

GODDESS OF THE MOON



John Murray Reynolds

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A Complete Planet Novel

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The Tokyo-to-New York Stratholiner swept down toward the Manhattan Municipal Airport early on a winter evening, with the port-holes gleaming all along the 300-foot length of her polished steel body. Rockets cut off well above the city in accordance with the strict American traffic regulations, she came down with half a dozen big props spinning under the drive of her powerful Diesel auxiliaries. A dozen whirling helicopters had been upthrust to take the strain. She came down to a city that lay murmurous and uneasy under the greatest threat that mankind had ever faced—the threat of the Gray Death!

A band was playing in the liner's saloon, and passengers in the smoking-room were hurriedly gulping down the last of their drinks. There was a forced and unnatural gaiety on board. Most of the passengers had taken more than a few drinks on the way across from Tokyo—for the news of the spread of the Gray Death was ominous. It is hard to retain peace of mind when a strange new epidemic rages unchecked from Alaska to Cape Horn and from Nova Zembla to New Zealand. Men and women were dying like flies, and all the medical science of this Twenty-fourth Century seemed helpless before the deadly plague.

It was the steady vibration of the Diesels that brought Larry Gibson back to an awareness of his surroundings. Their resonant hum was distinctly different from the pounding blast of the rockets, and any experienced stratho-pilot could tell the difference in a second. Larry tossed off the last of his drink and wiped his mouth with the back of an unsteady hand. Then he pushed back his chair and stood up, swaying as he tried to hold his balance on the slightly tilted floor of the descending liner. A man at the next table glanced curiously up at him.

"Guess we're landing, friend," he said. "Y'know, they say that there are a thousand deaths a day here in New York City now. They're digging graves in the cemeteries with electric shovels, I understand."

"Life," said Larry with alcoholic gravity, "is cheap. Too cheap. One hundred lives equals a man's career. It's all been worked out mathematically. Good evening."

Larry left the third-class bar where he had been sitting, and walked slowly along the corridor. Mechanically he turned the collar of his frayed coat up around his neck and pulled the brim of his wide hat well down over his eyes. There was always the possibility that someone would recognize him, and in these past months he had learned to keep in the shadowy byways of life. The time would come when men would forget that an unlucky person named Larry Gibson had ever existed, but in this year 2332 there were still plenty of people who would recognize his face.

Gibson was not traveling in the first-class section of the big liner, in those luxurious quarters built into the giant wings to which his rank had once given him free entry. Back in the days when he had been Chief Pilot of all the Strathofleet he could ride there as a matter of course. Now he could not afford it. He could not even afford

the second-class accommodations amidships. Instead, he rode in the third-class quarters back in the tail. When a man knows that he has no possible chance of getting another job, he has to hoard the money he has saved up.

The giant airliner came down to an easy landing, and rolled across the field on her big wheels. The lights of the airport burned as brightly as ever, but anyone accustomed to New York could tell that there was something wrong. There were no crowds of spectators at all, and the few people who met the incoming travelers looked harassed and nervous. Even the airport attendants went about their business in a listless and somehow furtive manner.

It had been ten days ago that the blight first struck a peaceful World that believed it had at last made life safe and pleasant for its inhabitants. A few peasants in Honan province in China had taken convulsions and died while their skins turned a peculiar silver gray. Within twenty-four hours similar deaths were reported from points as widely separated as Bergen, Norway and Santos in Brazil.

Since then the strange new epidemic had raged unchecked. All the medical and financial resources of the Confederated Nations of Earth had been thrown into the fight without effect. The Gray Death struck quickly, men and women alike dying within six hours of the appearance of the first tell-tale patches of silver on their skin. The population had not yet started to panic, except in a few isolated instances, but the nerves of all men were ragged and jumpy from the strain.

Standing in the crowd of third-class passengers that had just alighted from the liner, Larry Gibson heard two of the airport attendants talking.

"He claims he's going to take that old rocket-ship to the Moon!" one of them said, and his companion chuckled.

"Crazy, all right."

"Guess he is. But what I'm wondering is how he got a crew to go along with him."

"Have you seen them? They're the damnedest bunch of derelicts I ever saw."

For a moment Larry was tempted to ask the attendant for the name of the vessel they were discussing. It sounded like the one place where a disgraced and black-listed officer might get a berth. Then he shrugged and turned away. Nothing mattered very much, any more.

II

The alighted passengers strayed slowly across toward the glass and chromium entrance to the Administration Building. The landing lights were cut off, and the airport became a deep pool of quiet shadow in the midst of the towering ramparts of New York's buildings. Most of the structures were two hundred stories high in this queenly city that had been built on the site of the old one destroyed in the final World War of 2132.

Then a woman began to scream. She was standing in the glow of light from the Administration Building, holding out a shaking hand that was already turning silver on the back. People hurriedly backed away from her. She was already in convulsions before the white-garbed attendants from the airport hospital could get her under shelter. A man swore tonelessly, and people kept far apart as they hurried from the field. The Gray Death had struck again!

Most of the passengers took elevators to the upper floors. There they boarded monorail trains that took them to the part of the city where they were bound. Or, if they happened to live near the airport, they simply went along one of the glass-enclosed cross-walks that clung to the outside of the buildings and bridged the streets in graceful curves. Larry Gibson did not go into the Administration Building at all. There would be too many people who might know him, and he dreaded their sneering smiles of recognition. He went out a small gate at the side of the airport, a gate that led to the tenth-floor level.

The lower parts of New York's towering buildings formed the zone of factories and warehouses. There were few lights here at this hour, and the cross-walk was nearly deserted. Larry was looking for a cheap place to stay, to conserve his dwindling resources. It wasn't that Larry was particular about the kind of work that he was willing to do. That stage was far behind him! It was simply that, in this simplex and highly organized civilization of the Twenty-fourth Century, a man couldn't get a job without showing his properly authenticated identity papers. And when a prospective employer saw his papers, it always turned out that there were no vacancies available. There was a hard bitterness in Larry Gibson's eyes as he trudged away from the airport.

After about half a block, Larry turned in at a little place called the Moorings Bar. It was dingy, and smelled of stale beer. Most of the customers were night-shift factory employees, waterfront loafers, and the crews of the water-borne ships that still crawled sluggishly across the ocean with those bulky and cheap commodities that the airliners did not care to handle. Half a dozen roughly clad men leaned on the greasy bar. Larry sat down at a corner table and called for a drink.

So he was back in New York—the city that had been his home before the Stratholiner *Pegasus* fell into the sea with a loss of a hundred lives two years before!

Larry wondered how long he would stay here. Not long. A month, or perhaps six weeks. The latter would be a long time for him to remain in one place nowadays. He had become a wanderer. A rolling stone that gathered neither moss nor worldly goods, nor even much of the peace of mind that he sought. So he passed like a shadow from city to city and from land to land. He made no friends nowadays. Larry Gibson was still a young man, but there was a cold grimness about his face that did not encourage advances.

A radio behind the bar had been playing music, but now the sound abruptly ceased and the television screen went blank. Then the face of a government announcer appeared on the screen. His voice came from the speaker sharp and clear.

"Though the toll of the Gray Death continues to be very heavy, the government of the Confederation is pleased to announce to the peoples of Earth that the mystery of the disease has been solved. It is found to be a new and malignant form of leprosy, caused by some hitherto unknown germ. It has also been found that the proper use of radium can control the disease, when applied by what doctors call the Riesland Method. That is the end of this bulletin."

The radio returned to playing music. The bald-headed bartender grinned broadly.

"Maybe we'll have a chance to go on living after all, boys," he said. "I guess that calls for a drink on the house."

"Aye—the mystery of the Gray Death is removed!" a deep voice behind Larry rumbled with heavy sarcasm. "I could have told them that answer a week ago, if I'd thought the thick-headed fools who run this planet would listen to me! But what they haven't announced is that the Riesland Method calls for a lot of radium, and all Earth's supply is not enough to check this epidemic in time to save the population of the planet!"

Larry turned around to glance at the speaker. It was a man who sat alone at a table by the wall. He was a very tall man, gaunt and gray-haired with a pointed beard that jutted forward at a pugnacious angle. Exceptionally heavy eyebrows gave him a quizzical appearance. His unpressed clothes were badly stained, and rakishly tilted on one side of his head was a slouch hat of a type that had gone out of style many years before. A half-empty bottle of rum stood on the table before him. Somehow he gave the impression of having already consumed what liquor was missing from the bottle, and of having every intention of emptying it before leaving his table.

Well, Larry Gibson reflected with a sardonic grin, *he* was no one to criticize a man for a little thing like excessive drinking. His own record in that regard had been pretty lurid for the past two years. Just then the other man grasped his bottle firmly in one hand, and his glass in the other, and lurched over to Larry's table.

"Mind if I join you for a bit of conversation, young feller?" he boomed. "Rum, more than any other essence of Bacchus, is a friendly drink that needs to be shared."

Larry looked up at him without cordiality. He had been living alone with his bitterness and frustration for so long that he resented any intrusion on his privacy. Then he suddenly grinned. There was a reckless and irrational gallantry about this gaunt old man that appealed to some part of his own nature that had now been dormant for a long time.

"Sure, sit down," he said.

"Thanks, young feller. My name is Crispin Gillingwater Ripon, and I feel the need of a little company after a hard day trying to recondition a rocket ship with the lousiest collection of shiftless renegades that ever signed on as crew for such a craft."

"What ship is that?" Larry wanted to know.

"The *Sky Maid*."

"Never heard of her," Larry said thoughtfully and slowly.

"You wouldn't! She used to be the *Orion*, but she is now renamed and my ship—subject to a matter of a few liens and some faulty hull insulation and a very good chance of never coming back to port again after I start on my voyage. Have a drink, young feller!"

"The *Orion*!" Larry exclaimed "Why, she was condemned as not air-worthy over a year ago!"

"How else do you think I bought her?" Ripon grinned. "I'll concede that, if the world had shown a proper appreciation for my varied talents, I'd be a millionaire many times over, but I happen to be almost broke. You appear to be a promising lad, young feller. How about signing on for a trip to the Moon?"

"So you're the crazy man who is talking of going to the Moon," Larry grinned. Ripon glowered at him from under his heavy brows for a minute, then grinned in return.

"Be more careful with your language, young feller, or I'll bust this bottle over your head! I may be eccentric, but I'm a lot saner than those pedants who claim the trip can't be made."

III

Ripon was sprawled back at his ease, a smoldering pipe in one hand and his glass in the other. He was smiling at Larry's startled expression, but he seemed to be serious. Vague memories were stirring in Larry Gibson's mind, memories of things he had read and heard in the old days before he became a drifter whose main effort was to avoid thinking at all. Crispin Gillingwater Ripon! He had heard the name before, though it had been in connection with abstract science rather than with practical rocket-ship flying. Somehow, his memory of the name was connected with failure, with public derision, and with rumors of outright charlatanism.

"I think I've heard of you," he said cautiously.

"In that case you have heard no good!" Ripon said cheerfully. "I am at present the problem child of the scientific world. The horrible example! A laughing stock for seedy professors and callow students. Mention of my name produces hoarse guffaws of mirth in scientific circles at the moment, young feller, but it will be different when I return from my successful trip to the Moon. Better come along."

"Why are you going at this time?"

"Because there are radium salts on the Moon, I am convinced. This world hasn't treated me with much respect, young feller, but I've had a good time on it for my sixty-odd years and I'm fond of the old place. I want to make the trip and get back before the Gray Death wipes out our population—including myself!"

"But you can't take a rocket-ship to the Moon," Larry protested. "Professor Staunton's attempt proved that thirty years ago."

"All it proved was that neither Staunton nor his ship were ever heard of again," Ripon said calmly. "I knew Staunton well. He was a good man, a careful man—but he wasn't Crispin Gillingwater Ripon! I'm making some changes of my own in the *Sky Maid*; changes that should spell the difference between success and failure."

When he looked back at it later, Larry had only a hazy recollection of the rest of that evening. The rum got to him. The one thing that did stick in his mind was a snatch of song that he and Ripon had sung over and over again, pounding their glasses on the table while the other men in the dingy little barroom stared at them in good-natured derision.

"There's only a few of us left,
And we never were worth a damn,
But I'll follow my vagrant star,
That's the kind of a guy I am!
(Drink it down!)
That's the kind of a guy I am!"

Larry Gibson awoke the next morning to the sound of many hammers beating on a steel shell. There was also a sharp and comprehensive ache that started at the top

of his head, which felt as though someone had been hitting him with the butt of a ray-gun, and spread all down through his body. He groaned and sat up.

He lay in a bunk, in a steel-walled cabin. Evidently the officers' quarters on some strathoship. Across the white painted ceiling, where flakes of red rust were showing through the dirty paint, the word CONDEMNED had been stenciled in black. Sitting upright on the edge of his bunk, Larry momentarily dropped his head in his hands. Then he stood up and left the cabin, grinding his teeth at the ceaseless pound of the hammers on the steel shell.

At intervals, as Larry went slowly down the corridor, he passed the word CONDEMNED stenciled on the walls and bulk-heads. When the government inspectors decided that a rocket-ship was no longer safe for flights through the vast emptiness of the strathosphere, they made the fact very evident! He climbed a ladder to an open manhole, and emerged into the bright sunlight of a winter morning. For an instant he filled his smoke-tainted lungs with deep gulps of fresh air. Then he looked about him.

He stood atop the red-painted hull of a rocket-ship. It was an old V-39, a type that had been first built some thirty years before and was now obsolete. The weathered paint was badly rust streaked, and the worst spots had been touched up with bright red lead so that they looked like livid scars. The ship was lying in a corner of the airport, and a gang of men were busy at what appeared to be an attempt at general reconditioning. After one look Larry didn't think it would do much good.

Turning forward along the top of the super-structure, Larry met a man in a faded blue uniform that bore the two stripes of a second officer. He was a lean, swarthy-faced man with a meticulously pointed mustache that contrasted strangely with his otherwise down-at-the-heels appearance.

"Morning," he said shortly. "I'm Colton, the second officer. Guess you're the new first mate."

"If so, it's news to me!" Larry said grimly. "Where's the madman that commands this decrepit craft?"

"You'll find the Old Man in the control room. And if you use your head, you won't speak slightly of the *Sky Maid* in his presence."

"When I want your advice I'll ask for it," Larry said. Colton's eyes blinked momentarily, but then he smiled and Larry immediately marked him down as a man to be watched. He didn't trust people who smiled when they were insulted.

"Suit yourself," Colton said as he turned away.

Crispin Gillingwater Ripon was bent over a set of strange diagrams spread out on the chart table in the control room. Thick smoke swirled from the short pipe clenched in his teeth. His face was deeply lined this morning, and there were wrinkled hollows under his eyes, but he looked up with a broad grin as Larry came into the dusty control room. His reckless eyes were bright and cheerful in spite of being bloodshot.

"Cheerio, young feller!" he boomed. "How's the pride of the strathosphere this morning?"

"All right," Larry said shortly. "It seems that I owe you thanks for a night's lodging. But what's this about my being first mate of this hulk?"

"Accepting your unspoken apology for having maligned my ship," Ripon said severely, "the statement is correct. You signed on last night. I have your signature to prove it—although it's a bit shaky because I had to guide your hand which seemed unable to hold the pen."

"Do you know who I am?" Larry asked grimly.

"Do I know who you are?" Ripon's lean, brown face suddenly crinkled into a smile. "Good Lord, young feller, you spent two hours last night telling me your life's history while you cried into your beer."

"Then I can't have told you the whole story." The hang-over, and the fact that he had not had any solid food in nearly twenty-four hours, were making Larry slightly dizzy. His voice rose in spite of himself. "I'm Larry Gibson, black-listed in every airport in the world. 'Gibson the Murderer,' the newspapers called me. I'm the man who was master of the rocket-liner *Pegasus* when she fell into the South Pacific with a loss of a hundred lives. It wasn't really my fault, but the inspectors believed some fools who lied to save their own skins. Now, my friend, do you see why I can't sail on even your shaky old craft? I was drummed out of the service, and ever since..."

"And ever since you've been going around feeling sorry for yourself!" Ripon's voice cut sharply through the mists of Larry's bitterness. "Hell, young feller, I've been disgraced worse than that more than once. I just don't pay any attention to it. Forget it. I need a first officer on this trip, and I believe your story that the disaster wasn't your fault, and there's an end to it! You're coming along."

"But I haven't even a license any more."

"That doesn't matter. Governmental regulations don't apply to a trip to the Moon. They don't license a man for what they think is suicide, you know! Go ashore and get some breakfast to steady you down. Then, when you feel better, come back and I'll go over the details of the trip with you."

For a long moment Larry stared at Ripon. Then he began to laugh.

"By the Lord Harry, I think you're crazy!" he said. The gaunt scientist grinned back at him with complete good humor.

"Better people than you have called me that, young feller," he said cheerfully. "They've been expecting me to get myself killed for years. But Crispin Gillingwater Ripon is still alive and healthy—albeit somewhat battered. Follow my star and you'll have plenty of excitement, even though it may get you nothing more than a broken head."

IV

When Larry Gibson returned to the ancient and seedy-looking *Sky Maid* after a breakfast at a nearby restaurant, he paused to look at the work in progress outside her hull. It was like nothing that he had ever seen before. A network of interlacing wires was being bolted to the outside of the ship's cigar-shaped hull, so that they formed a sort of screen with the strands some two inches apart. Other men were busy at caulking rivets and repacking insulation. This last was routine stuff in connection with any attempt to recondition an old vessel for travel in the thin, chill regions of the strathosphere—but he was completely puzzled by the painstaking labor of fastening those criss-crossing wires in place.

He found Ripon still in the vessel's dusty control room. Much of the equipment had been ripped out when the ship was first condemned. The missing articles had been hastily replaced with second-hand equipment which was often of a slightly different pattern from the original, so that the whole room had a makeshift appearance. The lean scientist looked up from the clouds of blue and vile-smelling smoke that swirled upward from his pipe.

"Well, young feller!" he boomed in his deep voice that could easily carry above the dull roar of rocket motors. "How do you feel now? Ready to go to work?"

"Listen!" Larry said. He had intended to be sharp and sarcastic, but he was grinning in spite of himself. It was hard to stay angry with anyone as irresponsibly cheerful as Crispin Gillingwater Ripon. "Seriously! You couldn't take the best rocket-ship on Earth to the Moon, let alone this old derelict. Not if you want to come back alive. It's been proven that, by the time you reach the velocity of escape to get away from the Earth's attraction, you have a speed too great for our present knowledge of rocket-ship technique to brake in time to prevent disaster...."

"*How* has that been proven?" Ripon interrupted, jerking the pipe from between his teeth and pointing the smoking stem at Larry as though it were the barrel of a ray-gun.

"Why—by the two attempts that have been made! You know the story. Two hundred years ago, at the time we had the last war on Earth, that group of defeated outlaws stole the giant transport *Mercury* and started for the Moon and vanished. Then, it was only thirty years ago that Professor Lester Staunton made his attempt in the rocket cruiser *Orestes*, and he vanished."

"You're like all the rest," Ripon grumbled. "Always jumping to conclusions based on a few scraps of evidence. No man on Earth really knows how a rocket-ship would behave in interplanetary travel, because it hasn't yet been done. There is a great mass of unproven theories that are generally accepted as true—but those are not facts. It was once generally accepted that the Earth was flat. However—I have a new

method of propulsion for this ship, by means of the amplification of magnetic currents, and I expect to supplement the rockets with that new equipment."

"I think you're crazy," Larry said, "but I'll go along with you anyway."

"Now you show the proper spirit, even if not good sense," Ripon said cheerfully.

It was after midnight that night before the *Sky Maid* was ready to go. The crew were at launching stations, and the ship's old-fashioned Diesels were rumbling as they were warmed up. Larry was standing under the dome of duralite glass that covered the upper observation platform when Colton came up to stand beside him.

"Well—we'll be off in a few minutes!" the swarthy second officer said.

"Wonder if we'll ever come back."

"Lord knows!" Colton shrugged, and his dark eyes were somber. "The police of half a dozen countries are looking for me anyway. I've had my fingers crossed the whole time we've been refitting this craft."

"Why tell me all this?" Larry asked. Colton shrugged again, and his smile was half a sneer.

"Your own reputation isn't much better, Gibson. I figure that if this trip works out it may give us both a chance to square ourselves, and if it doesn't we're not much worse off than we are now."

"You may have something there," Larry admitted.

Then Ripon shouted a command, and the helicopters started to spin. Only a handful of loafers watched the *Sky Maid* take off. A few waved. Others tapped their heads derisively. Man's third attempt to navigate the 239,000 empty miles to the Moon had begun!

The old ship's rickety helicopters and creaking Diesels could hardly lift her high enough to reach the level required by law before the rockets could be started. High clouds veiled the stars, but the many lights of New York were still visible below them when Ripon at last cut in the rocket motors. The *Sky Maid* shivered all along her length as their blasting roar began, and then she started to shoot upward at a steep angle. Her whole fabric creaked and groaned, and Larry Gibson shook his head dubiously. A few air-leaks would be all they would need to make their situation utterly hopeless.

The drive of the rockets carried them into the belt of clouds. For a few seconds the glass ports were veiled by gray mist. Then they were above the clouds and zooming upward in the cold light of the Moon. The crew were released from their launching stations as the ship settled down to a smooth routine, and Larry took over the watch. A minute later he was alone in the darkened control room with the dim glow of the varied instrument panels to keep him company. Already the air was starting to thin out, so he closed the ports and turned on the vessel's air-conditioning system. The atmosphere took on the faintly chemical odor characteristic of travel in a sealed ship in the high places.

From somewhere nearby Larry could hear a deep voice lifted in song, a voice that rose above the pulsating throb of the rockets. The words were familiar:

"There's only a few of us left,
And we never were worth a damn,
But I'll follow my vagrant star...."

Larry wondered if Ripon was hitting the bottle again. They were in a bad spot if he was, for certainly no one else on board understood the new equipment that Ripon had installed to solve the difficulties that had blocked previous attempts at interplanetary travel.

In Larry's mind there was a steadily strengthening conviction that this whole expedition was destined to failure from the start. It was too makeshift. Too poorly organized and planned, too lightly financed. Ill-manned and poorly equipped, led by a drunken genius on a rickety ship that wasn't really fit to navigate at all, they were probably sailing to their doom somewhere in the cold reaches of outer space. If they reached the Moon at all, it would likely be as a twisted wreck dropped on the cold slope of one of that body's barren craters. Larry shrugged. He had made his decision, and he did not regret it.

And then, leaning beside one of the control room's glass ports while he kept an eye on the slowly climbing needle of the speed indicator, Larry suddenly realized that he had found the peace of mind he had so long been seeking. The clouds were a silvery ocean far below, the Moon was a glowing disc ahead. The *Sky Maid* snored onward through the night with her rockets pounding. He was again back where he belonged, standing a watch in a vessel's control room. Nothing else seemed to matter very much at the moment.

Ripon came out into the control room a little later, a faded uniform cap pushed to the back of his graying head and his empty pipe clenched in his teeth.

"It's tough not to smoke," he rumbled glumly, "but I don't want to put a strain on our none too good air-conditioning equipment. How are things going?"

"Not so well," Larry said, "The rockets aren't balanced, and we have a drift to starboard. Three micro-units in every fifteen minutes. I have to keep cutting down the port rocket tubes for short periods to equalize it."

"How's the speed?"

"Not what it should be." Larry looked dubiously at the indicator needle. "Even with as much rocket power as she's got, we've only built our speed up to a thousand miles an hour even though the atmosphere is greatly thinned. I don't think that we can build up the necessary velocity, Chief. I'm afraid it just can't be done."

"Okay, friend Pinzon," Ripon said. Catching Larry's look of puzzled surprise, the gaunt scientist smiled faintly. "There was once a man named Columbus who thought he could sail the Atlantic, which had not been done before. He was a bit of a faker and a bluff, that Genoese adventurer, and there was more than a touch of the charlatan in him. The Pinzon brothers who commanded the other two ships of his fleet

knew from the start that the voyage could never succeed. I'll admit that Columbus didn't find just what he expected to find, but he did cross the Atlantic!" Ripon laughed, and dropped a hand on Larry's shoulder. "Hold her on to the course a while, my friend. We're not licked quite so soon!"

V

Ripon was still staring out the control room window at the disc of the Moon ahead of them. His voice came somberly as he spoke without turning around.

"What's the speed now?"

"Eleven hundred. Velocity of escape is twenty-five hundred."

"Y'know, Larry, it seems one of Fate's little ironies that the only hope of saving the people of Earth from the Gray Death lies with this creaking ship and her polyglot crew! Oh—I have no illusions about the forlornness of our hope! We have no right to get through. But I'm not entirely a fool, and I have a few aces in my sleeves. I guess it's time to try out my magnetron controls. Stand by to cut rocket motors!"

Ripon moved to several strange-looking control boxes that had been set up at one side of the room. Instrument dials glowed into light as he threw a switch, and there came a faint hum.

"These tubes are the Magnetron Oscillators," Ripon said. "These switches control the magnetic converters. This other bank governs the selectors."

"But I don't get the general principle," Larry said.

"It's simply a selective utilization of the lines of magnetic force that fill outer space. This ship is naturally para-magnetic, so that she is easily permeable by the lines of force. By charging the wires outside the hull I can make all or part of the ship diamagnetic. Furthermore, I can change its charge so that the lines will draw in either direction."

"I know enough of the general principles of magnetism to understand that," Larry said. "You can vary the direction of the effect, and perhaps vary the dynes. But...."

"This indicator shows the hysteresis loop, the lag of magnetic indication behind the magnetizing force at any particular time," Ripon continued. "The heart of my system is the group of selectors and amplifiers set up in the compartments directly below us. With them I can select the magnetic currents suited to our course, and amplify them till they move the ship along with them just as the lines of magnetic force move iron filings about a bar magnet. At least," he said with a sudden flash of his reckless smile, "that's what I think I can do. If not, we'll probably never be heard of again. You'd better hope I'm right, young feller!"

Ripon's craggy profile with its jutting beard was silhouetted against the moon as he bent over his dials and switches. Twice he checked them, then he lifted one hand.

"Ready—cut rockets!" he snapped. Larry threw over the lever of the engine room indicator, and the roar of the rockets abruptly ceased.

The sudden silence was strangely startling to ears that had become accustomed to that steady pounding astern. Running feet sounded in the passage as Colton came charging into the control room to find what had gone wrong. For a moment Larry had

a sensation of falling, and then the *Sky Maid* danced about like a leaf in a wind. He steadied himself by clinging to a stanchion and anxiously watched Ripon. The gaunt scientist was hunched above his control boards like a gnome, his hands leaping from switch to dial and back again at furious speed.

Then the motion abruptly ceased. The *Sky Maid* became steady as a rock, with the bright disc of the Moon dead ahead through the forward port. There was a faint singing sound from one of the control boxes, but otherwise everything was so quiet and still that it seemed as though the ship lay motionless in space. Then Larry looked at the speed indicator, and saw the needle moving steadily upward. The *Sky Maid* was shooting through the heavens at a speed faster than she had ever traveled when she was new and in good condition!

"Gentlemen," said Ripon, solemnly shaking hands with both Larry and Colton, "this is an historic moment! This is a prelude to that day when interplanetary travel becomes as commonplace as are rocket ship flights through the strathosphere nowadays! No longer will the name of Crispin Gillingwater Ripon be a thing of scorn and derision. And just wait till I get a chance to spit in the faces of some of those living fossils back at the National University...."

"If the ship holds together!" Larry said. Ripon sighed.

"You *would* bring that up, young feller. But maybe our luck will hold good. At least this method of travel is less hard on an old craft than the steady strain of a rocket blast. If the ship holds together, we'll be on the Moon in forty-eight hours!"

Colton was grinning broadly as Ripon left the control room a minute later. The second officer gave the points of his mustache an added twist, and then rubbed his hands together.

"Looks like the old goat really came through with something after all," he said. Larry looked at him grimly. For all Ripon's eccentricities, he was an able man in a great many things. It annoyed Larry to hear somebody like Colton, a confessed thief and an indifferent officer, speak of him in quite that tone of disrespect.

"Don't speak of Doc Ripon in that way when you're with me, Colton!" he snapped. The other man's thin mouth twisted in a sneer.

"Trying to go high hat on me, Gibson? You're no better than I am."

"If we go into that I'm likely to throw you through the bulkhead," Larry said evenly. "So we'll just let it go that I have some gratitude and respect for the man who picked me up out of the gutter—even if you haven't. Now clear out of here till it's time for you to take over the watch."

For two days and nights the *Sky Maid* moved steadily forward on her way. There was, of course, neither day nor night in the airless emptiness of outer space, but they kept routine hours on board. The whole atmosphere of the ship had brightened and changed since Ripon's utilization of magnetic force had proven practical. Even the slovenly crew went around with their shoulders straighter. The feeling of gloom and failure had been succeeded by one of optimism. Now the talk was of whether or not

they would really get the desired radium salts on the Moon, and of what reward they would all receive when they got back to Earth. The watch off duty started a poker game based on notes against the rewards they all expected to get.

Ahead of the *Sky Maid*, the Moon was now a vast disc that filled half the sky when seen from the control room ports. The bigger peaks and craters were visible to the naked eye now. Back in the after observation room, the dwindling but still vast profile of Earth had taken on a strange and unfamiliar appearance. It was a lonely feeling, to be so far from that friendly planet. Larry wondered how things were now going there, and what had caused the spread of the Gray Death in the first place. Probably a virus brought in on a meteor from some unknown and unhealthy planet.

The hope of mankind resting within her rusty hull, the *Sky Maid* slogged onward. By Earthly standards she was moving at a terrific speed, but compared with the velocity of heavenly bodies and the vastness of interplanetary space she crawled slowly across a small corner of the solar system.

VI

At last there came the hour when the ship hovered a few hundred miles above the surface of the Moon. Below them was a vast and uneven surface of barren and pitted rock, round craters and jagged peaks stretching to the horizon in all directions. Larry realized now how uneven the surface of the satellite really was, how different from the orange-peel appearance it had when seen through a telescope from Earth. All the crew were at landing stations. Ripon had adjusted his controls to hold the ship steady in space, and now he stepped back.

"There's no use bothering with helicopters," he said. "Since there's no atmosphere here, they'd be useless. That's probably what wrecked the ships before us—you can't make an easy landing with rockets alone, and we have no padded landing platform."

"Can't you lower her down easy with your magnetic control?" Larry asked.

"That's what I hope to do, but we're not experienced and there may be a jolt. Cut off the reserve air tanks, and have all hands put on space suits."

The crew of the *Sky Maid* looked like a group of fantastic monsters in the metal-cloth space suits with their round helmets of duro-glass. Designed for use by emergency repair crews aboard stratholiners in case of trouble, the space suits would keep a man alive and warm in an airless atmosphere for a great many hours. Small containers of chemicals kept the air purified, and earphones made communication possible.

"Stand by for a landing!" Ripon's voice buzzed in the ear phones as Larry reported all hands ready. "We're going down!"

The *Sky Maid* went down in a series of jerky drops. With eventual refinement, a ship equipped with the Ripon Magnetic Control would probably be able to come down as gently as a falling leaf, but this first apparatus was crude and experimental. Just at the end one of Ripon's elbows touched the wrong switch. The rocky surface swept up to meet them at high speed. He shouted hoarsely and spun compensating dials, but before he could check the momentum they struck with a heavy crash. The ship heeled over, and all the lights went out. As Larry was flung off his feet he heard a sharp hiss of escaping air.

Momentarily half stunned, Larry lay on the floor in a corner of the control room with the body of another of the crew across his legs. Then he saw a bulky, space-suited figure heave to its feet across the room and heard Ripon's voice in his ear phones.

"Leaping ray-blasts, what a crash! But I seem to be alive and in one piece. How about the rest of you?"

Other men struggled to their feet and answered their names. One had his helmet smashed and was already dead in the airless atmosphere that remained after the air

had rushed out through the shattered wall of the control room, but the rest had nothing more serious than a few bruises.

"Well," Colton said. "Here we are! And here we're likely to stay."

"It may not be that serious. The first thing is to take stock of our damage."

The *Sky Maid*, they found on making a complete survey, was far less seriously damaged than might have been the case. The wall of the control room was punctured by a jagged splinter of rock, but there were only a few other minor leaks. Many of the compartments had retained their air. Once the hole was patched and the other leaks stopped, their reserve tanks still held enough air to let them make a homeward voyage in safety. The network of wires outside the hull would require considerable reconditioning, but none of the internal magnetic equipment was ruined.

"About five days' work!" Ripon summed up. "And it's primarily a job for the engine room force. Gibson, Colton, the two quartermasters and I will go ashore with several days' supply of chemical capsules for the air conditioners on our helmets. Chief Engineer Masterson remains in command of the ship. Get her back in navigating shape as soon as you can, Chief."

Masterson, a grimy and bullet-headed little man with a drooping mustache and something of the look of a mournful Airedale, slapped the side of his duro-glass helmet in a casual salute. Larry knew that the ship was being left in good hands. He had come to have considerable respect for the taciturn engineer. He did not know why Masterson was on board the *Sky Maid*, very likely because he had been in some trouble similar to Larry's own, but he was certainly an efficient engineer. He wished he felt as sure of the three men who were going ashore with Ripon and himself. Colton he considered thoroughly untrustworthy, and the two quartermasters were a pair of sullen derelicts of the sort that Ripon had picked up off the beach for most of the crew.

"Landing party ashore!" Ripon snapped. "Let's get going! This isn't an ordinary exploring party, and every hour counts."

VII

They stood on a bare expanse of pitted rock. The *Sky Maid* had crashed on the outer slope of one of the craters, and the ground rose steadily to the jagged rim of the rocky bowl. Other bare peaks were all about them, black teeth against the starry sky. The earth gleamed large and pale above them. The scene was bleak and silent, unutterably desolate and forlorn, and the little group of Earthlings drew closer together. Then Ripon pointed up the ridge.

"We'll go up there and look around. Larry—you carry the radium detector. We mustn't let the exploring fever make us forget our main purpose in having come here."

They toiled slowly up the slope. Walking was difficult. Due to the power of their Earthly muscles on this planet of so much lighter gravity, they had a tendency to bound into the air at each step in spite of the heavy leaden soles on the feet of the space suits. Gradually they learned the necessary muscular control, a sort of sliding step, and then they made better progress.

Ripon was some yards in the lead as they reached the rim of the crater. For a moment the tall scientist was silhouetted against the stars, then he abruptly dropped flat on the rock and motioned back to them to do the same. His voice was a faint whisper in the ear phones.

"Crawl up here slowly, one at a time. Careful!"

Larry was the first to join him, lying flat on the rock at Ripon's side. Together they peered down into the crater. It's flat floor was swarming with some sort of queer animal!

This particular crater was a small one, and the level floor was only some thirty yards below the rim. Larry stared in amazement at the creatures who were coming to sit in long rows around a small mound in the center of the crater. He hardly knew whether to call them men or animals. They had the hard shell and articulated legs of an insect, but their faces had a semi-human appearance in spite of the pair of long antennae that grew out of their foreheads. Their feet made a dry rustling sound as they clambered down over the rock, and they carried metal clubs with spiked heads. Larry saw that they walked with four of their six limbs while the upper pair were equipped with three curved fingers each. On the top of each antenna was a round ball that glowed with a phosphorescent light.

"I thought there wasn't any life on the Moon!" Larry whispered. Ripon grinned at him through the duro-glass of his helmet.

"You thought a lot of things that were wrong, young feller!"

It was a weird scene in the cold pale light of the Earth. Some of the insect men came out of small, dome-shaped mounds that might have been houses. Others came climbing down the far side of the crater. Their glowing antennae bobbed in ceaseless motion, and there was a constant dry clicking. Suddenly Larry realized that the creatures were talking together!

That meant that there was at least some atmosphere on the Moon! Enough to carry sound! Perhaps it had a different composition than the atmosphere of the Earth. It was certainly very thin, for the air in the control room had instantly escaped through the shattered side and the man with the broken helmet had smothered, but there was enough here to sustain these odd creatures. Then Ripon touched him on the arm, and Larry saw something that a group of the insect-men were very ceremoniously carrying to the mound in the center of the crater. It was an ordinary metal chair of a very common and familiar Earthly pattern, the sort of chair to be found in the cabins and mess rooms of any stratholiner.

"One of those old ships must have reached the Moon after all!" Larry whispered. "That chair must be from the wreckage."

"Heaven help the survivors if those many-legged devils got hold of them!"

"They can't be very strong, with the Moon's gravity so slight," Larry said.

"That doesn't prove a thing. They can be light in frame and still very strong. Think how many times his own weight our ant can carry, or how far a flea can jump."

The chair had been placed in the center of the mound, and the Insect-men drew back. Now thin jets of steam or mist began to pour up around the mound, forming a foggy curtain that hid it. The mist only rose a little way, then dropped slowly down again to form an icy film on the cold rocks. The jets ceased, and mist vanished, and Larry Gibson stared in open-mouthed amazement. A dark-haired girl was standing erect on the crest of the mound!

VIII

The girl was white-skinned and lovely, utterly different from the grotesque creatures who surrounded her. Larry was crouching near enough to see her faintly smiling eyes, and the curve of her red lips, and the dark hair that fell to her waist behind. Except for the grotesque metallic helmet on her head, and the fact that she wore no clothing except for a silver loin cloth, she might have been a girl of the sort to be seen along the elevated cross-walks of New York City.

"Do you see her too?" Ripon whispered.

"I do."

"We can't both be that crazy, so she must really be there. But how she breathes in that atmosphere, and how she avoids freezing to death, is more than I can tell you."

The ceremony had evidently some sort of a religious significance, for the Insect-men were clicking rhythmically and were bowing down before the dark-haired girl. Goddess of the Moon! The girl's head-dress was a grotesque representation of an insect, set with jewels. At the tops of the flexible antennae were a pair of giant rubies.

"Boy! Wouldn't I like to get my hands on those stones!" Colton whispered from where he crouched on Ripon's left.

Then Larry noticed something else! A group of perhaps a hundred of the Insect-men were moving swiftly forward between the ranks of their bowing comrades. This group carried shields as well as clubs, and they had the purposeful air of men with a grim and serious errand to perform. The girl was staring over the heads of the crowd with a distant and goddess-like manner, and did not notice the newcomers till they had almost reached her. Then her eyes widened in alarm. She leaped up from her throne and burst into a torrent of shrill clicking.

In an instant the crater was in a turmoil. The group of the heavily armed Insect-men charged straight for the mound in the center. Others flung themselves in their path, rallying to the defense of the Goddess. There was a wild flurry of swinging clubs. The spiked heads clanged on metal shields, or cracked sharply on the brittle brown shells of the Insect-men. The significance of the scene before him was still obscure to Larry, but it was evident that some kind of a revolt had broken out.

The rebels among the Insect-men were outnumbered, but their metal shields gave them a big advantage and they were better organized. Like a spear-point they drove straight through the confused mass of worshipers and surrounded the low knoll in the center. They brushed its defenders aside and swarmed up toward the dark-haired Goddess. Larry had already drawn his ray-gun, but Ripon was the first to leap to his feet.

"Come on, young feller!" he roared. "That girl is the first human thing we've seen on the Moon. We can't let her down. Let's show those many-legged devils how an Earth man can fight!"

Larry and Ripon went down the slope of the crater in a series of bounding leaps. The milling Insect-men opened before them, seeming to welcome these unexpected reinforcements. Some of the rebels had already forced the struggling girl to her knees and were lashing her hands behind her back. A solid rank of them faced about with their round shields locked and a tossing fringe of spiked clubs waving atop the metal wall.

The two Earthlings dove for the shield-wall with their guns flashing. Larry ducked as one of the Insect-men hurled a club which just missed his glass helmet, then pressed the trigger of his ray-gun. The murky beam of the rays stabbed into the shield, melted a hole through it in a fraction of a second, and struck down the man behind. The flashing ray-guns of the two adventurers ripped the shield-wall asunder. A wave of the loyal Insect-men poured in behind them.

Larry shifted his ray-gun to his left hand, and snatched up a fallen club with his right. It was heavier than he had expected, a well balanced and efficient weapon. The hard brown shells of the rebels cracked like china under the smashing blows of his Earthly muscles. Then he bounded up on the mound and struck down the pair of rebels who held the girl. Her wrists were now tied behind her.

Throwing an arm about the girl's shoulders, Larry hastily faced about. Ripon was a few yards away. A ring of his slain lay around him, but his weapons had been knocked from his hands and he was struggling in the grip of a pair of the Insect-men. A third of the creatures was swinging a club to strike a blow at the scientist's glass helmet. Larry instantly fired, the beam of the ray striking the arm that held the club and shearing it clean off at the shoulder. A viscous yellow liquid dripped out, and the creature dropped writhing on the rock while it clicked in pain. Then Colton and the two quartermasters came charging belatedly up, and the fight was over.

The crater was dotted with the still forms of dead Insect-men. Larry noticed that their hard shells gleamed dully in the dim light. The surviving rebels had fled off across the far rim of the crater, and the rest of the throng had gone chasing after them. No one remained in the crater except the strange girl and the party from the *Sky Maid*.

When Larry had freed the girl's hands, she turned to the five Earth-men and touched her forehead in a gesture of thanks. Then she stepped across to touch some hidden spring on the far side of the mound, and a trap door opened in what had apparently been solid rock. The girl led the way down a narrow flight of stairs, motioning for the last man down to pull the trap closed behind them.

They stood in a small chamber that had walls of roughly smoothed rock. It was evidently the work of men, for tool marks showed here and there. It was lighted by a green globe set in one wall. The globe appeared to be made of some kind of flexible glass, and it glowed with a faint greenish radiance that overcame the darkness enough to give the place a dim and eerie light. At one side of the room was an oval hole like a slanting well cut in the floor. Beside it stood a pile of low, flat carts. They were about

two feet wide by four feet long, and they were supported on axles bearing small wheels the diameter of a man's hand.

The girl spoke to Larry twice, first in the clicking talk of the Insect-men and then in some soft and musical tongue that was unlike anything Larry had ever heard. Both times he shook his head. Motioning for them to follow her, she put one of the low carts down near the rim of the hole and sat on it. Then she gave a push with her hands—and vanished.

"Come on," Larry said, raking another of the carts. Colton stared at him.

"Down that hole?" he asked.

"Why not? We've got to find out what all this is about."

A second later Larry Gibson found himself shooting down into the interior of the Moon by means of a sloping tunnel cut in the rock. A series of the greenish globes were set in the ceiling at intervals to give the rocky shaft a dim light. The wheels of the cart ran in two grooves cut in the floor, and he shot swiftly downward with a dull humming sound.

Larry was trying to estimate the speed of his downward movement. It was not so terribly fast, probably not really as fast as the nearness of the walls made it appear while they flashed by on either hand. The slope was a gentle one. Although he had gathered considerable momentum, he had no feeling of the car being out of control.

As the minutes passed, Larry saw something else. The moisture that had been on the outside of his space suit from the air within the *Sky Maid* had frozen into a white frost a few seconds after the breaking of the control room wall let the outer cold into the ship. Now the frost was melting! They were getting into warmer regions as they went down. Perhaps they were also running into a heavier atmosphere! Larry held his hand up before him, and had a distinct feeling of pressure against it from the rush of air sweeping up to meet him. A minute later he had tested the atmosphere with the portable oxygen-gauge carried in the equipment pocket of any space suit. Then he took off his helmet.

The air was quite warm, and though still very thin it was definitely breathable. Its clean, earthy odor was a pleasant contrast to the chemical product used over and over again inside the helmet of a space suit. A moment later he saw a brighter light ahead and realized that he had come to the bottom of the long shaft.

They were in a square room whose walls were of polished gray stone. As Larry got up from his cart and moved in aside from the landing platform, the girl gave him a friendly smile. She had already taken off her ornately jeweled head-dress and placed it in a metal cabinet fastened to the wall. Completely without embarrassment, she tied a strip of gayly colored silk across her bare breasts. Then she tossed her long hair back from her forehead and bound another strip of silk to keep it in place. "That was quite a ride," Larry said.

He had spoken in English, knowing that the girl would not understand but hoping the sound of the words would convey a generally friendly impression. She stared at him in startled surprise for a second.

"It is much pleasanter than the upward trip," she said at last.

"But—but you spoke in English!" Larry gasped.

"Why shouldn't I? My father is a man from Earth. I am Diana Staunton."

IX

As the others came sliding down into the room, Larry gave each one a formal introduction to Diana. The glow in the girl's eyes showed that she enjoyed their utter amazement. For a girl who had been born on the Moon, even though of Earthly parents, Diana Staunton had a great deal of poise and self-possession.

"I am only a Goddess to the sluggish minds of the Insect-men," she explained in answer to Ripon's question. "To our own people of the Lost Caverns I am simply the daughter of one of the nobles."

"I knew your father thirty years ago," Ripon said.

"He has always told me that other men from Earth would come some day."

"Your father can tell me most of the things I want to know, but I am wondering how you managed to survive up there on the surface where there is little or no air and it is always so cold."

"I could not stay very long." From a fold in her loin cloth the girl drew out a tightly closed glass bottle that held some white tablets. "These contain oxygen mixed with some gases unknown on Earth, the whole very strongly compressed into solid form. Ten minutes after I swallow one, it is safe for me to go out on the surface. The effect lasts for about fifteen minutes."

"Pretty risky if anything delays you," Larry said. Diana shrugged, and her blue eyes grew somber.

"Someone has to do it. The loyalty of the Insect-men is our greatest protection against the evil Lords of Gral-Thala. This is the first time there has ever been anything like a revolt among the Insect-men. I do not know what lies behind it, but it probably means trouble for us of the Lost Caverns."

Colton was the last to come down the rocky shaft. Larry noticed that the second officer was ill at ease, disinclined to meet his eyes, and wondered if Colton was ashamed of either his late entry into the fight or his fear of coming down into the Moon's interior. Hardly likely! From what he knew of Gerald Colton, the man was not likely to be ashamed of anything he did.

They went through a maze of gray walled passages, still trending downward. Once or twice Larry thought he heard stealthy footsteps behind them, but there was no one in sight when he looked back. On several occasions they passed sentries wearing a makeshift armor, who saluted Diana with long bladed swords. Sometimes they spoke to her in English with a peculiar soft accent, sometimes in that strange tongue that Diana had first used.

Larry noticed that these Lunarians looked only slightly different from the peoples of Earth. They had larger eyes, and a greater delicacy of feature. The principle distinguishing feature was their very thin legs. Often they had wide shoulders and deep chests, but since they did not need strong supporting muscles in view of the Moon's slight gravity their legs were thin and narrow.

The sentries stared curiously at the Earth-men in their bulky space suits, but the fact that the newcomers were with Diana Staunton seemed to be sufficient passport. They began to pass a greater number of people in the corridors, and finally they stepped through a heavily guarded gate and came to a vast cavern.

The place was huge, extending for a good mile ahead of them and with a lofty roof lost in the shadows overhead. Some of the gigantic columns that supported the roof were made of heavy stone blocks. Others were natural rock that had been smoothed and polished. All over the floor of the cavern were narrow streets, and small cottages built of some queer composition that came in a rainbow of different colors, and little patches of some sort of green grass. A golden and rather misty light pervaded the whole cavern. Square shafts of a brighter radiance darted down from above at irregular intervals, and wherever one of them struck the floor of the cavern there was a small patch of cultivated ground with long-leafed plants.

"Agriculture by chemical control!" Ripon whispered in Larry's ear. Diana glanced back at them over her shoulder.

"This is Chotan, largest of the Lost Caverns," she said. "The Council of Elders is now in session, and it will be best that we go direct to them."

"Why do you call these the Lost Caverns?" Larry asked.

"Because we who live here are outlaws, and the location of these vast caves is not known to the Lords of Gral-Thala who rule the other side of the Moon."

"Apparently not all the inhabitants of the Moon are so friendly," Ripon said.

"If you came into the hands of the Lords of Gral-Thala," she said grimly, "they would tear the skin from your bodies and use it to lace their scented golden boots!"

Large-eyed Lunarians stared curiously at the Earth-men as they hurried through the streets of the underground village. Diana led them direct to a broad-beamed, red-roofed building that stood by itself in the center of the cavern. A dozen elderly men sat behind a long table of carved wood that was black and cracked with age. It was, Larry realized, the first wooden thing he had seen since he landed on the Moon. At either side of the chamber stood a squad of armored warriors.

Larry was staring at a curious device that was carved in the center of the table, and carried on a banner hung above the heads of the council, and inlaid in a white metal on the bluish steel shields of the guards. And then he recognized it! It was the crescent Earth, the profile of the mother planet as seen from the Moon when the Americas were still in sunlight and the shadows of night were creeping across the Atlantic. The sight of it made him home-sick. The crescent moon had been a religious symbol to many of the ancient races of Earth, and it was fitting that the crescent earth should hold a similar place on this isolated satellite.

It seemed to Larry that Diana was a trifle nervous over something. She had entered the council chamber with an air of confidence, lifting one arm in a stately gesture of greeting and asking the Elders to accept the men from Earth as friends and guests, but he sensed a degree of uncertainty behind her manner. In hasty phrases she

told the council of the revolt of part of the Insect-men, and of the timely arrival of the strangers from the mother planet.

"And so I request that you accept these men into the Brotherhood of the Caverns!" she finished. The graybeards behind the long table nodded gravely, but before they could speak another voice rang but in a sharp challenge.

"And I, O Elders of Chotan, demand that these interlopers be put to death in accordance with the ancient law of the Caverns concerning unwanted strangers!"

X

The speaker was a fair-haired young man in a green cloak. He looked more like an Earthling than a Lunarian, with his sturdy legs and small eyes. He pointed an accusing finger straight at Larry in a dramatic gesture, and Diana wheeled to face him with anger in her voice.

"You talk very loudly of the ancient laws, Xylon, for a newcomer only recently taken into the Brotherhood because you fled as an outlaw from the Lords of Gral-Thala!"

"I did not make the laws!" Xylon retorted.

"The death penalty for strangers has not been strictly enforced for many years—or *you* would not now be alive! It is up to the decision of the Elders!"

The council chamber was in an uproar, with shouted phrases flung back and forth. Larry laid a hand on the butt of his ray-gun. A keen-eyed officer of the guards caught the gesture, and instantly Larry found a pair of rifles directed at his chest. At least, they looked like some sort of compressed air rifles. They had fiber stocks, and long barrels, and a cylindrical magazine beneath the barrel. Then a deep voice dominated the tumult as a red-haired man in full armor forced his way through to the forefront of the crowd.

"The girl is right, O Elders and members of the Brotherhood!" he boomed. "Xylon talks like a fool. I, Pyatt of Kagan, urge that the strangers from Earth be accepted. Let Xylon remain among us for a little while longer before he attempts to dominate our councils!"

Larry could sense the swing of sentiment in their favor, could feel the lessening of the tension. The man called Xylon shrugged and turned away. Then the council took a formal vote, waving the ancient death penalty and allowing the strangers the freedom of the Caverns. One of the Elders near the end of the table rose to his feet. He wore the typical black robes of the Council, but as Larry looked closely at the man's lined face he saw the resemblance to Diana and knew that he was looking at Lester Staunton.

"Since these men are from what was once my own land," Staunton said, "I will make them comfortable in my house for the duration of their stay here."

As the crowd began to stream out of the council-chamber, the red-headed man pushed his way through to Ripon and Larry. He was unusually burly and big-thewed for a Lunarian, and though his face was marred by a pair of old scars he had a wide and cheerful smile.

"Welcome to the Cavern of Chotan!" he boomed. "I am Pyatt of Kagan, military commander of all the armed forces of the Caverns. Later I will want to talk to you about that revolt of the Insect-men, which is something that has not happened before. Also, we will drink a goblet of wine together."

"Then you have wines on the Moon?" Ripon asked, visibly brightening.

"Aye, wines of many sorts. Though my own taste runs more to the strong-waters that fire the blood and set a man's head to spinning."

"I can see that you and I have a lot in common!" Ripon grinned.

Just before they left, Xylon came up to shake hands with Larry.

"No hard feelings, Earthling!" he said. "It is just that the safety and liberties of the Caverns are very precious to one like myself, who has so recently become an outlaw, and I did not think that we should take any chances."

"That's all right," Larry said shortly. Now that he saw Xylon at really close range, he realized that the man was older than he had thought. His appearance of youth vanished when you saw the many fine wrinkles in his face and the weariness around his eyes. He had a dissolute appearance. Xylon might be sincere in his bid for friendship, but Larry felt that there was something serpentine and evil about the man.

With Diana and her father and a few others, they walked along one of the many winding paths of Chotan. Larry noticed that the chemically grown plants had no scent at all. The motionless, warm air was suffused with a misty and golden light. Small, neat houses built in various bright colors stood amid their plots of grass. It was a strange scene to Earthly eyes, that cavern far below the Moon's chill surface, but it was a pleasant spot in its way.

The women they passed along the walks were dressed like Diana, in a gayly colored loin-cloth with a narrow band across the breasts. Most of the men wore a loose, colored cloak in addition to the single garment. Only a few were armed.

Larry had taken off the right mitten of his space suit to shake hands with Pyatt and Xylon in the council chamber. Several times he had started to replace the mitten, but something had always distracted him and he was still carrying it in his left hand. Now, as he happened to give the mitten a shake, a small insect of a blood-red color fell out and landed on the walk. It looked something like a miniature scorpion. Larry had only a hasty glimpse before Pyatt of Kagan leaped forward and crushed the crawling thing with the heavy sole of his sandal.

"That was a *spanto*!" he said. "Their bite means death within ten seconds. I wonder how it came to be in your glove!"

"I wonder myself!" Larry said grimly, looking across the field at the green-cloaked figure of Xylon, who had turned off on another of the branching walks. It would not have been hard for Xylon to have dropped the insect in his glove! As if in answer to his thought, Diana spoke quietly:

"I do not trust Xylon any farther than I can see him, friend Larry! There is something unclean in his eyes when he looks at me."

"If he looks at you too much while I'm here I'll break his jaw!" Larry said. The girl looked up at him with a sudden smile that was also a challenge.

"I begin to understand why my father has always said that I would like the men from Earth better than the Lunarians!"

XI

They sat in Professor Staunton's laboratory, a square chamber where Earthly equipment taken from the wreck of his space-ship was mingled with typically Lunarian furniture and equipment. The walls were light blue, of that polished composition resembling bakelite that was used for building in the Caverns. The walls were about ten feet high, and they ended in an ornamental cornice without any ceiling or roof at all. Overhead there was a glow of misty light, and far above the rocky top of the cavern.

"Why should we need roofs?" Diana said in reply to Larry's surprised comment. "Here in these Caverns there is neither rain nor snow nor wind, nor any change in temperature at all. The walls give privacy, and there is no need for anything else."

Ripon was bending over a table on which Staunton had spread a large map of the Moon. The cavern of Chotan was indicated by a red dot, and Larry saw that there were a dozen others scattered around within a radius of a few hundred miles.

"Our space-cruiser was wrecked near one of the entrances to this cavern when we landed here thirty years ago," Staunton said. "As you have guessed, it was the inability to land safely with rockets, in a practically airless atmosphere where helicopters were useless, that smashed us. As you did, we had fortunately put on space suits before trying to land. Our ship was too badly wrecked for any chance of return."

"But how have you succeeded in getting all these people to learn English?" Ripon asked.

"They knew that language before I came! But it is best that I give you a hasty outline of Lunarian history. The simple-minded but husky Insect-men were the aboriginal inhabitants of the Moon. Long æons ago, while most of the people of Earth were living crudely in caves and using chipped stones for tools and weapons, an isolated people developed a high civilization in what I have roughly identified as the region of the Himalayas. A series of great earthquakes destroyed their civilization, but a large number of them escaped and came to the Moon in some kind of a space-ship. Here they found, in those days, a small planetary body that had a thin but breathable air. They founded a civilization on the other side of the Moon where it is always sunny, and called it Gral-Thala. Those were pleasant days, if the old legends are to be believed, the Golden Age of Lunarian civilization."

For a moment Staunton paused. All those in the room, including the Lunarians who had been familiar with this tale since childhood, hung intently on his words. The broad face of Pyatt of Kagan was somber and moody as he sat bent forward with the scabbard of his sword resting across his armored knees.

"As the centuries passed, the atmosphere continued to thin," Staunton went on, "so the Ancients took care to preserve what was left. Gral-Thala is in the fertile part of the Moon, and lies in a vast valley completely surrounded by a lofty mountain range."

By means of the superior engineering knowledge of the Ancients, they built a lofty wall or barrier along the crest of the range so that its top is miles above the level of the valley floor. They then sucked all the air within the Great Barrier. Gral-Thala itself thus lies in a great pool of air surrounded by the ranges and the barrier. On the rest of the Moon, as here, air only remains in deep crevices and caverns like this."

"But these caves were a great labor in themselves..." Ripon began.

"Originally these caverns were built as outposts of Gral-Thala, built here because of their nearness to valuable mineral deposits. People came out from the sunlit cities within the Great Barrier to put in a tour of duty in the caverns. Again life on the Moon had reached a pleasant equilibrium. And then came the great disaster! Some two centuries ago a group of several hundred outlaws fleeing from Earth came here in a big space-ship."

"The *Mercury*!" Larry exclaimed.

"Exactly. Those men and women who came from Earth were few in comparison to the population of the Moon, but they were cruel and ruthless and they had weapons of war. The peaceful Lunarians had at that time no weapons at all, for they had no need for them. Within a few months the invaders made themselves Lords of all Gral-Thala! That was when English, the language of the invaders, came to be spoken by everybody on the Moon as well as the softer tongue of the Lunarians themselves. A few of the hardier folk in Gral-Thala fled to these caverns as outlaws. The invaders made only half-hearted attempts to come after them, and with the passing of the years the location of these refuges has been forgotten by people living within the Great Barrier. That is why these places are now known as the Lost Caverns."

"And the invaders still rule?"

"Their descendants are still Lords of Gral-Thala. Cruel and ruthless they always were, decadent and dissolute they have now become as well, but they still rule the sunny valley that was the pride of the ancient Lunarians. They hold the power, and they are aided by a few groups among the people of Gral-Thala who have sacrificed their honor to fawn upon their masters. Our spies, who penetrate beyond the barrier, tell us that before long there will come a day when the people are ready for revolt—but the time is not yet."

"But surely!" said Pyatt of Kagan, his deep voice breaking in on the low monotone in which Staunton had spoken, "surely our visitors will return to Earth, now that interplanetary travel has become possible, and bring us the warriors and equipment to storm the high palaces of the tyrants of Gral-Thala!"

"I should think that the Confederation of Earth would send help, particularly since the original invaders were outlaws from that planet," Staunton said. "How about it, friend Ripon? How are conditions back on Earth at this time?"

Ripon straightened up and shook his shoulders. The glow in his eyes faded away, and the lines in his face deepened once more.

"The Lunarians can look for no help from Earth until one thing is accomplished," he said. "I have been letting scientific enthusiasm make me lose sight of our reason for coming here. How are conditions on Earth, you ask? I can tell you in a single sentence. Unless we of Earth very quickly get a new supply of radium salts suitable for use with the Riesling Method, in a few weeks we all perish!"

"I do not understand."

In a few hasty phrases Ripon sketched the development of the terrible plague that was so swiftly robbing Earth of its inhabitants. At the end Staunton leaned back in his chair.

"Such salts are available on the Moon in ample quantity," he said slowly, and something in the quality of his voice robbed the words of the reassurance they would otherwise have held, "but—they are all located well within the area of the Great Barrier. And the Lords of Gral-Thala would never let you have even a single milligram!"

"Then there's only one thing to be done!" Larry stood up and began to peel off his space suit. "If someone will show me the way, I'll go into Gral-Thala and bring out as much of the radiatron extract as I can carry."

"And I will go with you!" boomed Pyatt of Kagan. "By Gorton and Laila, mythical gods of the Moon, it will take more than a few of those cold-eyed tyrants to stop us!"

XII

Time was the thing that counted. The remorseless pressure of minutes and hours that passed and could never be recalled! The tyrants who lorded it over Gral-Thala had no weapons more deadly than the electronic guns that had been common on Earth two hundred years before. A battalion of troops from Earth, wearing armor of dura-steel and carrying ray-guns, could probably have overthrown the Invaders very quickly. But—there was no time! The toll of the Gray Death was increasing with each passing hour, back there on the Good Green Planet, and the little group on the Moon would have to do what they could without hope of assistance.

They could not pause for proper preparations or careful planning. It was only half an Earth day after they had landed on the Moon, time enough to snatch a few hours' sleep, that Larry found himself moving up toward the surface in a slowly crawling cable car. Chotan already lay behind and far below them, and the oxygen indicator fastened to the sleeve of the space suit showed him that the air was thinning rapidly.

Colton and Pyatt were with him. All three of them wore space suits of the Lunarian patterns, that had a metal helmet with glass windows at the front and sides, for the difference in design of the space suits from the *Sky Maid* would have made them too conspicuous. Pyatt had come along because he had often penetrated beyond the Great Barrier in disguise, and a second Lunarian was waiting for them up on the surface.

Ripon had also wanted to come, the idea of this daring raid setting the old, reckless light dancing in his eyes. Finally he agreed that one of the leaders of the *Sky Maid* expedition had better remain in the Caverns in case of disaster to the raiders.

"That's the hell of getting along in years, young feller!" he rumbled regretfully. "There's nothing I'd like better than to penetrate the barrier with you and pull the whiskers off the tyrants in their lair. A quick wit and a ready weapon! But I couldn't keep up with you younger men if the going gets hot—though I never thought the day would come when I'd hear Crispin Gillingwater Ripon admit a thing like that!—and you'd better go on without me."

"We'll be back soon," Larry said. Ripon snorted.

"If you're not back in five days I'm coming after you with the crew of the *Sky Maid* and as many of the folk of the Caverns as I can get to come along!"

The Cavern of Chotan was in that part of the Moon which is sometimes in sunlight and sometimes in darkness, and it was night when they came out of the tunnel. The moisture on the space suit instantly froze into a fine white frost. A few Lunarian sentries waited for them there, and nearly a hundred of the Insect-men. With them were two carts that had high wheels and springs, something like an old-fashioned Earthly buckboard.

For a few moments, Pyatt talked to the leaders of the Insect-men in their clicking tongue. The glowing knobs atop their antennae bobbed up and down as they nodded their heads in understanding. Then Pyatt motioned Colton into one of the carts and climbed in beside him. Another Lunarian, slender even in the bulky space suit, climbed into the second cart beside Larry. Pyatt swung his right arm forward.

A score of the Insect-men instantly scampered ahead as scouts, spreading out like the spokes of a fan. Small parties went out to either flank. The rest, about thirty to each cart, gripped the trailing ropes and darted ahead with the wagons following behind them. They went at almost incredible speed, the four legs of each giving them a steady drive.

Even though the Insect-men were picking the smooth stretches of the rock and were evidently following a definite though unmarked trail, it was rough going. The light wagons jolted and banged as they whizzed along, and Larry had to cling to the rail with both hands to keep from being thrown off.

"Is all the way as rough as this?" he panted to his companion.

"Better soon," the Lunarian said shortly.

After about three hours they turned into a smooth and level road. It wound up and down over the rolling rocky plain, evidently a highway of great age. Occasionally they passed crumbling ruins beside it. Larry supposed that the road and the ruins dated back to those very ancient days before the Lunarians withdrew their shrinking supply of air within the Great Barrier.

Now that the road was smooth, the Insect-men pulled the carts along at a whizzing pace. The light wheels whirled as the wagons shot ahead. The scene, Larry reflected, was like a nightmare. All about him were the chill mountains and craters of the Moon, lifting their jagged peaks against the cold stars. Ahead of the speeding wagon ran the toiling cluster of Insect-men, their hard shells gleaming faintly in the starlight and their glowing antennae bobbing in a swift rhythm as they ran. The treads of the wheels rattled on the rocky surface of the road, the horny feet of the Insect-men made a steady scraping sound as they ran. The two men seated in the cart ahead were monstrous and misshapen figures in their space suits.

Larry's companion had remained sullenly silent, in spite of several efforts to start a conversation. This was unusual in one of the normally pleasant and talkative Lunarians, but Larry had not thought much about it. Now, as he made some remark about the speed of their progress, he heard a low chuckle and in his earphones sounded the voice of Diana Staunton.

"Yes, Larry, we travel fast. In a few days we will enter the zone of sunlight."

"*You*," he exclaimed. "This expedition is too dangerous. I would never have let you come if I had known."

"Why else do you think I kept so silent until now, when it is too late to send me back?" she asked, and though he could not see her face through the glass of her helmet in the darkness he could tell that she was smiling. "Neither would Pyatt or Kagan or

my father have let me come. I stole the space suit of the young man who was to accompany you and left him locked in a storeroom."

"You will have to remain outside when we go within the barrier."

"Where you go, I go," she said with finality.

Sunrise on the Moon! There was no sudden onslaught of light as on the Earth, for the Moon day was twenty-eight days long! Yet, as they progressed steadily toward the horizon, the Moon's rotation brought the edge of the sun gradually into sight above the barren horizon, and as the days passed, a blinding glare of light swept in upon them and they moved the dark glasses into place in front of the windows of their space-suit helmets.

The temperature rose rapidly with the coming of the two weeks' sunlight, and before long the frost on the space suits was melting. Then, stretching along the crest of a mighty mountain range ahead, Larry saw a lofty gray wall that went so high its top was almost lost from view above. They had come within sight of the Great Barrier!

XIII

Several times along the way they had been halted by sentry-patrols from some of the other outlaw caverns, who warned them that an unusual number of strong parties of troops from Gral-Thala were roaming the waste-land. However, they came without incident to a tiny outlaw hide-out. This was within half a mile of one of the caverns that was under the domination of the Lords of Gral-Thala.

Two hours later Larry and the others stood with a score of other people, in an air-lock in a great tunnel that led through the mountain range and into Gral-Thala. All these people were residents of the valley returning from a tour of duty in the caverns, and the four outlaws from Chotan had been furnished with forged documents that gave them the same identity.

The space suits had been removed and hung on numbered racks. The three men wore the tight tunics and loose trousers that were the customary dress within the valley, as distinguished from the loin cloth and cloak of the cavern outlaws. This was fortunate, for the trousers concealed the sturdy Earthly legs of Larry and Colton which would have stood out in sharp contrast to the typical spindly shanks of the otherwise well-built Lunarians. Diana wore a loose robe, with tight wrappings concealing her hair and a thin veil over her face.

A heavy guard of soldiers checked the papers of all the travelers before they let them through. These troops wore light armor, and each carried an electronic gun slung from his shoulder. The officers were evidently of the Invaders, cruel-eyed men cast in the same mold as Xylon. The men were Lunarians, generally of a rather debased type and drawn from among the worst element in the population. A heavy-featured trooper glanced at Larry's papers in a perfunctory manner, then handed them back.

"All right, all right!" he growled. "Get along. Don't block the way!"

The tunnel ended on the inner slope of the mountain range surrounding Gral-Thala, where many cars ran down the steep incline into the city below. It was a pleasant and smiling land that Larry Gibson saw before him, a sunlit and fertile valley so vast that even the lofty range on the far side was invisible over the horizon. Towns and villages dotted the plain. Farms lay among their fertile fields. A small river wound through the center. Directly below him, clustered against this part of the valley wall, was a mighty city.

"This is the city of Pandonaria," Diana's voice came softly through her veil, "capital city of Gral-Thala."

The city itself was a terraced mass of colored buildings cut by many streets and interspersed with gardens. Several towering palaces of white and gold, the abodes of the Lords of Gral-Thala, dominated the lower buildings. It was good to see real sunlight again! To see birds flying overhead! To smell the odor of flowers and growing things, in contrast to the flat and motionless air of the Lost Caverns! It was hard to believe that this pleasant spot was really the scene of such a brutal tyranny as

he had been told. Then they rounded a bend in the sloping road and came to an abrupt halt.

At the side of the road stood a sort of gallows, made of strips of a ruddy metal bolted together. From it hung the nude body of a young Lunarian girl. She was suspended by her bound wrists high above her head, and her feet swung far off the ground. From the clotted blood at her bound wrists, and the way the eternal sun of the valley had burned her skin, Larry knew that she had hung there many hours. The girl was far gone but she was not yet dead. At intervals her drooping head moved feebly from side to side. A pair of armored soldiers leaned on their weapons below the gallows. Around the girl's neck hung a sign, lettered in the archaic English script that was the official language of Gral-Thala:

"THIS GIRL DARED STRIKE ONE OF THE NOBLES OF
GRAL-THALA WHO CONDESCENDED TO NOTICE HER."

Fierce anger filled Larry Gibson's heart, a consuming anger that set his clenched fists shaking. For some reason he thought of Diana. Though she stood only a few feet away from him, he visioned her hanging from such a gallows if the dissolute tyrants of this land ever stormed the Lost Caverns. Then Pyatt of Kagan laid a hand on his arm.

"Careful, my friend!" the Lunarian hissed. "Your anger shows on your face, and that is bad. We cannot help that poor girl now. Come!"

They went down into the city, avoiding the broad boulevards and keeping to the narrower streets where the poorer people were. As they passed by the base of one of the high palaces, they came to the body of a girl who lay crushed on the stones and had evidently been thrown or jumped from one of the upper windows. An aged man stood astride the body, leaning back and shaking his skinny fists at the white and gold bulk of the palace above him.

"Woe be upon the Lords of Gral-Thala!" he screamed in his shrill old voice. "Triple woe upon the tyrants and upon the decadent parasites who fawn upon them. Evil lies in wait for ye, lurking in your white palaces with your guards and your harlots! The hour of doom is not far away! The vengeance of Gorton and Laila may be long delayed, but it comes in the end! Woe to the Lords of Gral-Thala!"

An uneasy, sullen, murmuring crowd was gathered around the ragged old man although they left a broad circle of vacant space around him and the body of his granddaughter. A few troopers of the garrison were making a half-hearted effort to push the crowd back. They were uncomfortable in the face of the unspoken but obvious hatred of the throng. Larry and the others prudently kept to the back of the crowd. Even so, they were near enough to see what happened next.

Silver bells rang sharply, and lackeys called an arrogant summons to clear the way. In the midst of a circle of armed guards, porters carried a swaying gilt litter. On the cushions of the litter rested a man. It was one of the nobles of Gral-Thala, a perfumed degenerate in silken robes with a rouged and painted face. For a moment he

stared at the crowds with his arrogantly scornful eyes. Then, as he saw the old man beside the girl's body and heard the curses he was shouting, his patrician face was distorted into a sneering frown.

The noble snarled an order, and one of his guards lifted his electronic rifle. There was a flash of blinding light! A sudden clap of miniature thunder, and a smell of ozone. The man-made lightning bolt struck the old man in the chest and knocked him sprawling across the body of his granddaughter. With a faint smile the noble leaned back on the cushions of the litter and waved languidly to his porters to move on again.

"Let us go, my friends!" Pyatt whispered hoarsely. "We cannot right all the wrongs of Gral-Thala at one stroke, and our mission is the most important thing at the moment."

XIV

They were walking slowly down one of the quiet streets of the city, a quarter where there were few guards and little chance of discovery. Larry noticed that all the windows were equipped with heavy shutters, so that the light could be closed out when the inhabitants of this land desired to sleep. It was a place of unending daylight, always turned toward the sun, where darkness never came. Colton was more interested in the metal rails that ran along the walks on the outside of the buildings.

"My Lord!" he said softly, "These are gold!"

"Of course," Pyatt of Kagan said absently, "Gold is one of the most common metals in Gral-Thala. Our problem is the matter of the radium salts. I happen to know that they are stored in small boxes made of ura-lead, in one of the government storehouses. It would be easier to steal some direct from the mines, but there is no time for that because of the question of proper packing and handling. We must risk everything on a bold attempt to raid the warehouses."

"Suits me," Larry said quietly. Just then Diana gripped him by the arm and jerked him back against the wall of the nearest building.

"Look there!" she hissed.

Another litter was passing along the cross street just ahead of them. This litter went in evident haste, with lackeys swinging whips to clear the path and the passenger bending forward to urge his bearers to greater haste. The man who rode in the litter was Xylon!

The four outlaws stared at each other in grim and ominous surprise. There had been no doubt of the identity of the man who had just passed within a few yards of them.

"But what does *that* mean?" Larry gasped.

"It means that I have been a fool!" Pyatt snarled. "Xylon is evidently no outlaw who came to the caverns to seek shelter, but a spy sent out by the Lords of Gral-Thala. Now I understand the reason for that revolt among the Insect-men! He must have stirred it up in an attempt to kidnap Diana here because of her hold over those simple creatures. Now the location of the Lost Caverns is at last known to the tyrants, and there will be an attack in force."

"And Xylon knows that we are here in Pandonaria!" Diana exclaimed.

"Which means that all our lives hang by a thread no heavier than a woman's hair! We must get under cover at once! Then we will send word back to the Caverns by secret radio, that they may prepare for an assault. After that we will plan an attempt on the radium salts."

The outlaws of the Lost Caverns had certain confederates within the city, and they now took refuge in the house of a small merchant who was a distant cousin of Pyatt. Larry watched as Pyatt and the merchant crouched over the sending set concealed in a small closet built in the thickness of one of the walls, the arkon-bulbs

flashing as they sent the warning to Chotan to be spread to the other caverns. At last Pyatt straightened up.

"At least that is done," he said. "Now we will wait two hours, which will be the time of the Third Meal. There will be few people on the streets, and the warehouse guards will be drowsy, and we will have our best chance."

Pyatt and Colton had gone somewhere else in the house, and Larry sat with Diana in a small room whose windows looked out on the green fields beyond the city. The girl had loosened her blue veil so that it hung in soft folds about her chin.

"This is the first time in my life I have been anywhere but in the Caverns and on the waste-land," she said moodily. "This valley of Gral-Thala is a pleasant place."

"You would like Earth even better."

"I suppose I would. Will you take me back to that Earth of yours when you return, Larry?"

"Not until the Gray Death is overcome! I would not want to take any chance of it striking you down."

"Do you love me, Larry?" she asked, without either coquetry or embarrassment.

"I guess I do. Of course, we've only known each other for a few hours—but I guess I do."

"I am glad," she said simply.

The two hours passed, and Pyatt came striding back into the room. They had given him one of the ray-guns brought ashore from the *Sky Maid*, and he carried it thrust in his girdle close to his hand.

"It is time to go," he said. "We must make our attempt now, win or lose. Where is Colton?"

"I thought he was with you."

"Haven't seen him in two hours!"

A hasty search of the merchant's house and small grounds revealed no trace of the missing officer. Pyatt stood glowering blackly and pulling at his chin.

"I don't like it," he said. "Yet, if the soldiers had taken him, they would have come for us as well."

A different thought was running through Larry's mind, a grim and unpleasant suspicion. He was remembering Colton's past history ... his general sullenness ... the greed that he had shown throughout the entire expedition. He was also remembering that he had seen Colton in deep conversation with Xylon a few hours before they had left Chotan.

"I am afraid," he said bitterly, "that Colton has sold us out to Xylon and the Lords of Gral-Thala for promise of reward. We had better get out of this house right away, before...."

Larry never finished that sentence. There was a roaring crash, and the door was shattered by the impact of a pair of electronic bolts fired by the soldiers who had crept up to the house. Armored figures came pouring in the door! Others were at the back.

Pyatt of Kagan, fighting furiously, went down under press of numbers. Larry managed to get his ray-gun up and fire one blast that crumpled a charging trooper in mid stride, but then half a dozen gripped him and the brief fight was over. They were taken!

XV

The hands of the three prisoners were tied behind their backs, and nooses were placed around their necks. Then they were dragged out into the street. The merchant was not taken prisoner at all, simply killed out of hand with the body left lying across his shattered threshold. A thin-lipped, hooked-nosed officer spat in Larry's face as he was led past the body of the dead merchant.

"Not for you will there be such an easy ending," he sneered. "An example is to be made. You will die before crowds, in the Plaza of the Four Virgins, and the process will be a slow one."

They were surrounded by a double rank of guards as they were led along by the nooses about their necks. All three had been stripped to a loin cloth, and the sun was scorching hot upon Larry's back and shoulders. At least, he thought thankfully, Diana's long black hair gave her some protection. There were jeers and hoots as they were led through the crowded streets, but most of them came from members of the tyrant class and from the few over-dressed and foppish Lunarians who aped their masters. The mass of the people gazed in stony and somehow sympathetic silence.

Into one of the tall white-and-gold palaces of the Lords of Gral-Thala they were taken, and down into stone-walled dungeons far underground. They were placed in a single cell. They stood with their backs against the walls, arms out-stretched and wrists lashed to rings set in the stone, able to move little more but their heads. Then, for a while, they were left alone.

"Well," said Larry with grim humor, "here we are."

"So it seems!" Pyatt's voice was rasping and bitter. "I am indeed a fool for ever having allowed Xylon to live in the Cavern of Chotan, in spite of the kind-hearted ruling of the Elders."

"What will they do with us?" Larry asked. Pyatt hesitated, licking his lips and glancing at Diana, but the girl answered for herself.

"We shall probably be skinned alive in the public square, dying slowly under the torture," she said. "It is the favorite punishment of the tyrants for those they particularly hate."

It was a day of triumph for the Lords of Gral-Thala. Xylon's triumphant return with the information that would lead to the wiping out of the always troublesome outlaws of the Lost Caverns, and the capture of the three prisoners, made it a holiday for the ruling class of the valley. They came in hundreds to see the three captives. The famous military leader of the outlaws ... the girl who was considered a goddess by the primitive Insect-men of the waste-land ... the the stranger from that distant Earth whence their own ancestors had fled. They came to throng the dungeon corridor and stare in at the trio of captives spread-eagled against the wall of the cell.

Larry watched them through the barred door. For hours on end there were always a few of them in the corridor, staring and jeering. Foppish men in white and

gold with their curled hair laden with scent. Haughty and jewel-clad women whose sharp featured faces held even more cruelty than their male companions. Many were attended by Lunarian slave girls whose fettered hands held their trains up from the floor, and the bare backs of the slave girls were usually marked with the crossing red marks of whips. Larry knew, now, that the tales told in the Caverns about the cruelty of the Lords of Gral-Thala had not been exaggerated.

Xylon came to see them after a while, opening the cell door and walking in to stand sneering at them with his thumbs hooked in his jeweled girdle.

"Colton sold you out for the promise of wealth and a place in the ranks of our nobles," he said. "It will be a pleasure to watch you die." For a moment he walked over to stand in front of Diana who looked back at him with an expressionless face. "You are not a bad-looking wench. I can take you for one of my slaves if you wish to be agreeable."

"I would rather go with an Insect-man!" the girl said with calm scorn. Xylon shrugged and turned away.

"So be it. At that, it would be a pity to rob the crowd of the pleasure of watching you die."

As near as Larry could judge it, the equivalent of an Earthly day had passed before they were taken out of the cell. They were given an hour to ease their stiffened muscles. Then the guards bound their wrists before them, and by the trailing ends of the ropes led them out of the dungeons and through the streets to a broad open space just at the foot of the inclines that led down from the tunnel by which they had entered the city.

The Plaza of the Four Virgins, named from the four gigantic statues of polished stone that had been placed at its corners in some long ago day before the Invaders came, was a vast paved space in front of an ancient temple that was now used as a government building. In front of the temple a metal scaffold had been erected with two heavy uprights and a cross-piece. The rulers of Gral-Thala were sprawled in cushioned ease on the steps of the temple, well guarded by their troops, and the floor of the Plaza was filled with the common people of the city. These latter were present in great number, a silent and ominously sullen mass.

The three prisoners were stood in a row on the scaffold. Their hands were raised above their heads, and the ropes made fast to the cross-piece so that they were held tautly erect and motionless. Sharp laughter and occasional jests came from the nobles and their women clustered on the steps, but as Larry looked out over the crowd in the Plaza he saw faces that were grim and intent. The threat of the electronic rifles of the guards would keep the unarmed mob from trying to aid the prisoners, but there was no doubt where their sympathies lay.

Glancing up at the tyrants grouped on the temple steps, Larry suddenly saw Colton. The former second officer of the *Sky Maid* now wore the white and gold robes of a noble of Gral-Thala. Xylon kept his promises! Colton flushed uncomfortably

when his glance met Larry's grim stare, quickly turning his eyes away. He looked uncomfortable and ill-at-ease. Larry glanced at him again a few minutes later and saw Colton staring at Diana's bound and motionless form with definite misery in his eyes.

One of the nobles stepped to the front and began to address the crowd. Shrill yells and catcalls drowned his words. The guards raged, but the men in the front ranks of the mob were discreetly silent and they could not reach or identify the culprits in the ranks behind. Many of the nobles were muttering nervously among themselves, showing definite signs of fear.

"There was never a scene like this in Pandonaria before!" Pyatt of Kagan exulted from where he was bound beside Larry. "We may die, but our death is likely to stir the people to such a pitch that the revolt will soon come!"

Xylon, for all his faults, was made of sterner stuff than most of his fellow nobles. He sneered down at the muttering crowd, then signed to the officer commanding the guards.

"Pay no attention to the dogs," he commanded sharply. "Give these three a taste of the whip before the flayers rip the skins from their bodies. Begin with the girl."

A heavy-featured man in a black tunic stepped up to Diana, pulling the lash of a heavy whip through his hands to test its suppleness. Before he could strike there came a sudden interruption. A small car had been speeding down the incline from the tunnel entrance and now a gilded officer of the invaders leaped out and came running across the Plaza.

"Great news, oh Xylon and nobles of Gral-Thala!" he shouted. "One of our patrols has captured a great force of outlaw warriors and their insect allies, who were moving in to raid our nearer caves. Some more Earthlings are with them!"

"Good, by Gorton!" exulted Xylon. "We will delay the execution of these three till the others are here to see it."

Larry's last hope was gone. He had remembered Ripon's promise to come after them if they had not returned quickly, and in the back of his mind had been the thought that the doughty scientist might yet accomplish a rescue in some way. Now that hope had vanished. He sighed, and beside him Diana sagged visibly in her bonds.

"Guess it's the end," she said. "Good bye, Larry!"

XVI

From where he stood on the scaffold, Larry could see a number of the big transport cars coming down the incline. They were crowded with prisoners and guards, and he caught the gleam of the hard brown shells of Insect-men. Once unloaded from the cars, they all formed up in columns and came quickly across the Plaza. Behind the front rank of guards Larry saw Ripon, and some of the men from the *Sky Maid*, and many whom he recognized as leaders among the Lunarians of the Lost Caverns.

It was all over now. The prisoners trudged along like beaten men, utterly disheartened although they were but thinly guarded. The nobles grouped on the temple steps were laughing loudly, all their nervousness of a moment ago gone before the reassurance of this victory. Then, as the prisoners were halted in the Plaza directly before the double line of soldiers that guarded the temple, an officer beside Xylon leaned forward to point down at the commander of the patrol that was bringing in the prisoners.

"That man wears the insignia of an Ensign of the first rank," he shouted, "but there is no such man in the ranks of our officers! There is treachery here!"

Before the man's words had died away, Crispin Gillingwater Ripon had whipped a ray-gun out from under his cloak and smashed the officer's chest into a charred pulp with the deadly blast of the rays.

In an instant the Plaza was a wild turmoil. The pretended prisoners drew their hidden weapons. Those who had been masquerading as guards, using the armor they had taken from the soldiers they surprised and overwhelmed when they stormed the tunnel entrance, threw the uniforms aside and charged into the fight. The rippling crashes of the electronic guns rang out again and again, the murky flashes of the Earth-men's death rays stabbed into the fray, and a clicking horde of Insect-men charged home with their spiked clubs swinging.



In an instant the Plaza was in a wild turmoil.... The rippling crashes of the electronic guns rang out again and again. The murky flashes of Earth-men's death rays stabbed into the fray, and a clicking horde of Insect-men charged home with spiked clubs swinging.

For the first few moments the fighting centered around the scaffold. Xylon led a charge of picked men down to seize and keep the three prisoners bound there, Ripon came storming through to effect a rescue. When the *mélee* was over, Larry and Pyatt were free and Xylon had retreated back to the temple steps, but Diana had disappeared.

"We got the rest of the crew from the *Sky Maid* and all the men we could collect at Chotan and crept up to the tunnel mouth," Ripon panted as he thrust a ray-gun into Larry's hand. "We took the guards by surprise and killed them before they could warn the valley behind."

It had been a daring raid, and at first its sheer audacity had carried it near to complete victory. Now the superior numbers of the guards were beginning to tell, and more of the troops of Gral-Thala came pounding up at the double. The crash of the

electronic guns became a steady roar, and bodies were thickly strewn about the blood-smeared surface of the Plaza of the Four Virgins. Then, with a long-drawn and sullen shout, the mass of watching Lunarians flung themselves on the soldiery. Hundreds died, but the others tore the guards to pieces with their naked hands and then snatched up their weapons. The people of Gral-Thala had risen against their oppressors at last!

With the uprising of the people, the battle ceased to be a fight and became a massacre. The troops were selling their lives, as dearly as they could, but thousands more citizens carrying improvised weapons were pouring in from every street and the thing was only a matter of time. Then, in the rear of the panic stricken mass of nobles who were fleeing into the temple to make a last stand, while the vengeful pack bayed at their heels, Larry suddenly saw Xylon!

The tyrant was standing beside one of the great stone columns that supported the portico of the temple. He held the half naked body of Diana before him as a shield. The girl's hands were still tied and she could not pull away. A swarm of Insect-men, who were bounding up the temple steps, halted as they saw Xylon hold an electronic pistol to the head of their goddess.

"Keep back or she dies!" he shouted. "She is hostage for our safety!"

Larry lifted his ray-gun, and then lowered it again with a groan. He dared not shoot with Diana's struggling body in the way. Nor had he any doubt that Xylon would kill the girl without compunction if attacked. Xylon began to edge back toward the temple door. Larry still stood indecisive, the others seemed frozen in their places. Then another white-and-gold figure darted out from the temple behind Xylon. The renegade Colton twisted the gun from Xylon's hand!

The thing was over in an instant. Xylon released Diana and turned on Colton with an oath, and the girl instantly dropped to the ground. Steel flickered in the sunlight. Xylon drove a long knife home between Colton's ribs, but before he could dart away Larry's ready ray-gun struck him down with its blast. His quivering body rolled slowly down the steps till the Insect-men reached it and literally tore it into bloody bits.

XVII

The dying Colton was sinking fast. His face was gray as he looked up with a faint smile at the others who were grouped around him.

"I never was much good," he said faintly. "Guess it just wasn't in the blood. Gold always led me into twisted paths, and I couldn't resist Xylon's offer. But it did something to me when I saw the way those devils were going to torture the girl. Well—I guess I paid my debt at the end."

"You've paid it—and you'll live to go back to Earth with us," Larry said. Colton shook his head, his eyes glazing.

"Don't try to kid me. I'm cashing in my checks," he said—and died.

Now that it was all over, Larry felt very tired. He put one arm around Diana, and leaned back against the base of the column. There was still some intermittent fighting going on where mobs of vengeful Lunarians had cornered some of their oppressors, but the victory was won. Ripon looked about at the carnage with a satisfied smile and then sheathed his ray-gun.

"It was a good fight!" he said. "I haven't had as much fun since the time I wrecked a saloon in Port Mahon. Now, young feller, you just take care of the lady here while I take a squad and get the radium salts from the store-house."

"And the *Sky Maid*?" Larry asked.

"That sour-puss Masterson has been standing over the men with a ray-gun in one hand and my last jug of rum in the other ever since you left. All the repairs are finished. We start back to Earth as soon as we can get our cargo aboard."

"Then the people of your planet will be saved?" Diana asked.

"They will be saved. And as soon as the Gray Death is checked I'll come back for you. Then the Moon will have to get along without its Goddess for a while."

"I'll be waiting," she said.