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CUBE FROM SPACE

A Novelette

By LEIGH BRACKETT



“I drove them out of one solar system. I sacrificed myself to keep those devils from ever finding a home again. And now you—you have traded it back to them for the life of a worthless fool. What are you going to do about it?”

CHAPTER ONE

Coffin Ship

HE'D been falling toward Jupiter for a long time. He knew that, because he could feel the thickness of his red beard against the curve of his helmet. It was hard to remember why, hard to think of anything except

the sharp, exquisite agony of breathing.

He raised his head with a blind, instinctive defiance. The slight movement set him spinning slowly. He watched the moving stars with savage blue eyes, and cursed them.

He was an infinitely tiny thing against all that empty, star-shot vastness—a red-haired man, dying in a vac suit.

Almost as sheer reflex action, he opened the oxygen jet. There was no response. "Empty," he mumbled. "Empty." He cursed it. His head throbbed, and the throbbing went down and burned in his throat and lungs.

He tried to remember why he was here, to take his mind off the strangling. Ships, spaceguard ships—very dimly that memory came back. The dirty sons had finally trapped him. He'd fought them, but there were too many, and he'd gone into the deadly Belt to lose them.

"Wouldn't follow," he whispered, and laughed. "No guts. Planet-bred, and soft. They couldn't follow Red!"

But it hadn't mattered. Ships weren't built to buck the Belt. His automatic deflectors burned out from the overload. He got lost. And then there was a crash.

He'd bailed out. There was no way of telling where he was until, miraculously, his hand rockets kicked him free of the asteroids. Then he saw Jupiter, and knew that he was in that vast gulf that no ship had yet penetrated.

He knew then that he was finished. There would be no one to pick him up. He couldn't get back. He'd live just as long as his air held out.

Now there was no more air.

Red hated dying. He hated meeting something he couldn't beat, either by cleverness or sheer strength. But he grinned, his strong teeth gleaming white in the tangle of his red beard.

"I lasted—" he whispered, "longer than any planet-bred man." He laughed out at space, the black fire-shot immensity

of it. "You couldn't drive me crazy, anyway. Not me, Red!"

The stars were getting blurred. There were great drums beating in his head. His face was twisted; the cords of his throat were like bundled wires. He clenched his fists, gathering the last shreds of his strength.

Death was going to have to fight for him.

It was then that the black cube drifted past, between him and the golden blaze of Jupiter.

Its gravitational field pulled him, broke his slow aimless arc toward Jupiter. The motion jarred his dull brain a little. It was hard to see, harder still to think. But the sharp perfection of that black mass spurred him.

It was man-made. He could see the rivets on it, the studded outline of an air-lock on the nearest face.

His lungs strained against the thick, foul air. Sweat ran from his hair roots, into his eyes and mouth. It was agony to move.

But he forced his hands to find the rocket lanyards at his belt, to fumble the little things to a grip and fire them.

There wasn't much charge left in them. He'd used it all getting away from the Belt. But there was enough—just enough.

He clawed for the outer handle of the lock door. He could hardly see it, and his hand didn't belong to him any more. But the handle moved smoothly on its delicate balances.

He clawed his way inside, grinning with the exquisite torture of it. The door closed automatically behind him. A dull reddish light came on overhead. Dimly he heard the hiss of air.

He pawed the latch of his helmet open. Air rushed into his lungs. It had a queer taste to it, but it was air, and breathable.

Red lay there a long time. Part of it he was unconscious. But his lungs stopped hurting and the drums stopped battering

his head. After a while he sat up, viciously thirsty, shaky, but alive.

It was then that the first chill of fear crawled over him.

HE LOOKED at the walls of rusty black metal, the way the rivet heads were cut, the mechanism of the lock door. It wasn't Martian work, nor Venusian, nor Terran.

Besides, all the Triangle ships were round or cigar-shaped, never cubed. And this was the Jovian Gulf, where no Triangle ship had ever come.

He got up very quietly, and shucked the clumsy vac suit. He flexed his great thick-muscled body, testing it, and was fairly satisfied. There was a heavy blaster on the suit belt. He took it in a huge, scarred fist with hairs standing on it like red-gold wires against the burn of space.

Very carefully he opened the inner door of the lock, his blue eyes narrowed and ugly under red brows.

A light came on, like the one in the lock, showing a narrow passage. Red padded down it on his soft Martian sandals. It was so still he could hear the rustle of his tunic, blue-green Venusian spider-silk, rumpled and open over his hairy chest.

The passage came to a square well, cross-braced with girders, with balconies of black metal above and below, connected by ladders. They were dark, but far down below there was light, a dim rusty-red glow.

There was a sound in the well too, a queer, soft, steady sound, almost like breathing, as a giant might breathe in his sleep.

Red started down. Suddenly, clear and sharp in his brain, a voice said, "Stop!"

Telepathy was nothing new to Red. He'd worked with Martian Low-Canalers in the glory holes. He sprang away from the ladder head and got his back

against the wall, looking around, his blaster up.

There was light in his eyes then, a stabbing blue-white dagger of it. He made a sharp animal cry of pain and covered his eyes with his free hand. But the light speared through the flesh, and his optic nerves contracted in agony.

He snarled and fired blindly out into the well. He heard, with his ears, a hard little laugh. The light burned into his closed eyes, stabbed his brain with searing blades.

He fired again, uselessly. The pain got him in the stomach. He was already weak from what he'd been through. He tried to hold his ground, but his head turned, and then his shoulders and his whole body, trying to escape the light.

It followed, ruthlessly. He retched, and his knees gave. His blaster made a distant ringing clang on the balcony floor.

The voice said, "Drop the weapon over the edge."

Red gripped it, stubbornly, and the light was intensified. Nothing shut it out. His whole brain was seared with it.

"In one more minute," said the voice, "you will be blind."

Red pushed the blaster over the edge. It struck a girder, and then, distantly, something that rang. A great bellowing roar echoed up the well, a sound that made Red's heart skip a beat.

The light was gone then. He crouched, trembling, breathing hard, with the sweat salty in his mouth, letting the blessed darkness flow through him. There was no sound. The cords of Red's jaw knotted in anger, but he was afraid.

He was no fool. And he knew he couldn't fight that light.

When he could begin to see again he squinted out into the dim well.

Something moved between the rusty girders, and the voice said in his mind, "Here, in front of you."

AT FIRST Red saw only a faint, fuzzy glow. It focused slowly into a small metal disc, perhaps three feet across, hovering in the well. Above it, apparently growing out of its center, was the upper body of a man.

It was not really a man—manlike, but not human. Red felt that in the nerves of his skin, the prickling of his hair roots. He stared with hard, wary blue eyes.

There were shoulders, narrow but powerful, and long wiry arms ending in strong, slender hands with seven fingers. There was a head, magnificently domed, and a face that was rather too small, though the features were beautiful and cut with uncompromising strength.

Crowning that splendid skull was a crest of something soft and feathery that shimmered iridescently. The whole creature glowed with a faint, pulsing phosphorescence.

The eyes that watched Red were long and opalescent, slightly tilted. They burned with little flickering points of fire. Red shivered suddenly.

There was an eagerness about those eyes, a hunger and a towering, driving hope, almost as though Red were a symbol.

He said sullenly, "What are you?"

The creature laughed. Its teeth were pointed like a cat's and its tongue was blue.

"So there is life in this solar system—human life!" The feathery crest rose and began to pulse with rippling light, as though the hairs were hollow and filled with fire.

There was a stirring down below. Red looked down. Little shining discs began to pour up through the well, rushing with a strange, excited eagerness between the girders.

There were ten of them presently, hovering in front of the red-haired man. Some were older than the first; one was younger. But all had the same opalescent

eyes and the same terrible, fierce hope.

Red caught the thought of one. "Is it possible, after all this time Korah! Is it possible?"

The first one smiled. "We'll make it possible. You, human! There's no life in this gulf. How did you get into our airlock?"

Red told him, briefly. His body was strung tight and his nerves ached. He was in a trap, and he couldn't see a way out.

Korah's opal eyes narrowed. "The lawmen of your people chased you, eh? That means you're an outcast. What's your name?"

"Red. I never had another."

"We have just entered your solar system. Tell me about the inner planets."

Scowling, Red told him. Then he demanded, "What are you? Where did you come from? What are you doing here?"

Korah's face was a hard white mask. "We were a great people once. We came from the world of another star. For more time than your little brain could conceive we have drifted across interstellar space, fighting, in this iron coffin, to keep alive."

His sinewy hands gripped the rim of his floating disc and there was a look in his eyes that made Red's heart jerk.

"All this time," whispered Korah. "All this darkness and loneliness and suffering, these maimed bodies, because of a man. A human, Red, a human like you."

He caught something swiftly and raised it, a queer thick tube aimed at Red. "I ought to blind you," he said softly. "I ought to burn the brain in your stupid skull!"

One of the older creatures caught his arm. "Wait. This man was sent to us. Let's try to use him."

He floated closer. His fine-cut face had deep, grim lines in it, and his eyes were infinitely tired—but not soft.

He said, "Red, is there any place on

these three worlds you speak of where we could land, colonize, and live unnoticed until—until we have regained our strength?”

“No. You’d be spotted the moment you got into the space lanes beyond the Belt. They’d either take you in or blow you apart. Besides, all the usable land is already being used.”

“And there’s no other place?”

“Listen,” said Red. “What is all this? And what’s in it for me?”

“Your life,” said Korah evenly. “If you’re of no use to us, we’ll use you as a slave—as long as you last.”

Red’s dark, scarred face was ugly. “I don’t make a good slave.”

“That depends on the master,” said Korah gently. “Well?”

“How can I tell you where to go?” Red’s body was clammy with sweat, prickling with the cold, dry hate he felt in them.

The old one said slowly, “Perhaps you don’t understand. I’m Saran. My body is older than Korah’s, less impetuous. I’ll try to explain.

“We are near death. If we don’t find a suitable place very soon, our race will become extinct. If you can help us to such a place, you will be rewarded. If not . . .”

He shrugged his narrow shoulders. “We have no reason to love your breed.”

Red looked at the rust on the walls, the dim light, listened to the whispering silence of the great empty cube. He saw Korah’s eyes, burning with deep, terrible fires, and the others with their beautiful crested heads straining forward.

He shivered. The white scar stood livid against the burn of his face, where old Wick had broken his nose with a spanner. Earth, Venus, Mars; swamp and desert and teeming cities; spaceguard ships—where could he tell them to go?

"If I do tell you," he said, "how do I know you won't welsh?"

"We keep our word," whispered Saran, "even to humans."

Somehow Red believed him. But the younger ones, Korah—He licked dry lips and tried to think. They waited, pale and glowing in the dim well, hardly breathing.

And suddenly, in the tight silence, there was a voice, a man's voice, faint and distant, down below in the rusty dimness, cursing. Cursing with such a low, blistering intensity that the whisper of it carried like a spear.

Red's muscles tightened. "What's that? Some other fool who did you a favor?"

Korah laughed very softly, the point of his blue tongue flicking across his pointed teeth.

"Yes, Red, a very great favor. But that doesn't concern you now. Three planets beyond the Belt. Our instruments showed us four."

"Mercury!" cried Red. He'd forgotten it. Nobody thought about little Fireball much. Then he shut his jaw and his mind tight.

Saran said wearily, "Don't bother, Red. We can drug you and pick your mind at leisure. You'll have to trust us."

Korah's thought smashed across the older man's. "Then there is a place!"

"I don't know," said Red slowly. "Maybe." Their glowing shapes blurred. He took hold of the balcony rail and closed his eyes. Quite suddenly the last of his tough strength was used up.

The last thing he heard was the man's voice, cursing down in the rusty well.

RED realized two things when he came to. The first was that the ship was moving. He was as sensitive to every quiver of a spaceship as a good rider is to his mount. He knew that the great cube was limping slowly along a definite course.

The second thing was that he'd been out a long time. He was completely rested. He was neither thirsty nor hungry. And there was the mark of a hypodermic needle on his wrist.

He scowled at it, remembering Saran's words. They'd moved him off the balcony. He lay on a mattress of some spongy stuff in a little iron cubicle.

He got up and tried the door. It opened. A little surprised, he went out onto a balcony, like the first one but much lower down.

And suddenly a mind invaded his, gripped it, shook it, tramped about in it like a black wind.

Red started instinctively to fight it off, but it cried, "You, human! Come down! Come down!"

Red looked over the rail. There was no sign of the shining creatures. The floor of the well was just below him, partly obscured by the pattern of the girders, murky in the dim light.

He went down, slowly, the mind force pulling at him with terrible intensity. It wasn't a mind like Korah's. It was wild and savage and powerful, but it was human.

His sandalled foot touched bottom. He turned. Heavy riveted doors pricked the black walls on four sides. In the center of the space were three great blocks of iron, kept free of rust.

The two outer blocks bore clustered vats and coils and apparatus in glassite cases. The rhythmic breathing sound which Red had heard before came from them.

The middle block was higher and larger. There was something on it, connected by transparent tubes to the others, so that the whole thing formed a cross. The red light was dim. He padded forward. Then he stopped, the pulses hammering in his throat and wrists.

Spreadeagled on the center block was a man in armor.

He must have measured nearly seven feet. His black armor was dulled and crusted with age, dented with the marks of great blows.

His mailed feet were shackled to the block with iron bands. The wristlets had been stripped from his wide-spread arms and there too were shackles, grown deep into the flesh. Below them the transparent tubes ran into the veins, pumping a fluid that glinted darkly in the dull light.

Black hair grew from the man's head, flowed down the block and out over the metal floor in a pool of shadow. His black beard spread out over his battered breastplate, falling down to mingle with the darkness of his hair.

Something dangled from the girders overhead. It was a chain, and a sword hung from the end of it by its grip. A great two-handed sword, its queer blunt point just above the face of the giant.

Red stopped. The pit of his belly was cold. The man's head turned suddenly, so that his hair made a dark, whispering sound on the rusty plates, and eyes were watching him from under shaggy black brows—eyes half mad, but human.

The mind-voice said to Red, "You've given them refuge. You've given them life. You've betrayed your kind!"

RED looked at the mark on his wrist and smiled without mirth. "The dirty sons! So we're headed for Mercury."

"They got everything—orbital, space-guard patrol boundaries, everything you know about the planet. Korah told me. He was pleased to tell me."

The black eyes went to the sword overhead, swinging slowly in a vagrant current of air. They followed the motion in a way that made Red shiver. Suddenly the prisoned body moved convulsively, fighting the shackles, and the rusty armor groaned and rang.

"The devils! They've won out after all. All this—the darkness, the suffering, the time—for nothing!"

His gaze swung back to Red, only half seeing him. "I drove them out of one solar system. I sacrificed myself to do it. And I've stood the punishment, the drifting and the time because I thought they'd never find a home again. And now you—little red man that I could break in my two hands—you make it all for nothing!"

Remembering Korah's opal eyes, Red wondered if it was all for nothing for him too. His hand strayed uneasily to where his blaster should have been, and his narrow blue eyes searched the darkness.

He said, "I don't get this. Who are you? What are they? Where did you come from, and why? And—how long ago?"

He looked at the dull, rusted armor and the shackles grown into the flesh of the man's wrists, and the black hair heavy on the deck.

"How long, little man? How long is eternity?" Those suffering, elemental eyes went again to the swinging sword. "I am Crom. I was king once, in a land called Yf. And they are the Rakshi. The time came when we had to fight them, we humans, because we couldn't take any more.

"They were different then. They were beautiful and numerous and very strong. They knew a lot we didn't know, the shining devils! But they didn't know us—not the heart, the guts of us."

Crom's hands clenched into great scarred fists and the glass tubes swayed into his wrists. He smiled, his teeth white in the black tangle of his great beard.

"That was a fight," he whispered. "They almost beat us. But they were fighting from this ship, all the best brains of them, and I thought of something. I

got in through a space-vent while they were busy deciding how to finish us off in a hurry, too busy to hear my mind. I killed two of them in the engine room, and poured every last ounce of power they had into their drive.

"The terrific acceleration tore us clean away from our solar system, as I hoped it would. It also burned out the motors. Even if they could have fixed the motors they couldn't have got the ship back because they use sun-power and there wasn't any sun."

Crom laughed, the harsh roar of it echoing in the rusty balconies. "Can you conceive how they felt? They had me, but that was all. Me, and interstellar space! *Haie!* That memory is almost compensation for the rest. All this load of mighty brains, rushing at constant speed through nothing to nowhere, and helpless, because of me!

"I thought they'd kill me, but they had better ideas. Trust them! They kept me alive—alive to meditate on my sins, with my sword mocking me overhead. But I could mock them too. I could say, 'My people are safe from you,' and laugh at them, all through those black empty ages of drifting.

"But now we've been drawn into the field of another sun. And you . . ." His head turned, and the voice of his mind shuddered like distant thunder in Red's brain. "And you have let them win."

IT TOOK all Red had to meet Crom's eyes. He said, half angrily, "That's too bad. But how could I help it?"

Crom whispered, "You could have thrown yourself from the balcony."

Red stared at him, and then laughed. "Hey, wait a minute! This isn't my fight. All I want is my neck safe and a get-away."

"Not your fight!" said Crom. "The gods blast you! There's a colony on Mercury, isn't there?"

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"Korah told me. He took particular pleasure in telling me. They picked your brain clean, Red, and it gave them ideas. You know why you're here talking to me, don't you?"

"No." He was liking things less by the minute.

"You're here to make me squirm," said Crom with savage quiet. "They're throwing my laughter back in my teeth, through you. Do you know what they'll do to that colony on Mercury?"

"No." The red shadows were still empty. Red's hide prickled uneasily. He knew he was being watched, and he didn't like it.

"They'll take them for slaves, Red, use them like beasts, for work they won't do and for experiments. You don't know the Rakshi, how they live on and on in different bodies. You don't know the agony they can cause. They worship power, Red, as men worship their gods—power, pure and naked, for its own sake. They don't want world conquest or domination by force, nothing as stupid and mentally unimaginative as that.

"They like to sit in their beautiful fortress and play with men like pieces on a chess board, for the sheer mental pleasure of the game. They get power in many ways—giving scientific secrets to unscrupulous men, powerful new weapons to lawbreakers, the gift of prolonged life to men whose minds they test and improve. Minds," he added softly, "like yours, Red."

Red's blue eyes were suddenly hot and bright. "What are you getting at?"

"I mean they can use you. They'll give you power under them, the status of—well, ambassador to the human forces they wish to contact. Power, Red, and virtual immortality."

A thick, hot pulse began to beat in Red's temples. His lips were dry. He licked them, and whispered, "Yeah?"

There were thoughts tramping around in his head—huge, thundering dreams. Circe, the Pleasure World, with the wealth of three planets there for the plundering. The Treasure City of Mars and the lost, water-buried secrets of Venus.

He spread out his big, scarred hands and looked at them. Age was like death to him, a sneaking thief to steal his strength and his cunning. To defeat age, to jeer at death.

It was while he was off guard, thinking these things, that Crom attacked him.

The shackled Titan looked up at the swinging sword with eyes as deep and elemental as primal space. And the strength of his brain shocked against Red's, huge and savage and terrible.

"Free me!" roared the voice of his mind. "Give me my sword. Free me! *Free me!*"

It was very still in the dark well. Red's eyes closed. His body stiffened, bent like a straining bow. Sweat needled his face, oiled the red-gold hair of his chest.

It was agony, the beating of that mind against his, greater than the blow of Wick's spanner across his face, a great thundering pain, the pain of iron under the hammer. He snarled, and the veins of his brow and throat stood out like knotted cords.

And suddenly it was gone. Crom lay limp on the block, his teeth white in the black tangle of his beard and the breath harsh between them.

"They were right," he whispered. "The gods curse you, Red. The gods blast you to hell!"

A cold, black fury swept across Red's heart. "What do you want me to do?"

"Look at that door. That's the Temple. The Temple of the Flame, the light that makes them shine the way they do, and stimulates their tissues so that they live on and on. Do you know how many there are sealed up in there, waiting for

bodies? Three hundred of them, the best brains of their stinking race!

"My sword was forged in Yf. It has a power beyond steel, a flame of its own that will destroy their Flame. Give me my sword. Free me, let me blast the Flame. You're human, Red. Remember your duty!"

Red laughed, a harsh, ugly bark. He stripped off the rumpled silken tunic and stood with the red light spilling over his bull neck and great thick-muscle body.

"Look," he said.

Crom's black eyes went from the white scar of the spanner across Red's broken nose, down the tangled pattern of old weals across his back and breast, to the puckered gashes of a spiked Martian knuckle-duster across his flat belly.

"Most of that," Red said dispassionately, "I got before I was fifteen. I was born on a tramp freighter. I never knew who my parents were, never cared much. Had all I could worry about just staying alive.

"They sold me from one tramp to another, to sweat in the galleys and the glory holes. I never set foot on any ground until I was sixteen. Then I ran away from the ship I was in. It was a dirty little tramp port. I got shanghaied aboard Wick's rotten hulk. I stood him for two voyages, and then he hit me once too often. I woke up. I took the spanner away from him, and I never heard whether he died or not. I got away in a life-skiff. Nobody touched me. They knew I wasn't a kid any more, and they were scared.

"Since then I've made my way alone, getting what I could and not doing badly. Black Cargo running, hi-jacking, straight piracy."

He pulled the tunic on again, running his palm over the soft, rich silk.

"I haven't said I'd take their offer, if they make it. I don't like taking orders. But if I do decide to . . ."

He shrugged and gave a slow, hard grin. "I have no world," he said softly, "and I never met a man I didn't hate."

Crom looked at him. He didn't speak nor move, but a cold, iron something slid through Red and held him.

He snarled and jerked his head away, and saw Korah coming toward him, a swift silver gleam in the red dusk.

The Rakshi's tilted eyes burned like living opals, a shifting fire that warmed his beautiful white face. He set the great sword swinging over Crom's head and laughed silently, the points of his teeth like ivory needles.

"Come into the control room, Red," he said. "We're landing on Mercury."

CHAPTER TWO

Part of Death

RED stood in the control room, looking into a visilens of unfamiliar shape. The bitter blaze of Mercury stabbed in at him. The Rakshi had made a long curve in their ship, clear outside the orbital range of planets or spaceguard patrols.

They were coming in now toward the Sunside. As they drew nearer, Red could see the black line of the Darkside slicing thin across the farther hemisphere, and the naked mountains of the Twilight Belt raking at the sky like Titan spear-points.

He was used to the sleek fast ships of the System, and the great cube seemed clumsy and unmaneuverable.

He said uneasily, "Do you think she'll do it?"

Korah hovered beside him. He answered in Red's own mongrel tongue, learned from his drugged brain along with the information on himself and Mercury.

"If we had full power, there'd be no doubt. But we had only proper metal enough to repair one motor. And since

we had none of these problems in our own sphere of activity, we're not prepared for them."

He looked at the visilens. The opalescent fire of his eyes was suddenly misted.

"No more darkness," he whispered. "No more hunger. No more ages of little death in the Temple. We can have bodies again, strong fine bodies, and breathe clean air and feel sunlight."

The muscles stood out on his pale, shining jaw. "We've got to make it."

Saran spoke from a complicated panel of indicators and delicate reaction gauges.

"There's unlimited power from the Sunside, and raw materials of every kind in the rock and soil. Notice the topography, Korah—a jumble of tremendous peaks with deep valleys isolated between them. A fortress cut in any one of those peaks would be completely hidden and impregnable."

The youngest one of the ten Rakshi grunted. He was watching still another set of instruments.

"The human is right, though. Mercury is highly metallic. It cuts the sun's magnetic field in an eccentric orbit, and dangerously close to the source. With full power in all our anti-gravity plates—which we haven't—it would still be hard to land."

Korah said grimly, "The ship is strong. The Temple is doubly protected. Even if we crash, some of us will live."

Red looked at him admiringly. Human or not, these Rakshi had the tough kind of insides he liked.

Korah must have caught his thought. He turned suddenly on the man, his tilted eyes and feathery crest alive with savage fire.

"Guts!" he said. "You don't know. Your brain couldn't conceive. Over three hundred of us trapped in this iron coffin, without adequate supplies of any kind, and a hundred human slaves. We had

to learn, human—learn how to handle brains as separate entities, keeping them alive and safe after the body was worn out. Learn how to create new bodies from the living tissue of the slaves, grown and kept in a plasma culture.

“We are a long-lived race. But the time we’ve drifted, the bitter, empty time! There were not bodies enough, even for the few permitted them. We had to design these hideous legless things and these magnetic cars, so that we could save flesh and energy. We worked a miracle. We stripped the inside of the cube of metal to keep our air pumps and heating units going. We designed bodies that needed almost no food. We lived, in spite of Crom, in spite of humanity.

“Now there is no more flesh for new bodies. We’ll get it down there. We’re not going to be beaten now, even if the ship is smashed to bits!”

RED scratched his bearded jaw. The idea of growing bodies from living tissue was unpleasant to him. But so were pain and hunger and hate, and he’d lived with those all his life. He said, “That offer Crom told me about—is that on the level?”

Saran looked up from his dials. “Yes. Do you accept?”

Red shrugged. “I don’t know yet.”

Korah’s pointed teeth flashed. “There’s no hurry, Red.”

For some subtle reason Red disliked the way he said it. “No. What’s this Temple, and the Flame? Crom said—”

“Red.” Korah’s silky voice slid across his like cold steel. “Those are questions not to be asked. Remember that.”

Red’s mouth set. And then the young Rakshi cried out, “Look! In the visilens. Isn’t that the Earthman’s beacon?”

Red looked into the screen. The night shadow was cutting in across the peaks of the Twilight Belt, drawn by the rocking of the planet on its axis.

On one gigantic, airless pinnacle was a shaft of metal topped by a glowing ball—a perpetual beacon powered by Mercury’s own electric potential—set there to guide the infrequent ships that dared the planet to bring supplies and fresh colonists. Without it there was no way of identifying the colonist’s valley. No compass or radio of any kind could work near little Fireball.

Korah touched a stud on a bank beside him. A single beam of light licked out and touched the beacon. It flared once, then there was only a molten puddle on the rock.

“An enlarged version of the weapon you experienced, Red. Using sun-power, it can reproduce light of any frequency and any concentration. By modulation, we can induce burning, blindness, or spontaneous combustion. Simple, and very effective.”

"Very," said Red grimly. They dropped lower over the valley. It was dark now, and there was a storm raging down in the atmosphere. He could see the lightning flashes.

This was Markham Chandler's haven for waifs and strays—one little man tackling a job too tough even for the mining companies. The last man Red had talked to, in a crimp port while fueling, had said there were about eight hundred dopes sweating their hearts out in the valley.

The naked peaks came closer. The cube lurched with sharp suddenness. Seven-fingered hands began to fly over key-banks. There was dead silence in the control room, except for the spitting hum of power.

Red got hold of a stanchion and braced his feet. He disliked the feeling of helplessness. But the controls of the cube were a mystery to him. Besides, they had forgotten his existence.

Pale, glowing faces bent over instruments. The young Rakshi had the tip of his blue tongue hard between his teeth, thin strong fingers racing. There was a singing tension in the air.

The cube lurched again, heavily. Now that they were close, Saran had slid the metal shutters from the huge square ports. Walls of naked rock reared up beyond them.

Red wasn't quite clear about what happened next. The magnetic pull of the cliffs made the cube rattle like a die in a box. The snarl of overloaded transformer banks rose, stuttered, and choked out.

Somebody yelled, sharp and high. There was a shattering, grating crash of metal on stone. The cube tilted over and began to drop.

Red hung fiercely to his stanchion, his legs dangling.

The glowing shapes of the Rakshi moved erratically in the dull red light. He

heard Crom laughing far down the well, a great taunting roar. The cube dropped with a scream of tortured metal.

There was an impact. Red got only a confused chaos of sound. He lost his grip and fell a long way through grinding, wrenching darkness.

Hot, wet air struck him, and lashing rain. The noise of crashing metal blended into the stunning roar of thunder. There was earth under him, soft and wet and warm.

He got blindly to his knees, gasping. Blood was running into his mouth and eyes with the savage rain.

And suddenly there were hard human hands on his body, and a hard human voice yelling in his ear, "Get up! For God's sake, hurry! Back into the caves!"

HE RAN, but without sight or knowledge. There were flashes of fierce light, and then another light that was fiercer and didn't go away. The-man with him cursed in a sobbing voice.

There were feet trampling the wet ground, a lot of them. Voices crying out. Red tried to break free from the hands that held him, but there were more of them, helping, urging. His head spun and sang.

His eyes began to hurt—the familiar, blinding pain of Korah's tube. The running feet began to falter. A man's voice cried out, wild and strong and, even in that dazed moment, infinitely thrilling.

"The caves! Run, all of you! Never mind the pain. Come on!"

Up a steep, rocky slope, Red stumbled, drenched, his head a burning agony. The man had stopped cursing. And then darkness came sudden and sharp, like a blow.

The rain was gone; the thunder muted. Voices, footsteps rang back queerly.

The vibrant voice said, "Back to the third chamber—quickly."

They stumbled on in utter dark, in

uneasy silence. A child was whimpering and someone moaned softly, but that was all. Then the sounds of their going flicked away, as though the walls and roof had opened out.

It did that twice more, and by that time Red was getting his grip back. In the third cavern they all stopped. Someone lighted torches. Red blinked and shook himself away.

The man who had picked him up started to speak, stared, and then yelled, "Hey! All of you! This man—"

The babble that had started hushed abruptly. In the utter silence, every wet, stricken face turned to Red, standing huge in the torchlight, blood and water dripping from his beard, his blue-green tunic molded tight across his bunched, taut muscles.

The man said with grim quiet, "I picked him up in Tenney's field, right under the thing. He must have come from it."

In the silence Red could hear the beat and rush of his own blood. The air was furnace-hot, but his skin was cold. They were a hardy lot of people, big and tough and work-hardened. Just now they were furious in a grim, dangerous way.

He said, "I did. Got thrown free when the ship crashed." His voice was steady. "They had me prisoner in her."

A man pushed forward. He was little, broad and thick and ugly. Thinning gray-brown hair was plastered wetly to a clumsy skull, and his face was almost funny, even now. But his brown eyes had something in them that made Red's heart jump a little, just as Crom's voice had.

The little man said, "I'm Markham Chandler. What are the creatures in that—ship, you said? We couldn't see it clearly."

There was no point in lying. Red told them as well as he could. The man who had helped him watched him with hard

green eyes. He was a Martian with Drylander blood in him, as big as Red, with a stern, dark face and thick, dark hair.

"Drifted in from outer space, eh?" he said. "How'd they get you then?"

"Suspicious, aren't you?" growled Red, and explained, including the space-guard, because there was no other credible reason for his being beyond the Belt.

"Spaceguard, eh?" said Chandler. "Well, we hold nothing against you for that. Many of us have been in trouble at one time or another."

That sounded strange to Red. But Chandler's eyes were neither soft nor foolish.

The Earthman went on: "What do they—the Rakshi—want of us?"

Red told them that too. He watched faces go whiter and harder, eyes widen in stunned disbelief. Suddenly the big Martian caught Red's tunic at the throat.

"You're lying," he said, his green eyes ugly. "You're either pirates or slavers."

Red's hand went up toward the Martian's face, and was caught suddenly by another—a cool, strong, brown hand, a woman's hand.

"Let him alone, Jat. He's hurt—and he's not lying. I saw the thing crash and something shiny was thrown out of a broken port. It wasn't human, and the ship isn't a Triangle ship."

Red looked into a woman's face, not far below his own. Tangled, curling hair the color of wheat-straw framed its brownness, softened the clear sharp lines of brow and jaw.

She smiled at him. Her hazel eyes were hard and grim, but not afraid. She said, "Come over here and I'll fix your head."

Chandler nodded. He looked very tired. "Yes. I'll count noses, and then we'll see what to do next. Jat, you get some of the men and guard the passage. We may be attacked at any time."

JAT went away reluctantly. Markham turned back into the crowd, and there began to be a stir of voices and purposeful movement. Red studied the girl with flat, hard eyes.

"What's the game, sister?"

She stared at him. "Game? I just want to patch up that cut."

Remembering the women in the crimp ports, Red put his eyebrows up. Then he shrugged and fell in beside her. She moved easily, with a springy litheness. Her body, in a plain short tunic of rough homespun, was built of long, clean curves.

It came to Red that she was something he'd never seen before. He scowled uncertainly and asked, "What's your name?"

She laughed. "Hildegarde Smith. They call me Hildy. What's yours?"

"Red. What do you do here?"

"Work on my father's farm." Her face sharpened as though with a sudden pain, and she glanced at the cave entrance and away again.

"He didn't make it," said Red.

She nodded. "It all happened so suddenly. I was visiting in the upper part of the settlement. We all made for the caves when we heard the crashing—sometimes the cliffs crack and there are slides during a heavy storm. Our place is farther down the valley. I started back, but I knew it was no use. I—" She broke off and bent over a chest marked First Aid.

Red scratched his matted beard. The girl had sand. He wanted suddenly to get away, back to the Rakshi. But there was no way without tipping his hand, and that meant death.

"Sit down," she said. Red obeyed reluctantly. If the girl had been one of the kind he understood, it wouldn't have mattered. But she wasn't. He had no precedent, nothing to judge her by. It made him uneasy.

Looking out over the cave, he realized

with a sharp, cold shock that he had no precedent for any of those people. They were as alien to him as the Rakshi.

And he was trapped with them.

Hildy's fingers were cool and deft on his skin. They made him feel strange, uneasy. He watched her tensely while she bandaged the cut, sponged his face and beard clean.

She gave him water, caught the look and smiled. "What's the matter? Did I hurt you?"

"No. Only nobody ever did that for me before."

She looked at the scar of Wick's spanner across his face, her eyes both angry and compassionate.

She said quietly, "You've suffered, haven't you?"

He shrugged and took his eyes away. "I guess so."

"Then you can understand." The people in the cave were breaking up into orderly groups, supplying themselves with food, water, and blankets from big chests. Hildy watched them, the torchlight making deep, harsh shadows on her face.

"We've worked so hard, Red. God knows what we'd have done without this place, and Markham Chandler. And now, to have it stolen from us, to be threatened and tortured. . . ."

She moved her clenched hands savagely. Chandler came up, rolling heavily on his short legs.

"Four hundred and twenty-seven," he said, and put his hands wearily over his face. "The cube crashed almost in the center of the valley. The others were cut off, or caught by the light."

Red had a mental picture of how the Rakshi were doing it. The high-power light mechanism would make the people blind and helpless long enough to be disarmed and divided up, herded into the few remaining rooms of the ship that still had doors.

Chandler went on, "I'm sending the



women and children back into the caves in small scattered groups, with a few men. The rest of the men will go up into the galleries to try and get a line on how to fight these devils."

His brown eyes met Red's blue ones suddenly, very clear and direct. "Red, you know about these Rakshi. You'll help us."

Hildy took his hand. "Of course he will." She smiled at him, her hazel eyes warm and deep with friendliness.

All the meaning, the implication of trust and comradeship and understanding behind Hildy's eyes took Red with a sudden violence. He took his hand away

roughly and opened his mouth, but no words came.

He saw Hildy's eyes go cold and bright as spear points, saw the furrows deepen and tighten in Chandler's ugly, tired face. Then, through the bitter silence, there came the roar of blasters out in the passage.

They broke off raggedly. There was a noise of running feet. Jat stumbled into the cavern, his hands over his eyes, followed by the men who had gone with him.

A voice spoke out in Red's brain. He knew the others heard it too from the way they stiffened and gasped.

It said, "Submit and you will not be harmed. Resistance will only mean pain."

KORAH came floating through the entrance, a shining blur against the dark of the passage, four other Rakshi behind him. His crest was erect, a living, pulsing flame, and his eyes were godlike.

Hildy's face was a mask cut from gray bone. Only the eyes were alive in it, alive and hating. In a single blurred motion she caught up a heavy tin box from the first aid chest and threw it straight at Korah's head.

The Rakshi jerked aside in his floating car. The box went past him, crashing harmlessly into the rock wall. He showed his sharp teeth and the tip of his blue tongue in a smile, and raised his light tube.

Hildy cried out and turned away, shielding her eyes. Jat couldn't see her, but he knew her voice. He raised his blaster blindly. Korah's tube flicked a beam across his hand. He screamed and dropped the blaster. Red saw the smoke from the burn.

There was chaos after that for a brief time. They fought with everything they had, tools, weapons, fragments of rock. And the five Rakshi flitted batlike through the smoky torchlight, burning, blinding, laughing with their blue tongues and pointed teeth.

Red stayed out of it, against the wall. He dragged Hildy back of the chest and growled, "You'll be able to see again soon."

She didn't answer. He stood watching the fight. The Rakshi were mere pallid blurs, moving too fast for the eye to see. Their reactions were much quicker than the humans', because they didn't miss a shot.

They weren't out to kill. Men and women, blinded by the light, blundered into each other, so that those who could

still see had to stop fighting lest they kill their own people.

Markham Chandler's ringing voice made itself heard finally, over the din, telling them to stop. They did, reluctantly. Hildy got up without looking at Red and went uncertainly toward Jat, crouched and snarling over his seared hand.

Korah said aloud, silkily, "That's better. You'll learn to obey. Form ranks, please. We're going back to the ship."

Chandler came forward. His brown eyes were bloodshot, tortured slits, but his voice was clear and steady.

"What right have you to do this?"

Korah's eyes burned on him. "The right of survival."

"We haven't harmed you. This is ours. Our lives aren't yours to take or control. You can't do this!"

Korah's soft voice carried across the whole cavern, and it made Red shiver.

"We can do it because we must, or perish. Your race is not at stake. You're only a handful, a pinch of dust. But we are all. Do you say, when you kill a beast to feed your children, 'We have no right'?"

"A pinch of dust!" It was Hildy's voice, ringing out like the music of a steel blade.

She stood erect, with her hand on Jat's broad shoulder. Her face in the torchlight had the primal beauty of a tigress. Red licked dry lips, watching it. The palms of his hands were wet.

"Who are you to judge us as nothing? You, a monster from another world! What right have you here, stealing and maiming? This is not your earth, nor your air, nor your sun!"

Korah turned to her slowly. It was a long time before he spoke.

"No," he said very quietly. "It's not our earth, nor air, nor sun. All those we had once, and a human stole them from us."

He moved his free hand down his body to the metal car. The muscles tightened in his glowing face, ridged and bitter.

He whispered, "Monster!" and raised his tube.

He didn't go for her eyes this time. The hot beam flicked like a whiplash. She bared her teeth and her eyes closed, but she didn't move. Red saw the red weals of the burns come out across her face and throat.

Jat roared and started to his feet, but Red was quicker.

He took the stabbing beam on his own back and snarled, "Stop it, damn you!"

Korah let the beam stay just long enough to set the silk of his tunic smouldering. Then he flicked it off and said, "Well, Red. We thought we'd lost you."

"The port split when we struck," said Red sullenly. "I fell through and got caught in the stampede." Hildy hadn't moved, but her fingers bit deep into the muscles of Jat's shoulder. The Martian's green eyes were the eyes of a tortured fiend.

Red said, "Did you have to do that?"

"Why?" Korah's eyes were mocking. "I thought you hated humans."

"She was kind to me," said Red sulkily. It sounded a weak, silly thing to say. His heart was pounding and the veins in his neck hurt. He was confused and viciously angry, and he didn't know why.

RED felt Korah's mind probing into his. He tried to shut his mind, but the anger and confusion slowed his reflexes. Korah's thought withdrew, and Korah's eyes danced with wicked fires.

"About that offer, Red. Will you take it?"

"I'll tell you later." He was safe enough, with five light tubes holding the colonists.

But the hate, the loathing in them prickled across his hide.

"Now, Red," said Korah softly.

Red felt Korah's thought, and knew it was now. He tried to think of Circe and the Martian Treasure City, and strength beyond the span of other men's strength.

But all he could think of was Hildy's gentle fingers on his head and the burns red and ugly across her face.

He looked at Korah, and there was a new, wary understanding in him.

"I won't bargain with you. Where's Saran?"

"Dead, in the crash. Don't you trust me?"

"No." He knew nothing of the process of longevity. Korah could play any sort of a trick on him at any time. And he didn't like reins on him. If he took orders from the Rakshi, he'd never be free.

Hildy's face, stony white and barred with livid burns; Jat, dark and tortured; Markham Chandler's ugly, gentle face with eyes that Red couldn't meet—all those people, alien, new, beyond his understanding—and Hildy, saying, "You've suffered. You can understand."

"There must be a ship in the colony. Give me that and let me go."

Korah laughed. His crest shimmered in the torchlight. "No."

Fear began to tighten along Red's nerves. "You promised me life."

"Have I said you were not to live? Think of this, Red. If you go to the culture vats, you'll live a very long time indeed!"

Red said very softly, "You dirty son!"

Korah laughed again. "Your crazy, inconsistent little minds! You humans run with every mood that blows across you. No matter how well I think I know a human brain, something latent may develop in a few short minutes and upset all my plans. I wouldn't have trusted you, Red, if you had accepted. You don't know it yourself yet, but you've changed. You're like Crom, too tough to be brok-

en. You'd betray us before we were ready.

"I think, my friend, that the culture vats will be much the safest place for you, if—" he let his tilted eyes move across the tense white faces, waiting under the threat of the Rakshi beams—"you live to reach them."

Red didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. He stood still while the Rakshi saw to the disarming of the crowd.

When it was done, Korah said, "We're short of food for the humans. Why the large stock here?"

Markham Chandler answered, in a voice utterly drained of emotion, "The storms at perihelion often drive us out of the valley."

Korah nodded. "Fetch it along. You'll need it while we're classifying you."

The youngest Rakshi had been preoccupied for some time, his crest glittering. Now he drifted close to Korah and spoke in his own tongue. Korah threw back his head in fierce exultation. His crest too rose and pulsated, and the three others joined in.

Red knew that the Rakshi back in the ship were communicating. He'd picked up the rudiments of telepathy from the Martian stokers in the tramp ships. Now he tried to use them.

He wasn't good at it. All he could catch were vagrant thoughts concerning "plasma shortage—hurry." But he could fill in. They were making plasma for the culture vats; they were short-handed, and they wanted help in a hurry. He wondered if the brains in the Temple were getting impatient for bodies.

It was just by sheer chance that Red caught the brief flame of inspiration in Jat's green eyes. The Rakshi were too busy to catch the thought back of it. But Red watched the Martian go very obediently to the store chests against the wall and haul out a side of bacon.

Watching that, Red saw Markham

Chandler's quick start, the urgent touch of his hand on Jat's shoulder, and the swift interchange of whispers between them. Chandler too got a side of bacon.

They came back together to Hildy, very patient and drooping. The ranks formed in sullen quiet and trailed out into the passage, with the Rakshi floating overhead, tubes raised and alert.

At low power the tubes lighted the way plainly. Red made his mind as nearly blank as possible and stayed close to Jat, Chandler, Hildy, and the fat sides of bacon.

They went through the second chamber, where the Rakshi's light was swallowed up in vaulting darkness, then back through the corridor beyond that, and into the first of the three caverns.

Again the light was swallowed up, the sound of their slow, sullen departure dispersed. And Red found out why Jat had insisted on bacon.

CHAPTER THREE

Sword of Light

THE cave roof was high and very black. Nothing happened for a minute or two, until the bacon was well out across the floor. Then Red heard them, cutting swift and shrill across the hot, still air—wings, huge, wide wings arrowing down.

Somebody yelled, and a woman screamed. The ranks fell apart. Red saw Korah's opal eyes dart upward, and his light tube brightened.

There were gleams up there in the dark, metallic purple and green, hard and bright. Red saw wings with small light bodies between them and little fanged heads, rushing down toward them.

They were going so fast that the light didn't stop them. Jat threw his bacon high up beside Korah. A cloud of the shiny things swooped at it like gulls. Red

saw that their thin wings were scaled.

The Rakshi turned up their power. Even at burning concentration the bat creatures didn't pay much attention. Chandler threw his load at the nearest Rakshi. Then he turned and ran, his arm around Hildy.

Red followed them. The Rakshi were recovering from their surprise now. Winged bodies were beginning to clatter down. One of the yarns he'd heard in a fueling port came back to Red: The Mercurian hunting bats, sheathed in glass-like, silicate scales to defy the lightning.

It was probably the salt they were after in the bacon. There wasn't much of it on Mercury.

Jat was leading the way toward a small side passage. There was no time to collect others from the confused mob. They could only run, hoping that the brief margin of time would be long enough.

The Rakshi, battling desperately against the hard-sheathed bats, didn't see them go. The little dark hole swallowed them up, Jat, Hildy, Chandler, and Red, following unnoticed.

They went a long way, quite slowly but as though Jat knew the way. The echoes didn't betray the extra pair of footsteps. They came out presently into a gallery that seemed to run just inside the cliff, because there was blinding daylight pouring in farther along it.

Red let the others get ahead of him. They stopped by the cleft in the rock.

He caught Chandler's low hard voice: "Our valley. Our valley, damn them!"

Jat said, "The ship's still there. If I only had bombs!"

"But we haven't," Hildy put her hands on their shoulders. "There must be some way! We can't lose it all now."

Jat said, very low, "That swine Red might know a way." His big body flexed. "I'd like to tear it out of him!"

Chandler sighed. "Poor devil. He's caught in his own trap."

Red, padding toward them on his soft sandals, stopped, scowling. Hildy shook her light curly hair away from her burned face.

"Red's not bad," she said. "He saved me, you know. He's suffered a lot, and he's bitter. I don't think he ever saw a decent human being before. He just doesn't understand."

Jat made a wordless snarling noise. Chandler looked at him with the ghost of a smile on his tired face.

"You haven't forgotten, Jat, how you felt when you came out of the Jekkara quarries?"

The line of Jat's shoulders sagged. "All right. But that doesn't help us now. Look down there. They got rid of the bats. And there go the last of our people into their cursed ship."

Red ran his hand through his beard, and then up across the mark of Wick's spanner. His fingers touched the bandage on his forehead. He looked at Hildy's face, clear and strong in the sunlight.

He went forward then, and said, "Hildy."

THEY turned, the three of them, startled. Chandler put a hand on Jat's arm and said, "Wait."

Red said, "Hildy, I've got to ask you something. There's a ship down there. Are you three going to escape in it?"

She frowned. "I suppose Jat will try and get back to Venus for help. Why?"

"You're not going?"

"Not without my father."

"And you, Chandler?"

"Those people are my friends. There may be some way I can help. A lot of them will die before help can possibly get here."

Red measured Jat's strength. "I can take that ship from you."

Hildy's face was suddenly brighter than the sunlight. She put her hands on his arms and smiled and said, "But you

won't. You're beginning to see, Red, aren't you? You're realizing that the people you've known are only a small part of humanity. Haven't you ever felt lonely, Red? Out there in space, with no one to speak to, nothing to trust, nothing to work for?"

He looked away from her, out to the insulated hangar that meant freedom, the old life. Her hands were warm and strong on him, and they never quivered.

"Lonely?" he whispered. "I never knew till now."

He broke away sharply. "Jat, take that ship and clear out. Get help here as fast as you can. Chandler—"

Chandler said, "Hold on. There's Rakshi."

They looked out. Far below, a little floating dot pressed over the hangar dome, trailing a pencil of pale flame. Then it flashed away, back to the great black cube tilted drunkenly in the neat green fields, with one corner crumpled and the square ports split.

"Fused the hangar opening," said Jat bitterly. "So that's that."

Chandler turned his brown eyes to Red. "Do you know of any way?"

"Perhaps." He was thinking of a man in black armor, and a vengeance that had waited too long. "Anyway, I'll try."

He sat down with them to wait until dark. And he laughed suddenly. "It doesn't make sense, any of it. You know that."

Markham Chandler smiled. "The best things," he said softly, "seldom do."

PLANS were completed by dark. Red and the Martian went cautiously back to the caves for arms. There was no sign of a search.

"Too busy," growled Red. "That's what I'm gambling on. They're in a fever for new bodies, and there are only nine of 'em to work."

Coming back, Red had an idea. He

stripped the heavy glassy-scaled wings from several of the fallen bats. "Armor," he said briefly.

When it was time, they went out into the stifling, moonless dark, going down the valley toward the broken cube. Steam from the hot springs choked them, and the rich earth was warm underfoot.

There was a Rakshi on guard. Red grinned. "All right," he whispered. "Cover me. And if I don't see you again . . ."

Hildy said, "Good luck, Red. God go with you." She kissed him, firmly on the lips. Jat and Markham Chandler shook hands with him. Red let his head drop.

"I still don't know why I'm doing this. Maybe if I come back . . ." He shrugged and went away, going softly through thick undergrowth. The glassy bat wings hanging against his body made a tiny clicking.

The Rakshi stopped suddenly in his drifting patrol. He didn't look at Red, but beyond, and Red smiled. The three he had just left were thinking hard at the Rakshi, thinking threats and plans, trying to cover Red's mind. He crept on, his mind guarded.

The Rakshi made a single dart toward the noisy minds. Red got behind him. His blaster made a brief bright flare in the blackness.

"Eight," he said grimly, and climbed in through the riven port.

There was no one in the control room, or the dark well beyond. He could hear muffled sounds from the prisoners. He didn't try to release them. Their suddenly-altered thought pattern would warn the Rakshi no matter what they were doing. But two brains, wary and guarded, might be blanketed, might go unnoticed long enough . . .

One mind, if Crom had died in the wreck. But Crom's sword would still be there.

The floor of the well tilted crazily, but the walls, here in the heart of the cube,

were not much buckled. The Titan in black mail lay still on his block, his eyes open, fixed on the sword.

Red padded softly across the floor. The heavy iron doors were all shut. He came up beside the block and whispered, "Crom!"

He thought for a long moment that the man was dead. The black, fixed eyes never wavered. Then, from a vast, cold distance, "Go away. The stink of you makes me sick."

Red said, "I discovered something, Crom. I am a human—and proud of it."

The eyes moved then. They came slowly to Red's face, and a fire began to burn in them, deep and terrible.

"You lie. The gods blast you!"

Red said doggedly, "How do I get you loose?"

The mad black eyes seared into his, but this time he could meet them. He felt Crom's brain beating at his, and he didn't stop it.

"Gods, gods, gods!" whispered Crom. "Don't give me hope again!"

Red said, "How, Crom? Before it's too late."

This time he couldn't meet Crom's eyes.

"Take out the tubes and bind my wrists. I'll live long enough."

He did it, binding the round holes tight with strips from his tunic. "Now, Crom. The shackles."

"Take down my sword. Hold it by the grip only."

Red climbed on the block. The sword was heavy in his hands. He got it free and climbed down again.

"Lay the blade across the iron hands."

Wild violet light sheeted out. Molten metal sparked and ran. Red stood back, pulses hammering thick and hot in his throat and head.

Slowly, slowly, Crom rose from his block and stood.

Red put the sword in his hands. A cold shudder shook him. It wasn't Crom's body doing this impossible thing. It was something beyond, something primal and burning strong as the sun.

There was a grating clang of metal behind him. He spun around. Korah floated in the red dusk, smiling, his light tube raised.

"Well, Red," he said softly, "I thought you might come back." Then he saw the giant standing, his hair spread like a sable cloak over the block and the rusty iron floor.

His face turned to a pale, glowing mask, and his opal eyes had death in them. He

didn't speak. But the light tube steadied.

The blinding beam struck Crom fairly across the eyes.

RED fired. The flame of his blaster shot wide as Korah made his car dip aside. Crom cried out, a great thundering roar. Red cursed silently and went in closer.

He fired again, and missed again. The Rakshi was iabolically quick. Crom was abruptly quiet. Korah laughed, the tip of his blue tongue sharp between his pointed teeth. His beam flicked to Red.

Red smiled without mirth. With his free hand he held one of the bat wings to shield his face, firing from the shelter of it.

The blaster flame just grazed Korah's gleaming shoulder. Red heard, behind him, the ring and groan of Crom's armor and the heavy, dragging whisper of his hair. Korah's face tightened.

His beam shifted strength, shot down below Red's guard to leave a seared weal across his midriff. Then it went to Crom again.

Red shut his teeth together and went in between them. The hot beam struck against his shield of hard-scaled wings.

Then, almost contemptuously, it darted down, found his unprotected legs and struck them from under him. His hands came out to stop the fall, and the beam smoked across them. Red screamed and lay still.

The beam touched the fallen blaster and brightened. The weapon vanished in a molten blob.

"Little men," whispered Korah. "Foolish little humans, to think you could stop us now!"

Crom moved across the floor in slow; ragged jerks. Korah danced out of the way of his sword, laughing without sound.

"Go on, Crom, every step of the way. Is there a bitter, deathly taste in your mouth, the taste of defeat, Crom? The

bitter bread you fed us. Suck it, Crom! Chew it, and strangle on it!"

He let his burning beam play with exquisite skill across Crom's face. The weals stood scarlet against the deathly white skin, and the eyes were black seared shadows under the heavy brows. But he didn't stop, moving step by step toward the door of the Temple.

Down on the floor, Red twitched and drew his muscles tight. He mind stood at a great distance, looking down at his body and telling it what to do. Korah floated below, lost in the ecstasy of his triumph over Crom.

There was no time to Red, nothing but his mind detached in a clear white light directing the formless agony that was his body. He got up, very slowly, and went up behind Korah.

His great seared hands went up. They pulled the floating metal disc off balance and down, and jerked up to the Rakshi's glowing neck.

Korah cried out. He tried to turn, but Red's hands held him. He stepped up the power of his beam and turned it backward against Red's body. The hard bat wings began to melt, but not soon enough.

Korah's crest, for the first time, rose in an effort to warn the Rakshi in the temple. But it dropped again with the snapping of his neck in Red's fingers.

Crom made a harsh animal sound in his throat and staggered forward against the prop of his sword. Red saw his face through a dark veil, the face of a dead man, driven only by the fire that burned in him.

Red said, "Give me the sword, Crom."

"Open the door," whispered Crom.

"You're dying. Give me the sword."

"The gods blast you! Open the door!"

Red pushed the handle down with his elbow. The metal door swung back. Light flooded out, warm opalescent light that pricked his skin with tiny needles. Red looked into the Temple of the Flame.

Seven Rakshi hovered over huge vats, turning startled faces to the door. The square room was very large. Stacked against the walls in transparent containers were naked brains in clear fluid, bathed in the light.

The light came from a pedestal in the center of the space. The heart of it was too bright to look at. But Red knew dimly that in some way it was life.

Red whispered, "You can't make it. Give me the sword. You can't even see it."

"I can feel it," said Crom softly, and smiled. The sweep of one great arm struck Red back out of the way. He went on into the Temple, his head erect, carrying the weight of his rusted armor and the black hair that dragged behind him as though they were nothing.

The Rakshi made a strange wailing cry and their tubes came out. Crom's armor glowed and his hair became a bursting

aureole of flame. He laughed out of it, a great ringing shout beyond pain, beyond anything human.

He crashed forward, and the blade of his sword smote fairly across the heart of the Flame.

THERE was nothing after that but light. Lying on the floor of the well, seeing very dimly, Red watched it swell out and out in a pulsing fury of strength. The Rakshi vanished in it, and the vats, and the brains in their stacked containers.

Presently the inner surface of the heavy walls vanished too, in a flood of molten metal. Then the fire died away and there was darkness, and utter silence.

Red smiled. It was a boy's peaceful, tired smile. His body ached. He looked down and said, "Hildy'll fix it."

He fainted, quite happily, on the rusty iron floor beside the empty block.