

CLASSICS TO GO

AMAZING

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RAY CUMMINGS



Amazing Stories

Volume 73

Ray Cummings

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Gods of Space

Planetoid-150 was a world of horror.

**A star of death, ruled by a weird
and beautiful Earthian goddess.**

The weird purple glow of the planetoid was apparent now, even to the naked eye. The end of Roy Atwood's long, lonely journey was at hand. In the narrow control-turret of his small spaceship he sat gazing. Planetoid-150, in the belt out here, far beyond Mars, was a great leaden disc now occupying nearly a quarter of the firmament. And the purple glow of the *Xarite* was puzzling. On Earth, young Atwood's father had located the treasured substance with a giant electro-spectroscope; seen it after patient search as a tiny tracery, a faint band upon the prismatic 'graph of the light from this distant world.

And now Atwood was here, seeking it. Long since he had discarded his spectroscope, here in the spaceship turret. It had been his compass, the identification of Planetoid-150, enabling him to chart his course. It was unnecessary now. He stared, puzzled. Surely there must be an immense amount of the electroidally active *Xarite*—the name his father had given it—here on this little world. And all concentrated almost in one spot, apparently. The weird purple sheen was intense; a patch down there on the putty-colored surface of the five-hundred-mile-diameter asteroid. Occasionally he could see it clearly. Then at other times the leaden, sullen, low-hanging cloud masses of the unknown little world wholly obscured it.

With his journey's end so near, Atwood's heart was pounding. But a grimness was on him. He was a young fellow; just twenty-four this Earth-summer of 2050, a handsome young giant whose hundred and ninety pounds were stretched over a powerful, yet almost lanky, frame. In the Government College of New York, he had been a champion athlete. What would he be here?

Actually, Atwood cared very little what strange form of life might exist here on Planetoid-150. His was not a trip of scientific exploration. Now that the beginning of Interplanetary travel was at hand, he was willing to leave all that sort of thing to the professional scientists. His was a secret adventure, and so he had of necessity come alone. His purpose was to land on this unknown little world, and get a small quantity of the treasured *Xarite*. With that safely stored in the foot-long, insulated cylinder which now was ready to strap on his back, he would leave and get back to Earth as speedily as possible.

It had been a long journey. Atwood contemplated it now as the round disc of the asteroid enlarged until it was beneath him, stretching all across the lower firmament; and he set his anti-gravity plates to resist his fall and verified that the repellent rocket-streams of electroidal gases were ready for the final atmospheric descent. By his calculation he would emerge from the clouds fairly close to the *Xarite* purple glow. It would be early evening here. He recalled the details of Planetoid-150 which had been in the letter to him from his dead father. Meager details indeed. Dr. Paul Atwood had calculated the asteroid at between five and six hundred miles in diameter.

Then the clouds broke away. Atwood's heart was pounding as he stared down for his first real sight of the unknown world. At first it was a blur of deep purple radiance. It

seemed to blind him, this weird glow to which his eyes were unaccustomed. But presently he could see better.

Ahead, the purple glow suffused the night with its faint but lurid sheen. Then his eyes seemed to grow accustomed to the purple so that he had the illusion of it fading a little with the details of the scene taking form. A broken forest stretched here—a strange, spindly form of purple and red vegetation. In places it grew a hundred feet or more high in a tangled, lush, solid mass of interwoven vines. There seemed no trees. It was all slender-stalked, spindly.

Atwood stared, amazed, puzzled. The forest, if it could be called that, grew in dense patches, interspersed with open spaces where there was apparently a little soil. Others were naked, gleaming masses of metallic rock. The forest patches swayed in a gentle night-breeze like marine vegetation in water. The stalks of the vines were thick with giant pods; balloon-like things twenty feet or more in length. It was as though gases of decomposing vegetation within them were lifting them so that their upward pull held erect the swaying, hundred-foot stalks.

Off in the distance, from the height at which he stared down, Atwood could see a thread of river. It gleamed dull purple-green, from the *Xarite*-glow, and the reflection of the cloud-light. The same glow of cloud-light shone on the forest-top.

Landing demanded all of Atwood's attention, so that after his first quick scrutiny of what lay down there, he looked about for a place to land. He headed for a dim open space in the forest, an almost level hundred-foot area seemingly of rocky soil.

Then, at last, he had landed; brought the forty-foot, narrow little ship down flat upon its spreading base fins. With air helmet beside him in the event this atmosphere was not

breathable, he cautiously opened a pressure-exit porte. The cylinder's air did not go out. On the contrary, the outer pressure was greater, so that the planetoid's air came hissing in—a rush at first, then a filtering drift, and then it stopped.

Atwood's head reeled. He gripped his air-mask; then his head steadied and he discarded the mask. Breathable air. It was heavy; moist, aromatic with strange smells of the forest. But breathable. In a moment he hardly noticed its strangeness. In the silence, mingled with the thumping of his heart against his ribs, a low hum now was audible coming through the open porte. The voice of the forest. The blended hum of insect life. Was it that? He listened. It was a weird hum. So faint it seemed that he heard it within his head, rather than against his ear-drums. A tiny throbbing sound. But he seemed to know that it was vast. The blend of billions of still more tiny sounds. And queerly, it seemed hideous. A thing at which he should shudder. A thing of terror.

With a lugubrious grin he shoved away the thought. Certainly it was no more than a hunch, a premonition.

Atwood was clad in short, tight trousers, grey shirt open at his muscular throat, and heavy boots. His crisp curly blond hair was matted with sweat on his forehead. The descent through the atmosphere had made his little ship insufferably hot. This moist, heavy night air was a relief, but not much. At his wide leather belt, pulled tight around his waist, he carried a small electroidal flash-gun in a holster. The insulated cylinder into which he would put the *Xarite* was slung with a leather strap over one shoulder. In a hand-case he carried his portable mining equipment and a few explosive-capsules. But he did not expect to need any of it. Surely this *Xarite* was on the surface. And with a glow like this, it must exist in almost a pure state. Perhaps it was not

more than a mile from here in a concentrated lode somewhere here in this weird forest. All he needed was a scant pound of it. He might have it and be back here in an hour or two.

Fully ready now for what he hoped was a simple quest, Atwood stepped through the exit porte. Within the ship his interior gravity was maintained at about that of Earth. But as he stepped over the threshold, the gravity of the planetoid gripped him. Amazing change. He clutched at the porte-casement to steady himself. His weight—certainly most of it—had gone. Swaying on his feet, the lightness made him reel. Then gingerly he took a step. Seemingly he weighed now no more than ten or fifteen pounds. Carefully, with flexed knees, he impelled himself upward. It was the sort of leap which on Earth would have taken him a foot or so off the ground. He rose now to a height higher than his head, and came down, landing in a scrambling heap.

For a while, amused in spite of his grimness, Atwood experimented. By the feel of his cautious attempts, a good running leap would sail him a hundred feet or more, and probably smash him against a rock. Better be careful at first. It wouldn't be hard to kill himself, making errors with a power like this. His muscles were so powerful now in comparison with his weight.

Then he was ready to start. That faint weird humming still was audible. But there seemed nothing living here—no insect life underfoot, no birds in the trees. And, suddenly, he stood staring, stricken. Something was up on the top of the nearby patch of forest. The matted vegetation up there a hundred feet above him was so solid that he realized now he probably could manage to walk upon it. Something was moving up there. A swaying little blob, vaguely white.

Atwood stood silent, watchful with his gun in his hand. The blob seemed about five feet tall. White limbs; a flowing

drape. Then, as it moved, a little more light came upon it—starlight filtering down now through a break in the overhead clouds.

Atwood sucked in his breath with his amazement. A girl! A human girl! Apparently she had not seen him; and, suddenly, she jumped from the top of the swaying mass of vines and came fluttering down. A girl, with pale drapes held like wings in her outstretched hands, so that like a bird she fluttered down and landed lightly on her feet. She was only a few paces from Atwood when she saw him. For an instant, amazed, she stood staring, like himself, stricken. An Earthgirl? Certainly she looked it. A slender little thing with dark flowing tresses; a draped robe to her knees—a robe with a flowing cape at her shoulders, the ends of which she had gripped to spread it like wings as she jumped down. And now he saw that the robe wasn't fabric, but seemingly made of woven, dried vegetation.

"Well—" Atwood gasped. "What in the devil—"

With a cry like a frightened animal she stooped, seized a chunk of rock; flung it. The rock came, very much as a hurled rock would, on Earth. It struck Atwood's shoulder. The girl turned, and with a leap made off.

"I'll be damned," Atwood muttered. His caution, this time, was gone. He jumped, went thirty feet, landed on his side. Already the girl was gone. Then he saw her as like a monkey she went up a vine-rope. He tried it; hauled himself up with amazing speed. On the vine-top he tried running. But after a leap or two, with the girl far ahead of him, he found himself entangled, floundering in the matted mass of vines. His gun had been knocked from his hand, lost as it fell down into the leafy abyss.

The girl, apparently less afraid of him now, stood a hundred feet away, balanced on a swaying, rope-like vine as she

peered at him.

"All right," Atwood muttered. "I guess I can't catch you."

Certainly he had no idea that she could understand him. But, suddenly, she laughed—a little rippling rill of human laughter, mingled with awe.

"You speak my language?" Her soft voice was amazed. English! It was quaintly, queerly intoned. But English nevertheless. And she added, in wonderment. "Who are you that you speak the language of the Gods?"

He could only stare, wordless. And abruptly she was coming forward; slowly at first, and then, overcoming her fear, she jumped and landed beside him.

He seized her. "Look here, who the devil are you?"

"Me? I am Ah-li, Goddess of the Marlans."

"Well," he said. "Whatever that is. Anyway, be reasonable. I'm Roy Atwood. I've just come from Earth. You came from there, too, of course. When did you come? Your people, are they around here?"

She seemed only able to stare at him as though numbed. Seemingly, she understood his words, but certainly not their meaning.

"The Earth?" she murmured at last. "What is that? My people? They are here, of course. The Marlans." Her slim white arm gestured out over the forest-top. "I am Goddess Ah-li." Wonderment was in her dark eyes and in her voice. "And now you come—a God, like me."

Her voice faltered. She was trying to smile. "I am afraid I do not understand," she murmured. "A Man-God coming here to rule with me. Never did I think that could happen."

For a moment, as he sat there clutching the girl in the tangled vines of the swaying forest-top, Atwood was at a

loss for words. Beyond doubt, English was this girl's native language. Had some Earth-explorers landed here, bringing her when she was an infant? Earth-people who had died or been killed when the girl was too young to have learned anything? But her mature, fluent English belied that. In all those years, from infancy to maturity, alone here with what apparently were primitive natives of the planetoid, she would have forgotten her Earth-language.

She was staring at him blankly, her wonderment matching his own. "When did you come here?" he demanded. "Can't you remember?"

"Oh, yes," she smiled. "I was born—I appeared here in the forest—it was, how you would say, about two thousand of our days ago."

With the day here about half that of Earth, she was naming something less than three Earth-years.

"You appeared here in the forest?" he prompted.

"Yes. From the sky I came. The Marlans saw me coming down. In my God-chariot." She gestured. "Like yours there, it must have been. Only mine, they tell me, burst into flame and destroyed itself when it touched the ground."

A miracle surely. But to Atwood, the miracle was that from a wrecked, flaming little spaceship, somehow she must have escaped alive. Had she come alone, or with others who, doubtless, in the wreck of the ship, had been cremated so that remains of them had never been found?

"And you can't remember that coming?" Atwood demanded.

"Oh, yes. When human life came to me I was among the Marlans. I could not talk their language, then, but only the language of the Gods. This language of yours," she added. "God-language of you and of me."

Weird. She was so obviously sincerely truthful; she believed it. Naïve, child-like. Yet there was upon her, implanted by her belief, an aspect of power. A consciousness that she was a Goddess here. A radiance of her power, and a humility—a feeling of responsibility to One on High, who had sent her here as His servant.

And now she was staring at Atwood, another of God's servants, like herself. A Man-God. She stared with a little color coming into her cheeks and her breath quickened.

"I see," he murmured. Then abruptly on her forehead he noticed a scar—white scar-tissue over an area of an inch or so. He reached gently and shifted a lock of her hair. It was the scar of a ragged cut. Quite evidently a nasty wound. Three years ago?

"What is that?" he asked.

"Oh—that? There was my human blood running from it when they found me. My human birth—"

A crash when she landed. A brain concussion. And it had stricken her with amnesia—all her memory gone so that at that instant when she regained consciousness her life in effect was beginning again. Atwood understood it now.

"I see," he nodded. "Well, Ah-li, my name is Roy."

"Rohee," she repeated.

"I came, landed just now, from Earth."

"The Heaven of the Gods?" she murmured. "Oh, yes. Tell me. Surely I came from there, too. And you can remember it."

"I sure can. Ah-li, listen. What you've got to understand now —" Abruptly he checked himself. It wouldn't be easy to tell her. And then he had a queer thought. Was it right for him to destroy her faith in her own power to do good among the

people of this world? Certainly he'd better find out what was here, first. And she probably would not believe him anyway.

"Tell me," he amended. "The Marlans—your people here."

Under his questions she told him with simple directness. The planetoid here was known as Marla. The Marlans were its only race. Not many of them now of recent generations—a few thousands, he gathered, most of whom lived in a settlement here in the forest only a short distance away.

"There were many, once," she was saying. "But always the rising of the terrible *Genes* killed them off. We have learned now to subdue the *genes* with the glow of the *Drall-stone* light."

The radiance of the *Xarite*. Her gesture indicated it. From here, on the forest top, the patch of its light-radiance showed plainly an Earth-mile or so away. Weird thing. So far as he could understand now, these *genes* seemed to be microscopic things of horror. At intervals, caused by the weather, or in rhythmic cycles of some mysterious process of nature, the *genes* abruptly grew from microscopic spores into ghastly monsters. But the radiance of the *Xarite* held them in check. So that of recent years the human Marlans had learned to use the *Xarite* against these monsters of the half-world. A barrage of the *Xarite* radiance was set up here to protect the Marlan settlement.

"I think I understand," Atwood said at last. "Queerly enough, I came here to get some of that *Xarite*, as we call it on Earth. It is needed there."

"In the God-realm they need—"

"Yes," he hastily agreed. "Anyway—Oh, well, never mind that."

His thoughts went back to the letter he had received from his father who had died suddenly. Young Atwood had been

taking a post-graduate science-medical course in the great Anglo-American University in London. His father's death had brought him hastily back. And the bank had given him the letter which his father had left for him.

"My dear Son:" the letter began. "I am preparing this data for you so that if anything should happen to me before my work is done, you will be able to carry on for me. I haven't been able to tell you—it has had to remain a secret. I have been working with a Dr. Georg Johns, astronomer and physicist of Boston. As you know, all my life, Roy, has been devoted to the discovery of the cause of poliomyelitis—"

The dread infantile paralysis. Dr. Atwood, ten years ago, had propounded the theory that it was a sub-microscopic spore so small that even the giant electro-microscopes could not detect it. So small that it was non-filterable—no filter had ever been devised that could trap it, despite the claims of having done that which other medical men had made.

Surely that was a negative result indeed. But, then, Dr. Atwood had discovered, in the ore of Xarium, which existed in very small quantities on Earth, a product which he had named *Xarite*. He had spent a considerable fortune doing it—the resolution of many tons of Xarium, refined down into an almost microscopic quantity of an electroidally active substance. And with it, for a year he worked miracles. As though by magic the emanations from his tiny *Xarite* tube, magnified and projected in the fashion of radiotherapy treatments, had cured victims of the dread disease.

But the triumph was short-lived. The *Xarite* tube exhausted itself. And on Earth, the scarcity of the ore of Xarium was such that to secure another grain of *Xarite* seemed practically an impossibility. And then the death of Dr. Atwood had come, and Roy had gotten the letter. His father had secretly been working with Dr. Johns. Together, with Dr. Johns' huge electro-spectroscope, they had discovered the

existence of *Xarite* on Planetoid 150. And had kept it secret. With the era of Interplanetary adventure now at hand, both the physicians feared that the *Xarite* treasure might fall into unscrupulous hands, be exploited for profit. They wanted to get it themselves and invent the radiotherapy projectors suitable for its use; and give it all to the suffering children of the world as their benefaction.

Dr. Atwood's letter to his son told how, finally, Dr. Johns had secured a small spaceship and had gone, trying to get to Planetoid-150. Dr. Atwood, in delicate health, had not dared make the trip. He had been waiting; and had left this letter to Roy, with voluminous data, as a precaution. Roy had read the letter a hundred times. It was in the small spaceship which he had built with the money inherited from his father, and which had brought him here. He remembered its final, pleading words:

"You must carry on for me, Roy. Believe me, son, the lives of thousands of thousands of children will be in your hands. And the health of thousands upon thousands of others, who do not die, but live with twisted little bodies, tragic, pathetic, piteous monuments to the futility of man's medical skill. You have seen them. They will be counting upon you."

How could he fail them? And how could he fail his dead father? The thought of that was what had spurred him; what had brought him here with a grim determination to secure the *Xarite* and get back as soon as possible.

"You are very quiet," the girl said timidly out of the silence.

"I was thinking," he said. "Out there in our—our God-Heaven if that's what you want to call it—well, it's certainly very queer—"

Queer indeed. How could he even attempt to explain it to her! These *genes*—hideous monsters here on this little world, held in check, destroyed by the *Xarite* radiance. And

on Earth, the dread sub-microscopic spores of poliomyelitis—his father had killed them with *Xarite* radiance. As though here might be not only the original source of the terrible spores, but the cure for them as well. Nature striking a balance here; and failing to do it on Earth. Did the spores, the *genes* drift through the immensity of space? Young Atwood well remembered that even a hundred years ago, physicians had advanced some such theory. Spores, landing on Earth, where conditions would not allow them to grow in size, but where they could only multiply themselves in the bodies of human victims.

"I was thinking," Atwood began again. And then he shrugged hopelessly and gave it up. "Ah-li, listen. Take me to your people now. They will know I'm friendly?"

"Friendly? Why, of course. A god—to help them—"

And he would get his cylinder full of *Xarite* in its pure state, and then go back to Earth. And take the girl with him? The thought occurred to him suddenly and sent a queer vague thrill through him....

She was helping him to his feet. "We will go," she said. "The God—Roh-ee—Oh, they will welcome you!"

"We're supposed to go up here over the tree-tops?"

With a faint smile she regarded him. "Well, it is not very far. But you are clumsy."

"I think I'd feel better on the ground," he agreed.

A leap down, for him from this hundred-foot height, could have been dangerous. It was different with the girl. On Earth she might have weighed not much over a hundred pounds; and with her slight weight here, the pressure of her spread grass-cloak against this heavy air was sufficient. She fluttered down; and like a clumsy monkey he half dropped, half fell, clinging to the vine-ropes.

They started over the rocks. "We'll take it slow," he said. "Until I get used to it."

They followed the open spaces between the patches of forest. The weird scene was dim in the night-glow. Occasionally now, through breaks in the patches of lush vegetation, Atwood could see that the radiance of the *Xarite*-glow ahead of them was growing.... Strange progress, this half walking, half leaping advance. It was hard for Atwood to keep his feet; almost impossible to gauge the distance a leap would carry him. Many times he fell. Muscles that he had seldom used before were beginning to ache.

"Let's rest a minute," he protested presently.

They were in a rocky defile, like a little gully descending. Atwood dropped to the ground and drew up the girl beside him. More than ever now, the idea of taking her to Earth was in his mind. How could he ever have imagined leaving her here, an Earthgirl, suffering from amnesia. And he was thinking. Dr. Georg Johns, his father's friend, had left the Earth, presumably to come here.

"Listen, Ah-li," he said. "I don't want to confuse you too much. Don't think I'm crazy or anything. In this place where I just came from there used to be someone called Dr. Georg Johns. Doesn't that mean something to you? Think back."

He stared at her; and on her face, at mention of the name, there came a queer, startled puzzlement.

"Why—why—" she could only stammer. Puzzled, with some vague consciousness of memory stirring within her. And then it was gone. "Why—what is that?" she murmured. "You speak so strangely. The words I understand, but the things you say—"

"Forget it, Ah-li. I don't want to worry you. There are things you used to know, and that you'll remember sometime. They'll come back to you."

"My life in the God-Heaven?"

"Yes, sure. Call it that."

During all this time with the girl, Atwood had been conscious of that weird, gruesome undercurrent of humming which seemed a sinister background to this little world. And now, as momentarily they were silent here in the small rocky recess, abruptly he was aware that the humming had greatly intensified. Ah-li at the same instant noticed it. Terror leaped to her face as her hand gripped his arm.

"That humming—" he murmured.

"Yes. Oh, evidently this is the time for the *genes* to come out! I thought so; that is why I was out in the tree-tops tonight—to see if any were around."

The *genes*. On Earth they might remain always as sub-microscopic spores, multiplying in human nerve and brain tissue to cause the ghastly poliomyelitis. But here they were merely lurking monsters, seasonally growing into visible things of horror. Things with a voice. Countless billions of them, with their blended tiny voices faintly audible.

The rock recess here was dark. It was like a little cave, with an open, narrow front. Atwood and the girl were seated several feet back from the entrance. And now, as the tiny humming suddenly was increasing, in the grotto entrance close before them, a little spot was visible on the rocks. A spot, like a dot of saffron glow. For that stricken second numbly Atwood stared at it; an inch-long blob of glow, with a tiny solid nucleus.

Only a second or two Atwood and Ah-li sat transfixed with horror. The glow was expanding. A swift expansion—so swift that it was like a saffron balloon being blown up into size tremendous. As though hideous forces of nature, held in check, now abruptly were released. A tentacled thing, big as a football. But before Atwood and the girl could more than

struggle to their feet, it was a monstrous saffron thing of horror—a round, glowing, luminous pulpy mass, big as Atwood now. Its bulk blocked the cave-entrance.

"Good God—" Atwood muttered. "We're penned in here!"

There was no chance for them to leap away. In terror Ah-li was clinging to him. The dark narrow confines of the recess were lurid now with the monster's ghastly yellow light. Its hideous voice was a humming throb. For another second it stood blocking the opening, apparently its full size now, with long tentacles weaving like tongues of yellow fire; and a ring of clustered eyes in its center, balefully glowing.

And then, with a rolling lunge, it hurled itself forward!

It was a blur, a chaos of utter horror to Atwood. He had no time to do more than thrust Ah-li behind him when the monster was upon him. Weird and ghastly combat. He was conscious of being engulfed by the horrible glutinous mass as the noisome saffron pulp wrapped itself around him. Wildly he fought, staggering, with kicking legs and flailing arms. The intense yellow glow, so close to his eyes now, was dazzling, blinding. Its voice was chattering, like a dynamo gone awry; a throbbing voice that mingled with the girl's cry of terror.

"Oh, do not fall. Keep standing!"

"You run—" he gasped. "Get past it and run."

He mustn't fall. That would be the end. The sticky weight of the thing pressed him. Sucking tentacles were wrapped around him. In the saffron glare he could not see if the monster still blocked the cave-opening. If only he could get it further inside, so Ah-li could slip past. Then he realized that as he fought to get loose, his flailing hands were pulling the oozy tissue apart. He ripped one of the tentacles loose. It fell like a segment of yellow flame, writhing on the

ground. But there was no wound where it had been, for it seemed that the oozy flesh flowed around the break.

Then he felt Ah-li tugging at him as again he staggered, almost went down. She was tugging, trying to pull him loose. And the monster now, with chattering, enraged voice rising in pitch, was trying to draw him inward. A slap of the horrible stuff struck his face; choking him. He wiped it off; tore loose a great segment of the body and cast it away.

"Now—you—get free—we can run—" The girl's panting voice came to him out of the chaos. Behind him she was pulling at his shoulders, adding her slight strength and weight to his.

And suddenly he found himself loose, staggering backward. The monster, gathered itself, with its glowing fragments on the rocks around it, rolled itself a few feet away. Atwood found that he was in the mouth of the cave. Ah-li shoved him, and he was outside.

"You jump—now!"

The huge, screaming, saffron ball lunged for them. With his hand gripping hers, they jumped, sailed together in a flat arc over the monster and landed fifty feet behind it. Atwood, who had fallen, picked himself up. At the mouth of the cave the huge round ball, with new tentacles growing upon it, stood seemingly confused by the escape of its prey. Then, growling with a low sullen murmur, suddenly it rolled itself back into the darkness of the recess. Lurking, with only the reflected light of it at the opening to show that it was there.

Panting, still with horror making him shudder, Atwood followed the girl. They skirted an edge of waving forest growth, descending a rocky declivity. Open rocky space was to the left of them now, with a little line of hillocks. Ahead, at a lower level, the glow of the purple *Xarite*-radiance was a big patch in the darkness. And now in the patch, Atwood could see what seemed a weird little human settlement.

Clusters of low, mound-shaped dwellings of rocks and mud and grass. The semblance of crooked little streets. The purple glow bathed it—a half mile, irregular patch. And beyond it and to the sides, there was only blank darkness.

"That is Marla," Ah-li was saying. "We shall have to put the light-force up now for the season of the growing of *genes*. The time has come."

With his questions, she tried to make it clear. The radiance off there which enveloped the little settlement was inherent to the ground itself. Most of the Marlans of this little world lived here. And those others who were nearby, now at the season of the growing of the *genes*, would come flocking into the glow. A few days, a week or two; and then the *genes* would die away until the next cycle of their growth. But even this natural glow was not sufficient to hold them off, so that the Marlans set up around their settlement what Ah-li called a light-fence. A sort of barrage; a few hundred little braziers of *Xarite*, set at intervals on the ground, their spreading glow mingling one with the other, encircling the village. A barrage which no *gene* would dare pass.

"I see," Atwood murmured. "But Ah-li, where do you get that *Xarite*? Near here?"

"Oh, yes." She gestured toward the dark little line of hills off to the left. "It is there. Most of it, in grottos underground. You see, it is not far."

"And what's it like? Loose in the caves?"

He held his breath for her answer. "Yes," she said. "The *Drall-stone*. It lies loose in the caves."

Triumph swept him. He could get his insulated cylinder packed with *Xarite*, and then get back to his Spaceship and away. And take Ah-li with him.

"Listen," he began, "show me the way to one of those caves. I want to see—"

"Here is water, for us to swim," she interrupted. "The flesh of the *genes* is still on us."

Heaven knew he had been conscious of it. A little stream of purplish phosphorescent water, impregnated no doubt with the *Xarite*, came babbling down the slope here from the distant hills. He and Ah-li plunged in; came out, with the purple phosphorescence of the water dripping from them.

Atwood breathed with relief. "That's certainly better." Now, if he could get her to lead him to the *Xarite* caves.

"Ah-lee. Ah-lee." It was the sound of a guttural voice calling from the dimness of the rocks near at hand. The startled Atwood turned to see a group of small stocky figures approaching.

The Marlans. With Ah-li gripping him he stood as the figures came forward and ranged themselves in a jabbering group around him and the girl. They were about five feet tall. Cast somewhat in Earth-human mould, with crooked heavy legs, and swart, putty-colored skin. The body was wide-shouldered, thick-chested. The round, hairless head was set low in a depression of the shoulders. The face was rough-hewn of feature, with up-turned snout-like nose, and small, watery reddish eyes.

They walked with a sluggishness of heavy, solid tread. Quite evidently their bodies were a wholly different density from that of Earthmen. Atwood guessed that here they weighed what might be called three hundred pounds; compared to which his own weight was ten or fifteen, and that of Ah-li not more than five or eight. Beside them, with their swinging, ponderous movements, Atwood suddenly felt spindly and birdlike. How obvious now, that these primitive people would have accepted the beautiful little Earthgirl as a

Goddess! Her coming from the sky in a thing which struck the ground and burst into flame. Her seeming miraculous ability to leap into the air. Her size, and yet her lightness. Her ability to swim; to leap into the vine-tops and run upon their frail swaying surface.

Certainly these Marlans would sink like stones in this light water; they could leap no more than a heavy man could leap on Earth. Their weight chained them to the ground.

"Ah-lee...." One of them, slightly taller, less ponderous than the others, came forward, with a flood of words to the girl.

She answered him in weird, guttural, unintelligible words, with gestures toward Atwood at whom now they were all staring in awe. And then abruptly she added, in English:

"A Man-God has come to us, Bohr."

"That fellow understands English?" Atwood put in.

"Yes. A little. I have taught him, since this time when I was born from the sky."

"The language of the Gods." Bohr said heavily. "It, I understand. I am like a God too—"

Whatever plans Atwood vaguely had made, were swept away now. There seemed not so much awe of him upon these jabbering, crowding Marlans as curiosity. They were plucking at him now, with heavy, taloned hands feeling his arms, prodding at his ribs. And abruptly he realized the tremendous strength of these creatures. A ponderous power of muscles; a different quality of strength from that of any Earthman.

The realization sent a thrill of fear through Atwood; mentally he cursed himself that he had not seized Ah-li, rushed her to one of those caves for the *Xarite*, and gotten away from this accursed place. But there was nothing he could do about it now. Bohr and one of the others gripped him, leading him

along, with Ah-li excitedly beside them, and the crowd of jabbering Marlans engulfing them.

The crowd augmented as they progressed down the slope. It was fifty, then a hundred. And now he saw women. They were garbed much the same as the men—shorter, more flabby-looking bodies with wispy hair on their heads. Their shrill voices mingled with the deeper tones of the men, as they pressed forward, some of them carrying children, all of them trying to get a glimpse of Atwood.

"You are to see our Ruler, the great Selah," Ah-li said, as she walked beside him, clinging to him. "Tonight, I am sure, you will be proclaimed a God." Her young voice quivered. "Our Man-God."

"All right, but look here—" Atwood muttered. "You better get us out of this now. This crowd is getting pretty heavy."

They were among the little mound-shaped houses. The narrow crooked streets were jammed with pressing people.

"Yes," Ah-li agreed. "To my home first. And then the Selah will send for you."

In the Marlan language she gave her commands to Bohr. He seemed to assent. But in the light-radiance here which suffused the turmoil of the weird little village, Atwood had a better look at the leader of these Marlans. Bohr was close beside him; and on the Marlan's grotesque, ugly face, Atwood saw an expression very strange. A sort of sidelong leer at Atwood; and a look at Ah-li that made Atwood's heart pound. It was as though this Bohr were sullenly resentful. As though something which he might have been planning was going wrong. And abruptly, as though with a premonition of menace, Atwood recalled the only words of English which Bohr had spoken: The language of the Gods, he had said. "It, I understand. I am like a God too."