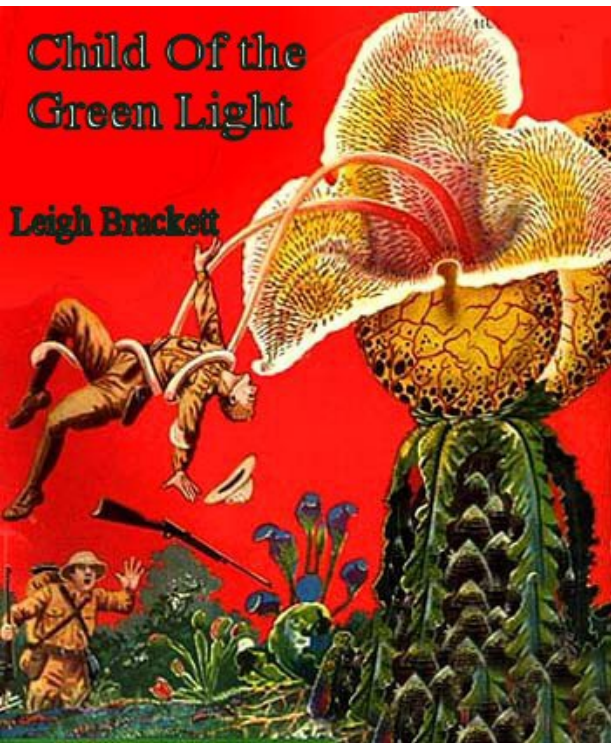


Child Of the Green Light

Leigh Brackett



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Son felt the distant, ringing shiver of the metal under him. The whole close-packed mass of broken hulks shifted slightly with the impact, turning wheel-like around the shining Light.

Son half rose. He'd been sprawled full length on the crest of the wheel, trying to make the Veil get thin enough to see through. They had both seen that it was thinner than ever, and Aona, on the other side of it, had danced for him, a misty shifting light beyond the queer darkness. Several times he thought he had almost seen her outlines. He could hear her mind now, tickling his brain with impish thought-fingers. She must have heard his own thought change, because she asked, "What is it, Son? What's happened?"

"Another ship, I think." Son rose lazily, the green Light from below rippling around him like clear water.

He looked out over his domain, feeling the savage sun-fire and the spatial cold of the shadows touch his naked body with little whips of ecstasy. His face was a boy's face, handsome and bright-eyed. His fair head burned like a torch in the blinding glare.

The sun made a blazing canopy across half the sky. The rest was open space, velvet dark and boundless, flecked with the little fires of the stars. Between sun and space lay the wheel, built of space ships that lay side by side, over and under and sometimes through, broken and bent and dead, bound close by the power of the Light.

The Light, lying below Son's naked feet at the very heart of the wheel, burning green through the packed hulks—the Light that was his bridge to Aona. Son's blue eyes, unshaded, looked for the wreck. He knew it would be a wreck. Only one ship in the wheel, the one in which his memories began, was whole. Then he stood quite still,

staring, feeling every muscle tense and tighten. He saw the ship, lying high on the outer rim of the wheel. It was not broken. Tubes burned red at the front end. There was a door opening in the side. Things began to come out of it.

Things shaped like Son, only thick and clumsy, with queer gleaming bulbs on their heads.

A strange contracting shiver ran through Son. Since sound and breath had gone, and the effigies that lay in his ship had ceased to move, nothing had stirred on the wheel but Son himself.

In the broken ships there was never anything but scraps of odd substance, scattered as though by some bursting inner force. Son and Aona had talked idly of living beings, but Son hadn't bothered his head about them much. He was Himself. He had the sun, and space, and Aona. It was sufficient. Aona said impatiently, "Well, Son?"

"It's a ship," he answered, with his mind. "Only it isn't wrecked. Aona, there are living things coming out of it."

He stood staring at the Veil, and the misty light beyond.

"Aona," his mind whispered. "In my head I'm cold and hot all at once. I want to go and do, but I don't know where or what. What's the matter with me, Aona?"

"It's fear," she told him softly. "I have it, too." Son could feel it, pulsing from her mind. In all the years of life he had never felt it before. Now it had him by the throat.

Aona cried, "What if these creatures should harm you, or the Light?"

"You have said that nothing in this universe could harm me now.

And"—Son shivered—"no one would do what has to be done to destroy the Light."

"But these creatures—we don't know what knowledge they may have. Son, if anything should happen . . ."

Son raised his arms to the darkness.

"I don't want you to be afraid, Aona. Tear away the Veil!"

"I can't, darling. You know neither of us can, until the Veil of itself passes behind you."

"How long, Aona?"

She laughed, with an attempt at her old sweet teasing. "How long is 'long' in your world, Son? How long have you lived? How long have we talked? No one knows. Only, the Veil grows thinner every time we meet, every time we talk like this.

"Stay by the Light, Son. Don't let anyone harm it!" Son's blue eyes narrowed. "I love you," he said quietly. "No one shall harm the Light."

"I'll stay with you," she said. "They won't be able to see—yet." Son turned and went, across the tumbled plain of dead ships, with Aona's misty light following beyond the blurred and pulsing dark.

* * *

There were seven of the invaders. They stood in a close knot beside their ship, staring at the green fire of the Light. Three of them began to dance clumsily. The others placed shapeless hands on each other's shapeless shoulders and shook and pounded.

Son's eyes were as sharp as the spear-points of the stars. He lay

behind a steering-jet housing, watching, and he saw with shock that there were faces under the glittering helmets.

Faces very like his own.

There were three round, smooth faces. They belonged to the ones who danced. There was one deeply lined face with bushy eyebrows and a framing straggle of white hair. Then there were two others, which Son sensed to be of different races.

One was round and green and small, with shining eyes the color of space, and a mouth like a thin wound. The other differed from the first three only in subtle points of line and shape, but its face was like a mask beaten out of dark iron, with deep-set, sullen eyes.

The seventh face drove all the others out of Son's mind. It was bronzed and grim and strong, with some driving inner force about it that was like the pulse Son felt beating in space, when he lay on the crest of the wheel watching the sun and the burning stars.

This last man seemed to be the leader. He turned to the others, his mouth moving. Then the mouths of the others moved also. Presently five of the invaders turned. Son thought they were going away again. But two of them—the white-haired one and the one with the dark, vital face—started together, out across the broken plain of ships. And Son tensed where he lay.

They were heading toward the heart of the wheel, where the glow of the Light danced like the fire-veils of the sun.

Who knew what knowledge, what powers they might have? Son called to Aona, and followed, keeping out of sight, his blue eyes narrowed and hard. They were almost over the Light when Son heard the first human thought-voice, as though the power of the Light

brought it out. It was faint and indistinct. He could catch only fragments.

" . . . here, inside Mercury's orbit . . . heat! . . . found it, after five years . . ."

That was the bronzed man speaking. Then—

"Yes, thank God! Now if we can . . ."

Son wished the voices were clearer. There was a terrible, disturbing urgency about them.

The invaders paused where the green light was strongest, at the heart of the wheel.

The mind of the grim, dark man said, "Down there." He started to lower himself into a crevice between two hulls. And Son, driven by a sudden stab of anger, leaped up.

He came striding across the searing metal, naked and erect and beautiful, his fair head burning in the sunlight.

He flung up one corded arm, and his mind cried out, "No! You can't go down." The invaders straightened, staring. The face of the bronzed, strong man went white, the lines of it blurring into slackness. The white-haired man swayed on his feet.

"The radiation's getting me, Ransome," he whispered. "I'm having hallucinations."

"No. No, I see it, too." The eyes of the bronzed man burned into Son's. "A man, naked in open space."

He stumbled forward, his gaze fixed on the powerful body outlined

against the stars.

Son watched him come, conscious of a curious pulsing excitement. Anger, resentment, fear for the Light, and something else. Something like the first time he had spoken to Aona through the Veil.

The bronzed man stopped before him. His lips moved in that queer way they had. Son heard his mind speaking, faintly.

"What are you?"

"I am Son," he answered simply. "What do you want with the Light?" Again he heard the faint mind-voice. "You can't understand me, of course. I don't know what you are, god or demon, but don't try to stop us! For God's sake, don't make it any harder!"

"But I do understand. You can't go down there." Ransome turned. "Dick," he said, "Lord only knows what this—this creature is, or what it will do. But we've got to get down there and study this thing. If it tries to stop us, I'll kill it."

Dick nodded his white head. His face was lined and very tired. "Surely nothing will stop us now," he said. "Not now."

"I'll cover you," said Ransome. Dick slid down into the crevice. The bronzed man drew something from his belt and waited.

Son stepped forward, anger and fear cording his muscles. The dark man said, "I don't want to kill you. I have no right to kill you, because of what you are. But that thing down there is going to be destroyed." Son stopped, quite still. A great flaming pulse shot through him. And then he gathered himself.

The spring of his corded thighs carried him full over the crack down

which the white-haired man had gone. One long arm reached down. The hand closed angrily on smooth glass.

The helmet shattered. Son had a momentary glimpse of a lined, weary face upturned, faded eyes staring in unbelieving horror. Then the flesh of the face split into crimson ribbons, and the body under the space suit altered strangely.

* * *

Son got up slowly, feeling strange and unsteady in his thoughts. He hadn't wanted to destroy the man, only to make him come back. He became aware, then, of Ransome, standing with a metal thing in his hand, staring at him with eyes like the savage, dying red stars.

"It didn't touch him," Ransome's mind was saying. "A heat ray strong enough to fuse steel, and it didn't touch him. And Dick's dead." Ransome hurled the gun suddenly into Son's face.

"Do you know what you've done?" his mind shouted. "Dick was a physicist—about the only one with any knowledge that hasn't died of old age. He might have found the way to destroy that thing. Now, if our weapons don't work on it . .

"The effect is accelerating. Every child born since the Cloud is horribly susceptible. There isn't any time any more for any thing. There won't be anyone to follow us, because now there's no time to learn." Ransome stepped close to Son. His head was thrown back, his face a grim, hard mask streaked suddenly by little shining things that ran from those savage eyes.

"You don't know what that means, do you? You don't know how old

Dick was, with his white hair and his wrinkles. Thirty-six! Or me. I'm nineteen—nineteen. And my life is already half gone.

"All over the Solar System it's like that, because of this hellish thing that came in the Cloud. We've hunted the System over for five years, all of us that could, for a thing that wouldn't react to any test or show on any instrument. And when we found it.

He stopped, the veins knotted across his forehead, a little muscle twitching in one lean cheek.

Then, very calmly, he said, "Get him, boys." Son jerked around, but it was too late. The five who had stayed in the ship were all around him. For a long time Son had been conscious only of these two men, and the strange confusion in his mind—a confusion made worse, somehow, by those mysterious crystal drops running from Ransome's eyes. They caught him, somewhere, deep.

Ropes of light metal fell around him. He fought like a Titan in the naked blaze of the sun. But they were experts with their ropes. They caught his wrists and ankles, dividing his power, baffling him with tenuous cords of elastic strength.

Son knew that his mass was still sufficiently in phase to be subject to such laws as gravity and tension. He fought. But presently he was spread-eagled on the burning metal, helpless.

The man with the face like beaten metal and the sullen eyes said, "We were watching from the ship. We thought we must be crazy when we saw this—man standing out here. Then we thought you might need help." He stopped, staring at Son. "The heat ray didn't touch him."

"No," said Ransome quietly. "That's how he got Dickson." The one

with the queer green face snapped, "Dickson's dead?" Ransome nodded. "Down in the crack there. We were trying to get down to study the light. He—it didn't want us to go."

The green-faced one said, "My God!"

"Quite. Arun, you and one of the boys guard the ship. Teck, you mount guard here with the other. Greenough, come with me."

One of the round-faced ones stepped forward. His eyes were light blue, oddly empty in spite of their brightness. He looked down at the crevice where Dickson's body was, and his mind said, "I'm afraid. I don't want to go down there. I'm afraid."

"Come on, Greenough," Ransome snapped. His lips started to move again, and stopped abruptly.

Son caught the thought, "Got to hurry. God knows what this radiation will do to us, right on top of it."

"Sir," said Greenough jerkily, "what if there are more like him down there?" Ransome turned his grim, hard face on the boy. Son felt again that force, the strength that pulsed between the stars.

"Well," said Ransome, "what if there are?" He turned and slid down into the crevice.

Greenough closed his pale, scared eyes, licked his lips, and followed.

* * *

Teck, the man with the sullen eyes, laughed—a biting mind-sound as hard as his jaw-line. "Hell of a gunnery officer."

Arun said absently, "He's only eleven." His eyes, purple-black and opaque as a dark nebula, swung jerkily from Son to the crevice where Dickson lay, and back again.

Teck was a big man, as big as Son, but Arun topped him by a foot. He was very slender, moving with a queer rubbery grace.

"What if we can't do it?" he said suddenly. "What if our weapons won't work on it any more than they did on him?"

"Then," answered Teck evenly, "the last generation of mankind will die of old age within fifty years." His sullen gaze roved over Son, over and over, and his mind was whispering to itself.

"Mutation," he said abruptly "That's it. Complete change of cellular structure, metabolism, brain tissue, everything. Mutation in the living individual. I wonder how long . . ."

"Look at that green light," whispered Arun. "Remember how it filled the whole sky when we came into the Cloud? Cosmic dust, the scientist said. Temporary effect. But it stayed, when the Cloud went."

His long thin arms came up in a blind sort of gesture. "We were millions of miles away, then. What will it do to us now?"

Teck studied his hands. "We're not aging, anyway. Concentrated effect is probably different. Feel anything?"

"Deep. Deep inside me. I—"

"Your cellular structure is different from ours, anyway." Arun swayed slightly, watching the green light pulse up from below. Beads of sweat ran down his face.

"Yes," he whispered. "Different. You know how the Cloud affected us

on Tethys. If our life-span were not almost three times as long as your —" He bent suddenly over Son, and more of the queer shining things were trickling out of his eyes.

"For five years we've watched our people die, hunting for this thing. Dickson was our only chance. And you, you damned freak—" He lifted his long arms again, as though to cover his head. "I'll get back to the ship now," he said abruptly, and turned.

Teck hesitated for a heartbeat, scowling at Arun. Then he stepped in front of him, the thing they called a heat gun in his hand.

"Sit down, Arun."

"You heard Ransome's orders." The Tethysman was trembling.

"In the Martian Drylands, where I come from," murmured Teck, "men sometimes get what we call esht—desert-fear. They take other men's water and vaards, and run away. You're the engineer, Arun, and even without me to do the navigating

. . . . Sit down, Arun."

The Tethysman sat, a fluid folding of thin length. The two round-faced boys stood by, not moving nor speaking, the fear so strong in their minds that Son could hear it shouting.

He saw and heard all this with a small part of his brain. Most of it was thinking of the Light and the men working their way down to the queer hole where it lay among the tangled ships.

This talk of age and years and dying and humanity meant nothing to him. In all his universe there was only himself, the wheel, the sun, the distant stars, and Aona. There was no day or night, no time.

He was angry and afraid, full of hatred and resentment and a queer tearing at his throat, as though he had lost some vital part of him—the Light. Were they going to take the horrible way of destruction that Aona had told him of? Or did they know another way?

He tensed his corded body against the metal ropes, and his mind cried out,

"Aona!" as though he were seeing her vanish forever beyond the Veil.

* * *

The Martian said, softly, "He used to be human. I wonder . . ." He leaned forward suddenly. "Can you hear me?"

Son answered, "Yes." He was beginning to realize something. The mouth-movements of these men had something to do with speaking, and their clearest, loudest thoughts came with them.

Teck must have caught the motion of his eyes, for he cried out.

"Yes! But you can't speak, because you don't breathe air. Probably lost both lungs and vocal cords. You must be a telepath. I'll bet that's what you are!" The Martian's dark-iron mask of a face was eager; his sullen eyes full of little sparks.

"You hear me think, is that it? Nod your head once, if you do." Son hesitated, studying the men with narrow eyes. If he talked with them, he might find out how much they knew. He nodded.

Teck was quite still for a moment. Arun sat rigid, staring with eerie purple eyes at the Light.

"How long have you been here?" asked Teck.

Son shook his head.

"Where did you come from?" Again Son shook his head, and Teck asked, "You know no other place than this?"

Again the negative.

Teck drew a long breath.

"You must have been born here, then. In one of the first ships swept up by the magnetic force of this thing as it passed through the Solar System. Then your ship cannot have been wrecked. Probably the counter-pull of some planet saved it, as our new Elker drive saved us."

His deep eyes blazed. "Your body was the same as mine, once. How long would it take to change me to a being like you?"

Arun got up suddenly. "I've got to get back to the ship." Teck's gun hand was steady. "Sit down!"

Arun's thought rose tightly. "But I've got to! Something's wrong—" Teck's gun thrust forward menacingly. Arun sat down again, slowly. The green light wavered around him, making his face curiously indistinct. Teck's thought hammered at Son.

"You know what the light is?"

Son hesitated, sending Aona a rapid question.

Her mind said, "No! Don't tell, Son. It might help them destroy it." He shook his head. "No."

Teck's lips drew back. "You're lying," he said, and then whirled around, his dark hard face taut.

Arun had risen, and the single wild shriek in his mind stabbed Son's brain so that he writhed in his shackles.

The two boys backed off, their faces white and staring. Even Teck drew back a bit, and his gun hand trembled.

Arun was changing. Son watched tensely, forgetting for a moment even his agony of fear for the Light.

The lines of the green, smooth face of the Tethysman blurred and shifted in the green light, like something seen under water. Strange writhing tremors shook his body.

His mind cried out with his moving lips: "Something's happening to me. Oh, God! And all for nothing."

He staggered forward. His eyes were night-black and luminous, horribly steady in that blurred face, fixed on Son.

Son knew, lying there chained, that he was in deadly peril. Because Arun was on his own plane, though a little past him.

"All for nothing—mankind lost," wailed the thought-voice. "I'm going blind. No. No! I'm seeing—through . . ."

His scream shivered cold as space along Son's nerve-channels. The tall rubbery form loomed over him, bending closer . . .

* * *

One of the boys fainted quietly, rolling like an ungainly bundle into a deep shaft between two wrecks. Teck caught his breath.

"I'm not through with him yet," he muttered, and raised his gun. The glassite helmet melted and ran. The head and the glowing purple eyes beneath it were untouched.

And then no one moved, nor spoke. Arun's head and face quivered, merging imperceptibly into the blurred darkness of the Veil.

Aona cried out suddenly, "He's coming through!" And then, "No! The change was too swift. Too many atoms in transition. He's caught . . ." Shivering against Son's mind, like the single wild shaft of a distant comet, came Arun's thought.

"No, not here! Not here—between!"

And then he was gone. His space suit crumpled down, quite empty. Teck swayed, the dark hardness of his face bleached and rigid. "What did he mean—'between'?"

Son lay quite still, hearing Aona sob beyond the Veil. He knew. Aona had told him. Between universes—the darkness, the nothingness, the nowhere. He felt the cold dark crawling in his mind.

Teck laughed suddenly, biting and defiant. His deep eyes were fixed on Son, sprawled like a young god in the raw blaze of the sun.

"By the gods," he whispered, "it's worth the risk!" Greenough came stumbling up out of the crevice.

He looked more like a child than ever. His round face was dazed and bewildered, screwed up strangely. Even to Son, there was something terrible and unholy in that child's shallow-eyed face on a man's strong body. Teck drew a slow breath. Son felt a dark, iron strength in him, different from the strength of the bronzed Ransome, that was like the

beat of space itself, but great, too. Great, and dangerous.

"What did you find out?" asked Teck. "Where's Ransome?" Son's brain burned within him with fear, though he saw that the green Light was still unchanged.

"Down there," said Greenough, and whimpered. He blinked his eyes, moving his head and pawing at his helmet as though to clear it.

"I only looked at it a minute. It was too little and too big all at once, and I was frightened."

Teck caught him by the shoulders and shook him roughly. "Looked at what?" he demanded. "What's happened?"

"At the light," said Greenough, in a far-away voice. "We found it inside a ship. We could look right through the metal. I only looked a minute because I was frightened. I was frightened, I was . . ."

Teck's strong hands snapped his teeth together. "What was it?" Greenough's shallow eyes wandered to his. "Ransome says it's part of another universe. He's still there, looking. Only . . ." Greenough's voice broke in a little hiccough. "Only he can't see any more." Son felt a great surge of relief. The Light was safe, so far. Greenough slipped suddenly from Teck's hands, sitting wide-legged on the battered hull.

"I'm scared," he said. "I want Mama." Big slow drops ran down his cheeks, and again Son was stirred by something deep and strange.

Teck turned slowly to Son. "He was six years old when the Cloud came. You can build a man's body in eleven years, but not his brain." He was silent, looking down with deep, intense eyes.

* * *

He spoke, after a bit, slowly and deliberately.

"So it's part of another universe. Diluted by distance, its radiation speeds human metabolism, causing swift age. Concentrated, it changes the human organism into an alien metabolism, alien flesh.

"Slim almost made it through, but his peculiar chemical balance destroyed him. You must be in the same transition stage, but much slower, being passed by the changing of your basic vibratory rate into another space-time continuum." Son couldn't hide the sudden flicker in his eyes. He hated this dark Martian suddenly, this man who guessed so much.

"So it's true," said Teck. "Confirmation of the old conception of coexisting universes on different vibratory planes. But how would you know, unless—unless you can talk to that other universe?"

He laughed at the bitter look in Son's blue eyes.

"Afraid, aren't you? That means you have something to hide, or protect." He dropped suddenly to one knee, catching his fingers in Son's fair hair.

"Look at me. I want to watch your eyes. You do know what that light is, and how it can be destroyed. If I could get a body like yours, and still not cross over . . .

"Do you feed on the green light, or the sun?" The question came so quickly that Son's eyes flicked to the canopy of fire overhead, before he could stop them. Teck sat back on his heels with a long, slow sigh.

"That's all I needed," he murmured. "Your friends on the other side evidently can't help you, or you'd be free now." He rose abruptly. "Greenough! You, there, sailor! Help me get this loose hull-section

over here." The two pale, empty-eyed boys rose obediently and helped. The heavy metal plates, uptilted by the force of the original crash, were not far from Son. They had only to heat the bottom with cutting torches and bend it. Son lay, then, in black, utter dark.

"Now then," said Teck. "Back to the ship, both of you." The boys stumbled off across the broken ships. Son could see them, out in the glare beyond his prison shadow. Teck waited until their backs were well turned.

The beam of his heat gun flickered briefly, twice. Two crumpled shapes fell and were still. Teck turned, smiling tightly.

"No need to have a whole race of supermen." He inspected the spiderweb of metal ropes that bound Son, and nodded, satisfied.

"When you get hungry enough for energy, you'll tell me how to destroy the light. And then—" His hard dark face was cut deep with triumph, his eyes fierce with dreams.

"After I destroy the light, the aging process will stop. People will start to live again. And I'll be virtually a god, untouchable, impervious." He laughed, softly and deep within him, rolling Son's head with his foot.

"You wouldn't know what that means, would you? Think it over while I'm down taking care of Ransome!"

He turned and slid down into the crevice.

Son cried out in anguish, "Aona!"

* * *

The Veil, the darkness that was everywhere and nowhere, that was all though the wheel and yet not of it, shimmered and swirled.

"Son! Son, what has happened?"

His mind had been too busy to tell her before. Now he hesitated, thinking of Teck clambering down to kill the man with the strength of the stars in him; thinking of Arun's agony and Greenough's fear and the tired face of the man he had killed; thinking most of all of the strange shining drops that ran from their eyes.

"Aona, what is age?"

"We had it, long ago. The legends hardly remember, except that it was ugly, and sad."

"What are years?" He tried to give her the thoughts as he had taken it from their minds. But the idea was so alien to him, the time-concept so vague in itself, that he couldn't make himself clear.

She said, "I don't know, Son."

"And Aona—what is death?"

"No one knows that, Son. It's like sleep, only one never awakens. But we live so long before it comes, there's time for everything. And even in the little part of our universe that's left, there are so many worlds to see." Already, there in the shadow, he was hungry for the sun. He would starve for energy if he couldn't get free. He gathered himself to try . . . And then, quite suddenly, it happened. The thing he'd waited all his life for. He looked into the shimmering blur of the Veil and cried, "Aona! Aona! I can see you!"

He surged against his ropes, aflame inside him with a joy like the fire of the sun itself.

The Veil was still there, hiding most of Beyond. But it was closer and thinner. He could see the slim silver shaft of her standing against soft blurred colors, could almost see the luminous brightness of her eyes.

"Oh, darling," she cried. "Almost!" Everything, all memory of the invaders and their alien troubles, left Son's mind. He stared hungrily into the Veil, watching the pale blur of her face steady, become clear.

"You're beautiful," he whispered. "Beautiful as a blue star."

"And you . . . Oh Son, go down to the Light. The force is strongest there. The Veil will pass more quickly."

"But I can't. I'm tied." He told her briefly what had happened. She laughed. "You've changed since then. The ratio has changed. More of your atoms are vibrating in phase with my universe than with yours. From now on the change will be very swift. Try again!"

He tried, pitting his strength against the ropes. Slowly their resistance slackened. His wrists and ankles slid through them, as though they were heavy smoke.

He rose and shook himself, and looked once more at the wheel and the stars and the blazing sun. Then he turned to Aona, and a pulse of joy rose in him until he thought surely his head would burst.

He plunged downward, toward the Light.

* * *

He found that he had no need to clamber though the broken ships. The matter of their metal walls resisted him as water resists a swimmer, no more. He went downward through the green light that grew stronger as he went, until it was like the water at the bottom of a

green lake.

Aona followed, running on little white feet across pale blue grass, with a great sweep of sky growing clearer behind her. Her silver draperies whipped in something she had called a wind. Her eyes were silvery, too, tilted with impish piquancy, and there was a crest of some feathery stuff on her head, burning red-gold like his own sun.

His mind shouted to hers and hers laughed back, and the barrier between their universes was growing thin.

It was almost a shock to Son to see Teck crawling through a doorway in the wrecked saloon of a liner, just above the Light itself. Ransome crouched on the deck before him, his back turned, quite still. The Martian's hard lips smiled. He drew his heat gun. Son stopped, the sheer happiness of the moment shattered. His dark hatred for this man came back, his instinctive loathing of what the fingers of his mind had brushed against in Teck's brain. Also, dimly, it had to do with Ransome. Hardly realizing what he was doing, he sprang at Teck. His arm sheared harmlessly through the matter of Teck's helmet and head. Son realized then that he had no more power over the stuff of his universe. But Teck started and cried out, and his aim was spoiled. The heat beam flicked across Ransome's shoulder, melting a little hole in the fabric of his space suit.

The Martian's sullen, fiery eyes were wide.

"You've changed," he whispered. "Like Arun. I can see through you." Then, furiously he shouted, "Damn you! Look out!" He lurched sideways, but he was just too late. A searching tongue of heat ranged across him, across Son and the metal wall behind him, leaving a little molten trail. It rose and fell methodically, weaving a net of death across that whole space.

Teck's space suit collapsed. Son witnessed again, this time with a curious satisfaction, the disruption of an alien organism.

Alien. Yes. And yet . . .

He turned to see Ransome crouched on one knee, holding the shoulder of his suit with one hand and the heat gun—not firing now—in the other. His eyes were open, but they didn't see. Son knew what had happened. Ransome had looked too long at the Light, and the distances, the planes and angles and curves of it had pulled his sight too far.

Son said, "He's dead."

Ransome nodded. "I heard his mind die. This thing down here—I can hear you, too. I couldn't, up there."

A strange, subtle thrill crept along Son's consciousness. Something in him reached out to that mind, strong even now, strong as the pulse-beat of space.

"You're not bad," said Ransome. "You just don't understand. I don't suppose you could, although you were human once."

He dropped the gun, as though it didn't matter any more. "I'm going to die, you know. There's a hole in my suit. In a few minutes the air will leak out. But there's no time here, is there? And you've forgotten what air is, or why I need it."

The bronzed, grim face smiled, but it was not humorous. "So humanity dies, because one of its sons has no conception of time."

* * *

"Son!" It was Aona calling, peering through the thinning Veil.

Ransome lifted his head. "Who's that?"

Son said, "It's Aona. She's waiting for me." His surroundings were getting indistinct.

The Veil was passing.

"Aona. Someone you love. Son—that's what she called you, isn't it? Son, what is this light? Where did it come from?"

The strength of Ransome's mind was bright and terrible. It was like the fire of a dying star.

"It's—Aona, you tell him." Son's thoughts were strangely chaotic.

"It's a part of my universe," she said slowly. There was a quality of stillness in her thought, a subtle forerunner of fear. "Something happened, in one small corner of space, to the electrical tension that holds the fabric of the universe together. There was a release of energy so unthinkable vast . .

."

Her burning crest drooped as she shivered. "Scraps of our universe were hurled right through the walls of vibration that separate us from other space-time continua. Only a very little bit of ours survived.

"The bit of our universe in yours, vibrating at a different basic rate, makes a sort of bridge between us, by altering atomic speeds. Son has changed almost completely. Only a few of his atoms now vibrate in phase with your universe." Ransome nodded. "And that alien vibration is destroying us. Can't you take it back?"

Aona shook her glowing head. "We could not possibly generate

enough energy to draw it back." Her silvery, tilted eyes went to Son, and the terror in them stabbed him.

"I hear you," said Ransome softly. "Then there is a way." Aona whispered, "Yes."

All Son's being went out to her. And yet, some tiny scrap of his mind clung to Ransome's, as though to something he must not lose.

"I don't understand," he said slowly. "Years, age, time—they mean nothing."

"No." Ransome's grim dark head strained back in his helmet. His face was veined and glistening with sweat.

"Think of it this way. You love Aona. She's beautiful—I can hear that in your mind. Suppose that now, while you looked at her, she were to wither and crumple and die . . ."

He broke off, as though fighting for strength. Not the pulsing strength of his mind, but the power of his body. When his thought came again, it was weaker.

"Look at your own body, Son. Think of it, now, growing weak and ugly and bent."

He staggered up suddenly, his eyes like the last embers of a dying sun, fixed on nothingness.

"You're mankind's only hope, Son. Son. Remember the people who called you that. They were human. Remember. Son—of humanity." Ransome's suit collapsed with a rush. Son shut his eyes.

"Son," he whispered. "His thought said—" He couldn't phrase it clearly, only that it meant coming from something, being a part of it,

as he, already, was part of Aona.

And Aona whispered, "I feel it growing in your mind. Oh, Son . . ." He could see the flowers around her feet now, the distant fires of some great sun. A strange tremor shook his body, a shifting and changing. The Veil was thinner.

"Son, they're not your people any longer. You couldn't even understand."

"No. No, but I could feel." He turned abruptly. "There's something I have to do. Quickly."

He plunged off, rushing through the dissolving matter of his universe. Up, and into the ship he thought of as his, though he had left it long ago. He hated it, down here away from the sun.

Aona followed him, her feet like little white stars in the grass.

* * *

Things grew dimmer, more vague. Son had only to wait, to put off thinking until it was too late. But something drove him on.

Presently he stood in the cabin of his ship, looking down at the still effigies. The people who had called him Son.

He shivered with something more than the shock of change. These still faces—Dickson's face, and Arun's, and Ransome's.

These still shapes, that had touched him and called him Son and shed queer shining drops from their eyes.

Something caught at him, wrung him so that he cried out.

"I don't want to. Aona, I don't want to. But I must!" Her thought was a mere tremor across his mind. "I think I knew, when he spoke to you. I try to think, if they were my people, suffering and dying—"

"I don't want to, Aona. But he said—Son of humanity." Only to postpone, to wait until it was too late. The Veil was so thin. Son beat his hands together, very softly. Then, blindly, he rushed back toward the Light.

Something had got hold of him, was driving him. He knew it was right. But he wanted to fight it, to hold it off until it couldn't hurt him. And he was afraid.

He stopped in the ship above the Light, where Ransome lay dead. He raised his corded arms and cried, "No! I can't. I don't understand!" He saw Aona watching him on her shining hilltop, not moving or speaking. And slow silver drops rolled from her tilted eyes and down her cheeks. Then he knew. Then he was calm and steady, and not very much afraid. Because he understood why the bright drops had rolled from the eyes of the strange men.

He smiled at Aona. He took a long, sweeping look at the sun and the sky and the blowing grass, and the silver shaft of her standing in the midst of it. Then he went slowly down toward the Light.

He knew what would happen. Aona had told him. Most of his substance was in her universe now. Part of it was still in his own. But there were atoms in him just changing. Atoms that were—Between.

Because of the atoms that matched its own, he could penetrate the Light. The atoms in transition would set up a vibration in the Light that had not been in Son, because of the balancing pull of two universes.

The vibratory balance of the Light would be destroyed, because

Son's universe had no hold on it. It would be pushed back through the wall of that universe, but not back to its own.

A little green roundness that could be held in his hand, that yet was not round at all and that stretched into soaring distance. Color and line and form that melted and flowed and were not.

Son went, without stopping, straight into the heart of the Light. For an instant, or an eternity, he was lost in chaos. He knew nothing—whether he moved or was still, whether he saw the black-green rushing darkness or whether it was only the picture of his own fear.

He didn't fight. He caught only two things to him in his mind—Ransome's strength and Aona, standing on her shining hilltop.

An instant, or an eternity. And then there was stillness, a cessation. Son opened his eyes and looked about—at the space Between.