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The Stolen Sun

by Emil Petaja

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PART ONE THE TIME GAP

“Then the sky was cleft asunder All the air was filled with windows, Burst asunder by the fire sparks As the red drop quick descended And a gap gleamed forth in heaven.”

Kalevala: *Runo* XLVII

I



The manship dropped into the seething darkness like a predatory fish. This alien-made dark was as virulent as it was viscuous; it brought corrosive death to anything less than a manship Destroyer of the Terran Deep Fleet, with its heavy coat of force field armor that deflected the planet’s lethal triple-shield.

“Go, Lady!”

Warily now, Lady sent out invisible probes to lick out into the stygian dark for Mephiti ships. Wayne Panu’s eyes were her eyes, hers his.

“So far, so good, your Lady-ship!” Wayne’s mind stroked hers but joined her in a tight watchfulness.

“Too close to light,” Lady pontificated out of her tapes. “Mephiti detest all light and sound. That’s why it is impossible for us to communicate, why we keep losing ships. Even the reflected absorbed light we can’t see, from stored energy and released energy, offends the Mephiti. So—they kill us out of fear.”

“Or we kill them,” Wayne said grimly. “The first thing we knew about them was losing a big wedge of Fleet ships in some black goop we couldn’t see. Can’t detect them by sound, either. The bases of their ecology is completely alien. If it wasn’t for the smell—”

“They are gaseous, obviously. Yet they are highly sophisticated and cunning. As far as our scientists have been able to deduce they evolved by skips and jumps straight out of N.C.C. 6720 itself, before it started to become a planetary nebula.”

Wayne made a rough noise. “Deep Fleet had some very desirable real estate all pegged out in this sector of Orion, what with a few million hopeful colonists... Then we slammed into one of these seething nightmare pockets. Two. Ten. A hundred. Their own roving colonies travel within these semi-solid shields until they reach a planet they want, then they spread the black goop all over it and take it from under our noses. Naturally we weren’t happy about this invasion, and the war was on. But what a war! If it wasn’t that the Mephiti smell so bad—”

“We have concluded that odor is their means of communication. When we tried to get close enough for the usual sight or sound symbols, trying to make contact, we got killed for our pains. And they are multiplying fast, oozing in from God-knows-where. Finally we were able to design our manships to be both sightless and soundless, like us.”

“I keep pointing out,” Wayne grumbled, “that the Mephiti stink to high heaven.”

“To Terran noses, yes. But this is *their* attempt to communicate with us, warn us away. Doubtless, like us, they need elbow room and new resources. They presume to take over planets we had claimed for ours, shrouding each one they take with a protective shield like this and—”

Wayne gave Lady her head; he had to. Once her micro-tapes were triggered off she was good for a solid hour or maybe ten. *Just like a woman*, he thought, grinning. In any case the Psychs who had engineered that phase of the incredible manships (Wayne preferred to call them Ladyships) had done this on purpose; it kept the weary enforced silences, after his brain had been umbilicated to hers, from becoming unendurable. Her microtapes fed his brain vast stores of mnemonic knowledge, prodding his own memory cells. When the time for action came, though, Lady shut up, whipping her sophisticated capacities and draining his toward the immediate end. The built-in irritation kept Wayne’s faculties honed to a fine edge. Lady was, after all, a machine, unsubject to human vacillations and quixotics; at the same time Wayne’s agility and reflexive capacities were more able to take care of intangibles and sudden changes. Wayne was super-high esp, too.

They made a beautiful couple. *Everybody* said so.

Dr. R. Roland Delph said so, over and over and over. Dr. Delph was the Fleet’s top Psych, was largely responsible for the manship umbilicus, and he told every new class of tyros the same thing. *Emulate Wayne-plus-Lady for all you’re worth*. They were Numero Uno.

The recruits who had made it to Astro Post XXXI were high-esp, of course, and the tests they had passed were grueling. Physically and psychologically, *and* para. Extrasensory talent was still hit and miss, still in the wistful stages. Chemo-therapeutic goosing upped the ante a little.

But Wayne Panu was special.

“Damn special,” Dr. Delph told each new crop. “Now that we need out-talents desperately to save our whole Deep Colonization program—where is it? Primitives had more of it than we do. Like animals, they *had* to have it to survive. We have our mental gymnastics to depend on, not to mention our robotic technology. We’ve let these unexplored areas of our mind sit and atrophy. Even a child—”

“Excuse me, sir,” one bright-eyed recruit said cheerfully, “We’ve already been briefed on all this. Children and animals empathize with their playthings, etcetera, etcetera. A dog knows when his master has had a fight with his boss. As the Neanderthals learned to talk and think they forgot how to esp. If you don’t mind—sir!—tell us about Panu. Just what is it he’s got and how do we go about getting it?”

Dr. Delph’s shook his loose jowls. “Son, if I could tell you that I would be a reasonably

happy man. We've tried to find out. Gone into his ancestry with a fine-tooth comb. Picked his brains, his glands, his psych—until he threatened to leave Project Manship. Every time he goes out we send a likely newcomer to tail him, observe, intuit, work him. But how can you explain the inexplicable? Apart from the purely thought-mechanics, which we ordinarily have to settle for, how can I explain the manner in which *Wayne Panu actually becomes part of his ship?*"

"You don't actually mean—"

"Whatever you are thinking, I mean it! Panu empathizes *in toto*. He is the hull. He is the motors. And of course the computer complex."

Whistles of grudging admiration.

"He must be a mutant. A giant jump in evolution."

"Or—" Dr. Delph broke off with a vasty sigh.

"Or what, sir?"

"A throwback to an unknown race that had such powers."

A burst of protest. "But sir! There never was such a race! Not on Terra! Nor anyplace else, as far as we've come!"

"We're the cream of the crop," somebody added smugly.

The balding Psych stared into infinity. "Somewhere along the ancestral thread, like a genetic overfold..."

"Red alert! Red alert!" Lady's electric arteries put Wayne's mind on the *qui vive*.

"Where?"

"Left. Ahead and down."

"Don't see a thing in the vid," Wayne grinned.

"No time for comedy," Lady said acidly. "Recheck instruments for position. Ready kill-ray. Confirm speed. Confirm trajectory."

"Yes, ma'am."

Wayne's hands went to work on the instrument panel; they snapped on buttons that aimed the infrared ray on the Mephiti ship's olfactory nerve center, which Wayne's nose and the odor-sensitive detectors had beamed in. As they dipped into Layer Two of the black goop, they found themselves rapidly nosing toward a lurking sentinal ship of the enemy.

"If we win this war," Wayne quipped grimly, "we'll win by a nose."

Lady was oblivious to his humor at this point. Wayne sent his mind down into the innards of the shark-shape, checking guns and thrusters. The robotics of Lady accepted his intrusion with military acumen. Moving up into the ship's engines, he nudged the accelerators; vectored; while dipping further into the second layer he made a cortical note of a buzzing connector. A

minor defect, like a human hair out of place, but Wayne took cerebral pride in Lady's appearance. Even in her insides. Especially in her insides, since they were most important.

Curious, he sometimes mused, to be roving among his wife's arteries and organs like this!

"Ten seconds!" Lady's voice was tart.

The blacker patch in the blackness now bogeyed the smell-scanner, clearly defined. Wayne held his breath while mind and hands poised for kill. He counted along with Lady.

"Damn!" He broke at six. "He's spotted us! He—" The bogey was moving out of fire range, fast. "Now!" Lady shrieked. "*Fire now!*"

Wayne's hand had already slammed the trigger studs. Hot red lightning sprayed out of twenty vents, stabbing the skunk-cloud's tail in a dozen places. Light limned an odd spiral shape just before the Mephiti ship imploded and vanished in a thunder of sonics. Grim-mouthed, Wayne released the four levers that laid destructive eggs on the surface below.

Lady precogged Wayne's mind; before he even said, "Let's get to hell out of here!" they were on their way up. Wayne gasped back against the auto-cushion enveloping him against the fury of their up-thrust into open space. "What would I do without you, Lady?" he asked, taking a deep breath and savoring the sight of all those salt-sprinkle stars.

"Without my hull to protect your human body, without the properly mixed air in my automatic tanks, without—"

"Yeah, I know." Wayne blew her a quick kiss. "Without you I'd just die!"

Lady reminded him, rather primly, "Have you checked the other manship?"

"Mother of pearl!" Wayne whistled. "I forgot all about the reader Dr. Delph stuck on my tail!"

II

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Chuck Sotomeyer was, taken physically, near to being the antithesis of Wayne. Where Wayne was lean and hard, with a narrow contoured face, an almost ascetic cast to his jaw-line, needle-sharp blue eyes, and close-clipped wheat blond hair, Chuck was short, muscular, stocky, and he wore his sheen-black hair rather long in front so that the crisp curls flung themselves down over straight-cut black brows and amiable green eyes. His wide young face had dimples and laugh-lines, his lips red and ready. When there were any women available, Chuck cut a wide swath.

Just as soon as Wayne tripped the umbilical switch and temporary divorced Lady, Chuck stuck his happy face in the vid.

"Yeah, buddy! I took it in and got the hell out as soon as Lady gave me the high sign! Gad, what a blast! Talk about splatter! How many skunks you figured we liquidated?"

Wayne ignored the "we," but his brows puckered. Not because he didn't like Chuck. He

did. He liked Chuck best of any of the readers Dr. Delph had saddled him with. Chuck's cockiness and good humor pulled him out of the sloughs of despond into which his work as Destroyer dropped him after the key-up demand for all-out action and target-directed thought was over. Each day, or almost, meant one more target. One more colony of aliens blasted out of existence. It wasn't a fun thing to have on your mind when the whole thing was over and it was time to go to sleep. If you could sleep.

But no jokes now, please. Not right now. Not *right* after. Maybe to Chuck it was some kind of a game, killing "skunks." But deep inside of Wayne Panu something rebelled; beyond his punning with Lady, his byplay with Chuck, Dr. Delph's shoulder-massaging, something resisted and loathed the whole thing. He killed Mephiti, by the thousands, millions for all he knew. If he didn't, they'd kill him, and God knows how many Terran colonists. Still, Wayne rebelled. Rebelled deep inside of his cells, and resented the super-mental equipment he was born with because it had brought him to *this*. ...

He didn't tell anybody. Who could he tell? Not Lady. Her brain wasn't equipped to understand compassion. He couldn't tell Dr. Delph. Delph couldn't permit himself to agree, even a little bit. Wayne was the Fleet's bright hope. Lord! It would never do to let the Psych Head know that he was starting—insidiously and without volition—to empathize with the Mephiti...

Wayne's upbringing was nothing unusual. In fact, it was commonplace these days. Wayne was born of simple second generation colonists on a farm in Proxima. His grandparents had, like so many billions, fled the crowded Levels of Terra and the monotonous complexity of rat-hole living. It was a rough pull, those first fifty years, what with the thin blue light of Proxima shining down on a virtually lifeless rock. Somehow, as elsewhere, they had survived and scratched out a scanty existence. Children had been born, married, stayed there on the scattered farms because there was no money to leave and nowhere else to go. Even Terra closed behind them after they had once made, the colonial lists, like a sea closes behind a flung stone.

Wayne thrived. He loved to watch the saffron blush of dawn over the jagged crystal peaks, along the clean green patent-leather shine of corn leaves sprouting tall and straight under anxious loving hands. The corn-stalks talked to Wayne; they whispered secrets about the pale blue sun and the soil, and how content they would be to become part of Wayne and the others who had tended them so faithfully. It was continuance; it was becoming part of something greater than themselves, to the great time pattern being woven on some cosmic loom beyond the stars.

Wayne's thin bones sprouted up with the corn. Hard work sheathed them with efficient useful muscles. But Wayne was not oriented to the technical sciences. He didn't know what he knew. Like the other youngsters, he studied the books and the vid tapes, and he did his share of squirming about it. Tech books weren't much fun. But, like most, he had his secret life.

At first it seemed natural to him to "see" into the heart of the corn and the barley. When his dog, Sisu talked to him, it was the most natural thing in his world. It was only after some stinging remarks and fist fights that he began to realize that it was best to keep his mouth shut about these things. When he tried to "see" his mother and father, or his playmates, it didn't work. Or just a little, randomly, vaguely. The lack he decided much later, was in them. They had no transmitter to his receiver.

"You came from a farm on Proxima, eh, buddy-boy?"

Wayne snapped to from Chuck's casual mind-thrust into his thoughts. After all, like all of the Manship Project pilots, Sotomeyer was a random esper, and Wayne's musing cut a deep rut.

Wayne smiled at him in the bid. "Yes. I got to hating the monotony of the same faces, same routine. When our twice-a-year offworld supplies were shipped in I'd get thinking about stowing away. I wanted *out* in a bad way, then." He ended, glumly, "I'm not so sure now."

"You were lucky, buddy-boy," Chuck grinned. "I had to claw my way up out of Level-84. Never even saw Sol until I was nine."

Wayne nodded. His one leave on the mother planet had bothered him, still did. All those hundreds of eggcrate levels, efficient/antiseptic, stretching out across all the continents. Oh, there were a few gardens and wild places, but these too were rigidly controlled. Everything was under control. It had to be; Terra was a technological sardine can. No wonder colonists were willing to endure *anything* to get off! And no wonder the Destroyers. Humanly inhabitable worlds were pitifully few and far between. The nothing in between was endless. And those planets which could support life already had life. They quite naturally resented intrusion. So. After the early X-Plor ships had tagged them, the Fleet Destroyers moved in. It took Man a while to work himself up to All-Destroy, but he made it. It wasn't the only way, but it was the best way because it came to that in the end.

Wayne saw death, brought death wherever he went. He watched inoffensive alien civilizations blown out of existence on their own worlds with steady eyes. Man's claw-out was too desperate, too needful. The stakes were too high. And each out-push led to others, like stepping stones. Man continued to breed and need, and the breeding and the needing shoved him further and further out in radiating circles from congested Terra. It was all—or nothing...

"How come you didn't go back home when your stretch in the Fleet ended?" Chuck asked.

"It was my trip to Terra." Wayne smiled a tight grimace. "The Mephiti had just started. Manship was cooking. Somebody someplace got a look at my esp chart."

"Three cheers for the red, white and black." But Chuck's green eyes registered a kind of envy. Chuck had scrambled into Manship the hard way, driven hard to pull himself out of the ranks of the nonentity numbers. "And now you are Number One." He whistled as a kind of genuflection. "Wanna tell Chuckie-boy about it?"

"Not particularly."

"Tell me anyway, buddy-boy. We're not going anyplace and"—he winked—"I'm supposed to dig you a little. Orders of Dr. Delph."

Wayne shrugged, gave the automatics a quick check.

Lady was right on course for home, which this time meant Astro Port XXXI, a ragbag of hangers-on to satisfy the off-tint needs of the Fleet.

"Dr. Delph and his staff must have combed through a billion esp records. Everything from precog to table tapping. Every possible candidate for Manship got screened. Lots of random, but random just isn't enough. In order to succeed in establishing the kind of rapport Dr. Delph

was after, he had to reach way down into the cells, the genes, the molecules, and whatever comes before them!

"I was just one of the boys. Passed the physical easy enough but when it came to college level bio-chem and physics I was out on my can. I pointed out that I was a farm boy; I had my book-learning with the rest, and I was a reader. But not tech stuff. Early sci-fiction. Adventure. History. Like that. Not much I didn't know about space pioneering, but toss an equation at me and I'm lost. I thought here is where I get dumped and goody-goody. Then—the card-esp..."

"One hundred percent!"

"Not first. Delph pulled me in for a personal interview. Here was when I tried to explain what my trouble was."

"And?"

"I saw the cards all right. Only I saw them too well. I saw them *inside*. The numbers on top didn't register; I was down inside of the molecular structure of the plastic. I had to train myself to skim off the top!"

Chuck whistled awe. "How about that! But, listen, if you can get inside of Lady like we are all supposed to do and can't quite, how come you can't read minds?"

"I think I know why. Either because the minds don't have a good enough amplifier to—"

"Mine does!" Chuck bragged. "All the Manship picks—"

"Sure, Chuck. But there's more to it. Don't you see? Our whole civilization is built on a kind of deviousness, a subtle cheating of each other. Look at the Syndicates and the way they prey on the colonists. It's the mental block we've unconsciously built up against outside intrusion. Dr. Delph wonders why our esp talents haven't kept up with the rest of our mental faculties. That's why! We distrust each other! We hide what we know so somebody can't use it against us!"

"Defense shield, like the black guck back there." Chuck scowled. "Yeah. When you think of all the back-stabbing and phony deals we've pulled on each other for thousands and thousands of years..."

"The more subtle and sophisticated we got the greater was the need for this mental force field. Me? I was brought up in a clean natural environment. There was no need to lie, at least my mother and father never bothered to, nor most of the others. None of us had anything worth stealing or finagling."

Chuck's nod was followed by a frown. "Still, lots of the men came from colonies. There must be more to you than that. Any ideas? Like for instance your people?"

"I'm pretty much of a mongrel like everybody else these days. Since World Idiom and U.N."

There was a brief silence, interrupted by the Port's signal beep for Wayne's report on the flight. After he clicked off, Chuck's wide face grinned back and there was a lustful glint in his green eyes.

"Hey, buddy-boy, wanna join me in a tour of the bistros tonight? I got this size thirty-six blonde and she must have a friend for you. Let's forget all this jazz, wipe the stink of the skunks off with a couple blashs and—"

"No, I don't think so."

"C'mon! You brood about all this too much, buddy-boy. I read you loud and clear. You take it to heart. Hell, it's dog eat dog out here! Gotta be! C'mon, buddy-boy! Well get Hashed. Do you good. I insist!"

"Go right ahead and insist," Wayne smiled. "Those *blash* sewers don't do a thing for me."

III

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Wayne's watch said half past one when the red light above his bunk flashed and the beeper began to beep. His Captain's status earned him a cubicle of his own in the cramped Astro XXXI Base and for this he was grateful. There were times when he couldn't stand anybody, even himself. He raised up drowsily and flicked on the intercom. "Yes?"

"Captain Panu, this is Ensign Gribble in Psych." Ensign Gribble was excited and plaintive at the same time. "So?" Wayne stifled a yawn.

"Captain, I know you've only had a couple hours sleep, but Dr. Delph told me to tell you—"

"I know. This one is special. I'm the only one who can handle it."

"Yes, Captain. That's it, all right. But—"

"But what?" Already he was dropping his feet to the deck in a wide swing and reaching for his pants.

"Sotomeyer! He doesn't answer. We can't find him. He must be off the Base. Have you any ideas where—"

"If he hasn't had any sleep he wouldn't be much good, anyway. Tell Dr. Delph I'll make this run alone." He was at the basin, dousing his blond head and giving it a vigorous shake to remove the last shreds of a strange dream about an incredible copper starship that—it was gone; Ensign Gribble's voice was taut and high-pitched over a rush of protest. "What's that?" he demanded.

"Dr. Delph wants Reader Chuck Sotomeyer with you. He insists. Seems as if the automatic computers on Sotomeyer's ship indicate that he is the closest thing to you we've hit yet. In spite of his bronco tendencies and drinking, the Manship-esper curves on his chart—" Ensign Gribble's voice lowered to a prim whisper, indicating an earnest desire to keep Chuck out of trouble, if he could. "If he's caught off limits one more time, he's had it."

Wayne toweled and pulled on his boots, fast. "How much time do I have?"

"Will an hour help, Captain?"

"I'll find him," Wayne said grimly. "Do what you can."

"Sure, Captain Panu. I'll stall 'em."

"Do that."

While the road-runner jeep he commandeered pummeled loose basalt rock to pumice on the so-called road toward the double row of bistros on the far side of Astro XXXI, Wayne swore inwardly at Chuck's "bronco tendencies." Sure Chuck was young, but he was smart enough to know that Space Navy rules were ironclad for good reason. Especially Manship. As for the bistros, which were presumably there to cater to colonials and frontier civilian workers but in effect were cosmic camp followers as well, these seamy joints were taboo and fraught with obvious perils. Most of the Fleet gave them a wide berth; still there were always a few men—like Chuck—whose libidos demanded the kind of diversion they could not buy in the PX. Funny how the fact that a man was bright, sharp, sensitive (and Chuck Sotomeyer was all of those things, besides high-random esp) could not overcome fleshly desires. Perhaps the closeness to death, the smelling of it and causing it in wholesale lots, was what did it. Tensions had to be released somehow. The invidious *blash* that hardcore spacers swilled in the bistros, and the soft yielding bodies with the hard calculating eyes—even this was something, after the aching desolation of so muck nothing out there and the everpresent realization that man had in Deep of his own insignificance in the scheme of things. Not much, but it was something.

Wayne Panu, in his early years, had brushed with the camp followers and the civilian spacetraps, but something deep inside of him couldn't cut it. Reading the flashes of thought within their habitués with his esper's talent, revealed naked and heartless under the impetus of *blash* and raw need, disgusted and pained him. In fact, being high-esp in itself made him something of a loner. Yes. He understood Chuck, perhaps in a way better than the youngster did himself. But he didn't judge him. He liked the lad a lot and he would save him now, if he could.

Moving into the mud-ruts of the neon-splashed main drag of temporary metal structures, Wayne glanced with frowning eyes over saloon signs like *KENTUCKY MOONSHINE* and *MOM'S APPLE PIE*, calculated to induce thoughts of "back home," an oldtime back home that didn't even exist any more. The whole thing reminded Wayne of a tri-vid play set. Something like the shoot-'em-up western America dramas.

The characters he saw shambling in and out of the bars and girl-bistros were mainly hardfaced frontier colonists; they had to be hard to put up with the discomforts and rigors of bleak raw planets which had just been stripped of life by Manship for the later influx. Womanless, mainly, the early colonist ships included construction workers of all kinds whose job it was to set up some kind of living and functioning quarters for those who panted and strained at their leashes to get out here from overcrowded Terra, for good or bad.

And the Syndicates.

These were like the old Mafia. New colonies were easy pickings for these under cover gangs. Misfits. Navy deserters. Natural or unnatural predators. The Syndicates lost no time muscling in after the far-flung Fleet left, bringing in gifts of supplies which were always in demand on the outposts. Then they would plant in bosses among the colonists for later

bleeding.

The saloon with the rococo front and the batwings was definitely Old West. Old West Thirtieth Century space-style. Wayne pulled up and climbed out of the jeep. Chuck had mentioned the *JESSE JAMES* a number of times, vocally and in random esps. It seems there was this buxom blonde they called Lollipop.

Wayne pushed through the batwings.

The smoke and the effluvium struck him like a wall, but he managed to grope his way through the din and the unwashed bodies to a corner table. It was near a woodlike stairway leading to little rooms that rented by the hour. Next to the stairway was a pianci, a real piano, with a real piano player with a cigarette dangling from his thin mouth, Old West style.

The bosomy waitress brought him a *blash* without asking. He paid her and took a sip. She lingered, eying his trim green uniform. When he coughed from the way it burned his throat all the way down, she laughed.

"Never had one before, Navy?"

"No. What's in them? Rocket fuel?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? No two batches are exactly the same, but the kicker is a Venus-type fruit that transports light after it's dried. Don't take more'n three."

Wayne smiled and promised he wouldn't. He was about to ask her about Chuck but she was gone.

His blue eyes ranged over the smoked-up pandemonium. They held at the piano. It was an open-front jazz affair that somehow hinted at older easier days. The piano player with the flying elbows pulled nostalgic tunes out of it to go with the pseudo-Old West nature of the bar. He crouched over the upright like a praying mantis.

There was a girl standing next to the piano, a shy-eyed girl whose heavy makeup and sexy dress didn't suit her at all. There was a kind of gamine wistfulness about her. She wasn't pretty, exactly, but her eyes were large and softly gray, odd-shaped as if she might have alien blood.

Somewhere over the rainbow, bluebirds fly.

The mantis put just enough schmaltz into the old song, which had somehow outlasted a million others like it. A lacing of hope for these humans in this frontier dropoff in space, who'd most likely never see Terra again, nor any of the Terra-like colonies they had left behind them.

The girl just stood there, half-frightened and hopeless. A shy waif in an evil place.

Wayne pushed out a preliminary probe to dig her mind, if he could. She looked easy. He stopped, as he usually did. It was not fair to use his talents like that. In fact, since his first year in space (seven years sometimes seemed an eternity) Wayne had rigidly avoided dipping into minds around him. He disciplined himself about it. Sometimes his mental probe struck blank walls of resistance; but when it wasn't there, that wall, he still boggled. Others, envying him, thought telepathy talent a blessing. It wasn't. Not to Wayne. It was more of a curse, reading the craftiness, the vulnerability to hurt, the thousand hints of beast-roots. Of course Lady was far different. Lady was designed just for him, to be part of him as he was part of her. As to *human*

minds, they ought to be sacrosanct. As least, in a civilization that was still dog-eat-dog, as Chuck Sotomeyer tagged it.

He considered the girl at the piano from appearance, from normal intuition.

If bluebirds fly beyond the rainbow, why can't I?

The girl's eyes found Wayne's; held.

He tilted an eyebrow over a second acid sip of *blash*.

The gray eyes lowered quickly. Then, haltingly, she moved across the crowd to Wayne's table.

"Buy me a drink?"

Wayne nodded gravely. She sat. Rather, she perched. It was as if she definitely did not belong here, but there was no place else to go and there was only one mode of existence open to her on this barren rock at the end of known space. She accepted the *blash* with a forced smile and touched it to her lips. Wayne toyed with his glass, aware of a chemical warmth moving up within him that had nothing to do with the evil-tasting drink.

The girl with the haunted eyes got to him.

It hadn't happened in a long time. For one thing, since those bucolic harvest outings on Proxima, Wayne's time had been several taken up with Fleet duty, and Manship operated where girls were only a memory.

"What—"

"I know." She overlaid his thought, huskily; "What's a nice girl like me doing in a..." She let the cliché dwindle off. "Do you really want to know?"

"As a matter of fact—" He started to ask her had she seen another Navy man in here tonight, but there must have been some element of differentness, of compassion, in Wayne that compelled her to let out some of the welling hurt.

Her story came in staccato bursts; Wayne had to infer most of it. Doreen was not the gabby type. Doreen Cutter. Mrs. Jack Cutter of Fleet Laser. Jack was the scholarly, earnest kind; neither of them had any family, so when Jack was shipped out further and further into the void, and his letters stopped coming after a while, Doreen couldn't wait. She followed him, missing him by inches on her trek. Then the news. Jack was dead. Erased with his whole ship in a Mephiti action.

Stranded, Doreen tried to stay out of the Astro night life. She tried hard, but something within her didn't care any more what happened to her. Jack was dead and again, there was nobody. Nobody at all.

"Couldn't Fleet Authority across the rock help? After all, there's your widow's pension."

Doreen nodded. "They did help, but the pension has to go through channels. As they pointed out, they're fighting an all-out war. They don't have much time and no room for waifs and strays. I wasn't supposed to come here."

"They'll put you on a Fleet ship home, of course?"

"Sure. When there is one. It might be six months. *C'est la guerre*, you know."

"I know." Wayne's smile was grim. "But—why here? Why the gin-traps?"

"Can you understand what it's like to sit alone in a room six feet by eight feet, night after night after night? Thinking. Wondering what's the use." Her eyes stormed with tears. "I—I guess I'm not very strong. I'm the kind who needs somebody. That's the kind who has never had anybody. Then, when it *does* come to you, it vanishes in a puff of Mephiti smoke—" Her head dropped and she gulped down half of her *blash*, *choking* on it. "After awhile—" she whispered, "it doesn't matter who. Somebody. Anybody." Her eyes moved to the piano player. She shivered.

"How about civvie ships?" Wayne asked.

"Mostly the ones I could get a berth on are Syndicate-run, and you know *them*. They want an arm and a leg, not to mention your soul. But there is one leaving next week. I've got some credits left from what they gave me at the Base and if I stop eating entirely—"

Wayne reached out his credits case and nipped out all but two c-notes. With no place to spend money in months, it amounted to quite a lot. Six months Manship Captain's pay.

The girl stared at it when he shoved it toward her, then at Wayne. She reached toward it, then pulled her hand back and fled, out of the JESSE JAMES and into the black spacial night...

Wayne understood. It didn't even take that involuntary esp-thrust into Doreen's unhappy mind when her haunted eyes touched his over the loot. Her story was not all lies. Not every word. Every other word was true. There had been a husband and he had been killed. But there was a lot left out. Such as the uses that had been made of her wide-eyed forlorn waif look. Doreen knew what she was doing, all right. But—as she had admitted—Doreen was weak... Wayne whistled silently at the sudden rebellion against evil that had taken hold of the girl, made her leave the proffered loot and run. He glanced toward the piano, muscles tensing. Wayne was no fight-lover, but right now it would be a pleasure to give the praying mantis something to think about. With his fists.

But the piano player was gone.

Stowing the credits back in his tunic, he called over the waitress. All this had taken time, precious time, and Dr. Delph and half the Base must be moving toward conniption fits by now.

"Have you seen another Fleetman around tonight?" He slipped her a credit note for inspiration.

"No. Gee, I'm sorry."

This was no time to be coy about using his esp-talents. He moved his eyes and his probes around the grimy bistro in a wide random swash, seeking any shred of recent memory of a handsome wide-faced whelp with sensual eyes and dark curls. It was like digging in a garbage can; he gagged on it. But he kept it up until he needled what he was looking for. A free-lance girl at the bar was downing *blashes* and indulging in self-pity about a man she went for. *Gee, he's*

cute. Why'd he have to go and switch to Lolli when I told him and told him I'd do just about anything ...

The face she projected was idealized from desire, but it was Chuck's, all right. And her most recent sight of the cause of her *blash-binge* was Chuck moving out through the batwings—with Lollipop.

Wayne took one moment more to fix in his mind, as best he could from the *blash-muddle*, just where Lollipop would have taken Chuck. It was like siphoning up one grain of gold out of an unsavory gyrating whirlpool, but it was there. The alley. The outside stairway. The little room, with the giggles coming out through the billowing curtains.

He moved out, fast.

It took all of his power to hang onto the tenuous blur of knowledge he had gleaned from the disappointed bar-girl. He moved rapidly down the brief benighted row of bistros, concentrating so fully on how many alleyways to pass and which one to move into that the furtive footsteps behind him didn't quite register.

The alarm bell came seconds too late.

There were two of them. The mantis and one other. They caught him just as his crackling boots moved onto that outside stairs toward the outbillowing curtain above, near the innocuous-looking door.

They had unfinished business with Wayne. What Doreen had refused they were all too willing to take, without permission.

Wayne whirled, yelling out. But the big man swung from behind, while he was battering out at the squeaking mantis. The leaded pouch struck.

Wayne's knees crumpled. The steps clubbed his chin when he fell.

It came as music, first. Brief, spellbinding chords of music struck from some ancient harp-like instrument. Then, very gradually, after his cellular totality of being luxuriated and bathed in the plucked elfin rhythms for a moment, came sight. He saw old gnarled fingers moving across strings; then, while he held his breath and waited, the miracle happened.

As if—as if some time-well, occult beyond naming, had cracked open and permitted his genes an ancient incredible *knowing*....

It was difficult to hold on to it. It kept slipping away, and he must not let it go. It was too wonderful to bear, but more than that it was too wondrously rare to let go. The plucked chords were also plucking out notes of ancient memory that were buried deep within the smallest parts of his cells, within the mystery of existence itself. The gnarled brown fingers plucked and the ringing tune was the catalyst that pulled Wayne Panu away and apart from his time-place, across the loom of time itself.

Watch, Waino. Watch and remember.

The voice rang like a tocsin. The words were of a language lost forever within the melting pot humanity had become, as its tentacles reached further and further out into space.

Wainomoinen. Katsoan. Nyt!

He saw, through smoky mists, a tall figure. An old, old man with a beard so white that the deep blue of his silver-figured robe was reflected in it. Under the robe, Wayne glimpsed brown boots and thonged deerskin leggings. As the figure stepped nearer, wonder prickled Wayne's scalp and his temples. The parchment skin of the old face was stretched over high cheekbones and involved in a smile incredibly kind as the deep blue eyes above were incredibly wise. Those blue eyes, with their flecks of argent silver, seemed to hold universes cupped within their depths. The calm assurance of god-within-man swept aside all fearful despair. Wayne believed in those eyes as he had never believed in anything before.

Time was a man-contrived illusion based on a false interpretation of cosmic mathematics while Wayne listened to the old man's song, as his ancient fingers moved across the strings of the magic thing he held across that silver-figured robe. Wayne's Manship galaxy of cynical all-kill vanished. The power behind the singer's eyes, and the song he sang split time and eternity wide. The rolling rocking words were great giants stalking out of the past. They tramped Wayne's mind. They evoked images. Images not only of color but of texture and piney scents. He *was*, suddenly, all that he heard and saw and sensed. He was one with the cool breeze brushing the valley's forest and the sun-drunk lake. He was the sound of the crane as it swooped and skimmed the cattails of the *metsola*. He was the golden dawn lavishing its splendor on the last flakes of snow dotting the achingly familiar landscape, from the flinted cliffs to the sea and on across bleak wastes into the burling northwind; he was of the small lives in the ocean where the foaming tide smashed black rock, where curlews bleated, where heron waded the fens.

The dream, wrenched out of his being by the blow, seemed to move lazily, comfortably glow, across his inner secret mind; yet it lasted no time at all, for it stopped Time. He seemed to lift and pull himself toward the swirling mist, toward the old man.

"Mitar

The old man stopped playing his *kantele*; nodded.

"Hyva vo, Waino, my son of many sons."

"Son?"

"There have been many, but none such as you."

"What—what do you want? Where do you come from?"

"From beyond the tapestry that Ilmatar weaves forever, my son. From apart. I have been waiting for you, roving the stars endlessly in my copper boat, searching—for you! I have cozened Ilmatar into changing the warp and woof of her Pattern so that I could find you. Praise Ukko, it has happened at last, and now you must follow—"

Follow. Follow. Follow ...

The word was a two-note chime, a final plucking of those golden strings, echoing faintly, faintly, faintly—across the abrupt wrenching pain of waking. His head bumped on the steps as the two waylayers yanked him over on his back to continue their fumble-fingered search for his credits case.

Wayne's head roared with angry pain, yet now he remembered. His esper talents strained, as his muscle and nerve cells strained to coordinate and move him into action.

Little bitch. Why didn't she take the loot when it was all laid out for her? Never mind, I'll take care of her, good. She won't pull that crap again!

"Hey!" The other, the bigger one, located the case and fished it out triumphantly from the in-pocket under Wayne's left arm where its bulge matched the cut of the uniform. "I got it!"

"Good!" the piano playing mantis croaked. "Now, let's get back to the pad. I've got something to give Doreen."

"Her split?"

"Split lip," the mantis growled. "Damn slut almost lost us a—"

The staccato *sotto voce* confab lasted just long enough. Wayne had lain there across the steps, limply, eyes closed. Now he snapped open his eyes and moved, with cougar swiftness, at the amorphous shadows lumped above him. Rage was a sometime thing in Wayne Panu, but in the rare moments when it did overtake him, it possessed him *in toto*, like cornered lightning.

His esp gauged the trajectory; his balled fist, with all the fury of a well-directed thunderbolt behind it, struck. The big man went down, with a low surprised grunt. The mantis squeaked and fled, but not far. Wayne was esping his wallet and replacing it when the piano player moved back in on him. Wayne esped the weasely desperation that had revived the mantis' lapse of courage; now he had a needle-like knife and his idea was to jab it in Wayne's throat while his right hand was thrust inside his tunic. Wayne's poke had become an obsession by now. He had seen it and lost it twice tonight.

The pasty face glowed in the dark from his need to make this nit. The skinny arm uplifted and swept forward in a convulsive lunge.

Wayne caught the wrist; a momentary sense of cruelty fired his brain, cruelty against cruelty. The mantis would take it out on Doreen. His arm muscles wrenched back. Bone snapped. The mantis' scream of agony filled the black alley. Wayne let go and the little man fled, moaning.

"What the hell's going on down there?"

Wayne looked up at the half-dressed frame bulking the open doorway at the top of the stairs where yellow light splashed.

"It's me, Chuck. Come on. Let's get out of here."

Chuck rumped his black curls and grinned. "Okay, Captain. Gimme a minute to put my clothes on. And tell your friends to can the noise, huh?"

IV

« ^ »

Somehow the dawn action was accomplished; the un-guessable reservoirs in a man that war

brings out were tapped; mission accomplished; and Wayne flung himself on his bunk and to all intents and purposes died for twelve hours. Chuck had somehow got it into his head that Wayne had followed him to the forbidden area out of some subconscious Freudian need to go there; next evening his bang on the door of Wayne's Captain's cubicle and his cheerful grin when he was inside told Wayne he was all set for another round.

Wayne put both feet down, hard. By the time he had explained what happened (they were both too beat and occupied on the run to communicate more than was absolutely necessary) and added a few gratuitous remonstrances about Chuck's behavior and where it was leading him, Reader Sotomeyer removed himself, chastised, to play ping-pong in the PX with anyone he could snag down.

Dr. Delph called Wayne in for a conference and a psych-check. Delph was small and pudgy and, from behind his thick trifocals, he watched Wayne's every gesture with a prideful wonder. He, of all others, understood the magnitude of such a phenomenon as a Wayne Panu: a farmboy from Proxima with a mind-talent as inexplicable as the mysterious stirring of primordial Terran slimes into life. What talents the other Manship gleanings from the Fleet itself possessed was only a modicum; it sufficed when individually tuned by brain-pattern to the brain of each man's super-sophisticate ship, but the breathtaking cellular empathy that Wayne's automatic chart grafts indicated was minimal. On the other hand, perhaps it was just as well that *everyone* didn't...

"How's your hand?"

"Hand?"

"The fight." Doctor Delph's eyes narrowed; his mouth curved a faint smile. "Oh, I know all about the other night. Don't worry, Wayne. I mean, for Sotomeyer. The CO doesn't know and he won't know. But I have to know. Everything."

Wayne cocked an eyebrow. "Everything?"

"Within reason." Delph paced his office-lab twice, then whirled. "Wayne, I'm worried about you. You have changed in the past few weeks. It's subtle, but it's there. You're doing your job as well as ever, but there is something."

Wayne was silent. What could he say? How could he even start to vocally explore the strange wonders that spurted into tendril-like being in his mind—out there in Deep, or lying on his bunk, on the rim of sleep? The glimpses of an impossible copper boat where there was nothing but black space. The old man with the harp. How could he speak of these things, even to such a brilliant psychologist as Dr. Delph? He'd *have* to put him down as losing his mental grip. He would theorize that Wayne was victim to the terrible mental strain of empathizing with Lady and that such aberrations might endanger the whole Manship program. He would be released from duty.

No. He had to keep quiet about these things. The war-push against the Mephiti was too crucial. He would thrust these visions and fancies aside, kill them, drown them in physical and mental effort as never before.

"Is it the girl, Doreen?" Dr. Delph's voice was gentle, willing to understand.

Wayne frowned. "Maybe she has something to do with it. Is she all right? Can't we do

something?"

"We already have," the doctor reassured him. "She will be on her way to Terra within the week, on a returning cargo vessel. Her alleged 'friends' are in custody."

"Doreen?"

"She is new at the game, apparently. Unless some past charges come up, she'll be let off with a suspended sentence. She'll be all right."

"I hope so." Wayne met the psych's eyes. "Thanks." Delph waved away his gratitude. "Now, what else? I know there's more and I don't want any of your Spartan heroics. I want to know if you're ready to go out again. How about a short leave? Luna, maybe? Port Mars?"

Wayne shook his head. "No. I—I'm happier out here. It's clean and honest. The kind of death you face out here is fast and it's unprogrammed. It's not calculated, like—"

"I understand. More than you think, Wayne. Out in that big black vacuum you're beyond all human foibles and perverse emotions. You feel close to something enormous and somehow comforting. Like a cosmic womb. Your ship, Lady, helps you, too. She is incapable of guile."

Wayne was surprised. This was the first time Dr. Delph had revealed his own psyche to this extent. The leap of hunger behind the trifocals made Wayne want to tell Dr. Delph everything—about the illusionary copper boat, about the old man, everything. Still, he could be reading the hope in those shrewd eyes wrong. Delph was dedicated to serving mankind, no matter what the serving might lead to. It was a soul-searing job, and it didn't pay off in dreamless nights.

Wayne stared at the walls, the metal walls that could be disassembled along with the whole Base when the time came for another predatory thrust into a new frontier. His eyes were dull, his mouth bleak.

"Guilt," he gritted. "That's the word for it, isn't it, Doctor?"

The psych-head read his thought. "I suppose it is. Why should Man imagine himself master of the universe? Why not some other race? Why anybody? Can't we just live and let live?"

"Well?"

"Think about it, Wayne. Think. Man is master up until now only because he hasn't met his match yet. It could happen at any time. Since man first recognized himself as a self-conscious entity he has had to fight. The elements. Hunger. Animals. Plagues. He is still fighting. In spite of his attempts to thwart overpopulation, it happened. It had to. Longevity increased, and the natural instinct to procreate pushed man off his mother-world and eventually out here into the stars.

"We didn't want to kill. We tried not to. But the aliens we met in our space-treks forced the old dictum: kill or be killed. We tried to live side by side with them. It didn't work, any more than it did when the European ancients swept across the Western American plains and destroyed the American Indians, one way and another. Our superior technology, our better witch-doctors, our hideous weapons, made us superior. So the aliens died.

"Still we tried to live with the alien civilizations we met in our outsurge. We established

colonies among them. What happened? The Fleet couldn't police them properly. Space is too wide and empty. We found colonies burned out. Destroyed. And there are so very few worlds on which human life can sustain itself, so—"

"So all-kill." Wayne's mouth was a tight line.

"Yes. All-kill. In a way it's more merciful."

"Merciful!"

"Before we know them or they us." He clapped Wayne on the shoulder. "Maybe we've met our match at last. The Mephiti have systematically destroyed every one of our ships that came near them, armed or unarmed. They have weapons we know nothing about. They keep destroying our colonies out of hand."

"And we, theirs," Wayne muttered.

Dr. Delph's voice was taut, tinged with reproach: "Each race must fight for its own, Wayne. You have exceptional talents, but you are *man*. It's the same out here as it was in the Terran jungles many eras ago. Survival. No form of life can last long cuddling up to its natural enemy. A rabbit can't run with a wolf pack. Nature is nature, whether it's a small valley or many light-years in all directions. We've only moved out into larger forests."

The laser needles bit into his brain as he sank back into the air-cushioned seat; as always, Dr. Delph personally supervised the cortical hookup which, when Wayne activated it by throwing the control, would marry him to Lady all over again. He endured the brief pain and watched the indicator lines move up to full contact. Then, with a small salute for the psych and the ground crew, Wayne sent Lady darting like a needle-nose far away from the rock-chunk Base into the endless black—Chuck close behind.

He forgot about Chuck. His mind jumped with contrary ideas. Paradoxes hard to reconcile. After the initial push came long hours of physical idleness, strapped to his flow-seat. Lady could take better care of them just now than he could, programmed as she was for instantaneous response to the occasional problems encountered in the flight toward today's objective. He checked to make sure Chuck's Man-ship was where it ought to be, but he avoided conversation. There was still a touch of bad feeling between them; mostly it was that Chuck still burned from the eating out Wayne had given him. Let it lay, until the vacuum silence and the awesome knowledge of the vast reaches separating the two of them from their kind demanded human contact.

He thought about Proxima, about the little farm of shining green plantings and the crystal ridges hemming them in. He thought how simple life had been, and good. If only one could somehow go back...

He couldn't go back. He had come too far. And, as Dr. Delph kept assuring him, he was too badly needed. Panu was the key to a whole new terrible kind of war, and, as the psych had put it: *No form of life can last long cuddling up to its natural enemy. Nature is nature. You have exceptional talents, but you are Man. Each race must fight for its own...*

Wayne's innate sensitivity, his distaste for what an ironic Fate had specially fitted him for, made him an idealist. If only Man and the Mephiti could somehow get together. Surely there was room in the universe for *two* major races! Yet—it takes two to make a peace pact, and

nobody had yet been able to figure a way to communicate with the Mephiti. Who knew what was on their totally alien minds?

He thought about the Old Man of his dream. He thought about the first time he'd seen the copper boat. It was after a particularly important kill. Usually Wayne didn't look back; he didn't want to see the ravaging flame of death he and Lady had left in their wake. This time he had, and the sight had shattered him. Drowsing from the tranquilizer Lady made him take when his reactions, out of shock, became erratic and irrational, he glanced out through the vid for comfort from the patterned flint points that were suns.

And there it was.

Unbelievable, of course. A riveted-together copper ship! In Deep Space! Impossible. His soul had been seared too deep and too often. Its overwhelming need for something to cling to had created the Copper Boat, an anachronistic hero-thing. And, when all-kill became too much for him, it happened again. He would look out, his eyes and his soul begging for *something*: and there it would be. Transitory. A brief-lived phantom.

Then, in that sordid alleyway, the white-bearded Old Man with the—the *kantele*. *Kantele*? What made him use such a word? From what deep well in his mind did such a word come? There were more! The Old Man had sung his song in an ancient lost language, and Wayne had understood!

If only he could remember more. If only—

“Wainomoinen.”

Wayne's blood leaped. *That name.*

“Chuck!” he grated. “It's you!”

Sotomeyer's grin appeared like the Cheshire cat's when Wayne reached up and flipped the between-ships vid. “Who did you expect, Santa Claus?”

“But—that name! Where did you hear that?” Chuck laughed. “You, of course.”

“Me?”

The grin changed shape, became pensive. “Maybe you don't know it, buddy-boy, but lately you've been putting on some way-out performances.”

“What do you mean?” Wayne's voice was a knife.

“Well, I know you're super-esp, buddy-boy, and all that. I'm minor league, so I just trundle along behind and keep my trap shut. But lately—wow!”

“Give,” Wayne snapped. “I want to know.”

Chuck squirmed thoughtfully. “Well, we all know about talking to yourself on these Deep gigs; that's why they use the buddy system so much. But, when you go off into one of your snits—what kind of goggledgook is that, anyway?”

Wayne breathed deep. He forced his hands not to tremble and his voice to remain calm. “You said *Wainomoinen*. You remembered that. What else?”

"I'll try," Chuck said. "First I thought you had been hitting the *blash* too hard. Sometimes it does that when you're not used to—"

Wayne ignored the implication that he was a secret drinker or hashish eater. "Try to remember."

"The lingo is like rippling water, when it's not like cracking nuts with your teeth." He grinned wryly, then sobered and took a deep breath. "Hold onto your hat. *Suihki suk-kula piossa. Kaami kaessa kaaperoitsi*. How about that?"

The rocking phrases were awkwardly spoken but the musical sounds sent a chill riveting down Wayne's spine. Could it possibly be?

"Any more?"

"Sure. Plenty. But I can only remember some of it. My recall's high, but this language is something else. There were words, names I guess, that you repeated over and over.

Like Wainomoinen. And—yeah—Ukko. Once you scared hell out of me by yelling out: '*Ukko! Maiden valo! Kadot-taa!*' "

Some groping tendril within Wayne's molecules reached way down, down beyond Time, struggling to drag up with it the meaning of the words. And did.

Our light! Our sun! Ukko, help us!

With the knowledge came cerebral pain, then Lady nipped in urgently. Her mind-whip pulled him away from the chaotic brink of time-fall and into the present.

"Red alert! Red alert! Target dead ahead!"

Wayne's hand went out and snapped the umbilical switch; Chuck's face vanished while its amiability changed abruptly into a mask as he, too, blended with his Manship.

The eggs the ships would lay were cushioned deep in their bellies; when the target was near enough Wayne would push buttons and the light sound bombs would plummet onto a remote area of the Mephiti planet. When the Manships were safely out of range the timers would activate and the eggs would spume out a beautiful self-propelling flame, a screaming river of flame, which would presently and in a very short time cover the whole planet, killing every trace of life on it. Everything except indigenous low-level flora, if any. Timing was everything, and it was Wayne's action that would accomplish the destruct for both ships; Chuck was still only a reader and observer, although his manship did its part as carrier.

Obedient to rigid training, Wayne's conditioned reflexes went to work; wizards and snowclad forests dissolved and went spinning back into limbo; his consciousness raced through Lady; the umbilical cord that made them one allowed no vagrant straying from total concentration on their purpose.

All-kill. Like Lady, Wayne was trained to all-kill. No time for second thoughts. Their very electrons were interlocked by Wayne's unique power. As a unit, with Chuck-ship trundling after, the destruct unit hurled itself soundless, lightless, into the black shield. Preliminary scoutings of the target had provided him with a map of sorts; olfactory probings had determined the densest areas, those which would be under heaviest guard. These were to be

avoided by the manship's dual skills.

They moved down through the first thinner layer. No skunk-patrols. Wayne flicked a brief glance at the rear vid; Chuck-ship was riding his tail at a comfortable distance, slightly up from Lady.

Layer Two. Denser protection here, and prowling black spiral ships to be on the alert for. Lady sniffed them out and changed course accordingly, with the agility of a somber swift-moving denizen of the deepest Terran oceans avoiding his natural enemies. Wayne was accustomed by now to their allowable black lights and his cellular *know* to Level One and half of Two. As to Three...

An abrupt check of all component factors, an involuntary breath-gulp, and they lunged down into Three.

It was like swimming through black glue. Together with Lady, Wayne could almost feel the gelatinous coldness against his epidermal cells. They were nearing the drop; minutes only now.

Ready, Lady warned. Ready to drop. Make ready ... Ready ...

They dipped deeper into the treacle, deeper than Wayne had ever been.

Now! Drop-NOW!

Wayne's hand moved to the triple buttons, froze. His muscles refused to put out that small bit of erg that would destroy this desirable planet. His nerve system refused them that last little bit of command, that final jab of energy.

Something down there had touched his mind. Something with intelligence had made contact.

"I can't!" he groaned.

Do IT NOW!

Instead of leveling the manship and obeying, Wayne's mind held Lady off and *moved further down*.

He had to. Something was fumbling at his brain with naïve curious fingers. It was not inimical, this thing. It had no emotion of hate or of kill. It was like a friendly creature one meets in the forest on a morning stroll. It begged for his friendship.

When Wayne told Lady, in a rush, she had an answer.

"It's a trick. The Mephiti are intelligent enough to have probed human weaknesses. DROP THE BOMBS!"

"Yes."

That must be it. Lady had to be right. Her light-fast computers possessed within their complex solids a vast store of knowledge that was all geared to her *raison d'etre*. A dozen sciences with space alien psychology uppermost. To battle an alien effectively, Man must out guess him; his record was more than just excellent, as his conquests bore witness. All of this was within Lady. She couldn't be wrong.

His frozen muscles moved. His hand went out to ram the three buttons with the flat of his gloved hand. The eggs dropped.

Horror set in. A shock-wave of guilt crowded out every other thought from his mind. What had he done? He had lolled. He had destroyed that small friendly thing down there. Along with its world, he had killed the baby-thing that had purred against his mind like a kitten...

Well? another part of him sneered. *What the hell did you come here for? You're part of a big push; you have your job, your duty, to do like everybody else! This mission is no different from any other of the others. Like Delph said, a rabbit can't run with a wolf-pack...*

He began to shiver. He trembled so hard that he couldn't move again. He heard Lady's sharp voice from far, far off:

Up! We've done it. Up and out—fast!

"I killed it," Wayne mumbled. "Whatever they say—"

UP!

The young Mephiti creature thrust itself into his numbed mind again, confidently, happily. There was no way of describing it. No way of picturing it, except perhaps in human terms that only suggested its tender beauty. It was beautiful as a firefly is beautiful on a warm summer's evening. Or a golden plover moving across glinting sand and march. Or a crimson-speckled wrasse browsing the spines of a tropical coral bed.

A new life-part. A small child. And, without knowing it, it was already dead. The destruct-eggs were timed to exude their screaming fire in moments; nothing could stop not. Nothing.

Lady rasped frantic warnings. Even Chuck was buzzing his alarm. *What's wrong? What's wrong? We laid our eggs. Did our job with the usual Panu precision. Let's get the hell out of here. My blonde bomb is waiting for—*

Red Alert! Mephiti spiral approaching to intersect us at .08! Vector! Move!

Wayne's torn-out yell and his grabbing blur of motion were both reflex; both Lady and Chuck had strained whatever powers they were equipped with and forced off his pain and his contact with the baby creature. The odor of the Skunk ship, spiraling toward them out of the black, did the rest. The stench Lady let him have, full, was painful, too. He moved. He acted. The manship sheathed itself in protective flame to hold off the Mephiti ship until they were safely out of the guck.

There was no thought, only reflex, until the manship was out of Layer One and into the sharp encircling light of a billion stars like Christmas tree tinsel.

"We made it!" He breathed deep, relaxing for a few seconds against the contour pillow.

Yes.

Wayne sat up. There was something fretful in Lady's tone, reflected, perhaps, out of his own mingled guilts. Her voice was somehow bleak.

“Chuck!”

He batted off the umbilical and put the intra-ship vid on in one swift sweep of motion. He stared. Behind him was nothing. No ship. No Chuck. Only empty space, freckled with stars.

“No.”

He made one quick movement to reverse course but Lady said no. But she was somehow gentle, as if she understood. Wayne didn't weld her to him; he didn't want to hear her say it. It was no use. Chuck didn't make it. Not quite. Obedient to his reader's status, he had waited for Wayne's high-sign to leave, and the sign came one split second too late. By now the whole planet was dead, but Chuck had died even before.

Facing the multitude of winking suns, Wayne's eyes burned with fire beyond tears to put out. Lady said nothing. After all Lady was only a machine and her immediate task was to get them back to Base. Mission accomplished. One more planet had been released for colonization and there would be rejoicing about it at the Fleet Base and at home on Terra.

To lose a manship was bad. They were hideously expensive and Chuck's training had cost a packet. Still, in an all-out war this was expectable. Routine, even. After all, Chuck Sotomeyer was only a reader.

First the burning in his eyes, like hot coals. Then a kind of emptiness. Lady's automatics pushed them homeward; as for Wayne, he was a dry husk without purpose or meaning. His hands did what they were conditioned to do. Beyond that, nothing. A vacuity, like all that empty vastness outside. The guilt came later. It washed over him in a tide of thunder.

Wayne was a killer. Call it what you may, pin medals on it, give it fancy titles, make it a symbol for new and faster destroy-machines: that was what he was. He had done what he was told to do and he had done it well. He had killed aliens by the billions. How many exactly he would never know, nor did it matter. Well, did it? After all, they were only other forms of life and by Fleet definitely sub-human. They weren't MAN. As for Chuck, he was no concern of Wayne's. Wayne only tolerated his presence as a reader. What if Chuck had somehow made a place in Wayne's life that the other readers had not? What if he did call Wayne “buddy-boy” and mean it?

Yes, Wayne was a killer.

And now he had killed his only friend.

Something inside of him wrenched loose when the tide hit. The thing that made a man care a damn what happens to him. The stabilizer that makes living sense, even when misfortunes pile up and become seemingly unendurable, losses relating to contacts he thinks he cannot live without.

With Wayne it was more. That part of him which was farmboy and sensitive to sunsets and rippling fields of grain against cirrus clouds, that part of him bled every time he killed and whoever he killed. Delph could say Man was more important until his vocals chords shriveled up from saying it, but it didn't matter. It couldn't.

Chuck's death was the last cry. The last outcry of a dream, dying and broken.

There was simply nothing left.

The totality of the desolation ahead left only one thing to do and he did it. His hand was rock-steady when he reached out for the lever marked *"Time-Skip."* If Lady protested Wayne was beyond hearing it. Time-Skip had carried Man, living, into the stars. Seventeen of the gauge numbers were used with varying frequency, but past the halfway mark, cued *"DANGER"* in specific warning letters, was a lot of time-jump that meant nothing. Yet.

Wayne almost smiled as, with one calm swift pull, he brought the lever all the way around, past seventeen, past one hundred, where the numbers crowded closer, past one thousand—all the way to eternity.

PART TWO THE COMING OF THE DARK

"Therefore was the night unending, And for long was utter darkness, Night in Kalevala ever, Likewise in the heavens was darkness, Darkness to the throne of Ukko."

Kalevala: Runo XLVII

V



At first the ship he tailed after was just a dull orange glint laboring across the familiar star pattern between Ursae Majoris' Merak and Dubhe. Familiar stars that pointed cool blue fingers at Polaris. And yet this constellation was somehow different. Time different.

The ship that lumbered its way toward Sol was different, too. Drawing near, Wayne stared wide at the small whale shape in his front vid scanner. It appeared to have been hammered skillfully out of copper sheeting, beaten into shape with rough hands. And what else? What incredible magic else?

Lady moved alongside the copper ship in one easy thrust.

"So you have come, my son."

He adjusted the side scan; blinked. Behind a wavery crystal window was a face. A face he had seen before. Wayne gasped at the

long beard, the parchment skin drawn across high cheekbones so tight that they appeared burnished bronze knobs surrounded by hoar. The blue eyes leaped with lambent flame from under white patches tilted, now, to agree with the strong creases of gratified pleasure in seeing Wayne and the grin of jovial welcome. Wayne rubbed his eyes. This was impossible! Simply impossible! Yet he was seeing it, so the copper ship and the old man had to exist. Besides, there was that in the old man's eyes which bade him believe...

Still, it was a wonder among wonders and it would take time; Wayne gaped and waited.

"It is good that you have come to help, Waino," the old man said. "The Vanhat have urgent need of heroes."

Wayne blushed from the implication, yet something within him leaped. To destroy in wholesale lots, whether in jeopardy or not, was not his idea of being a hero. Yet, like all men, he had his secret yearnings.

He looked for a voice-com; since there wasn't any he decided that the old man's words spoke directly into his mind. Sang, rather, like bells. Easily. Without strain. Unlike the confused others whose thoughts he sometimes saw as through a glass darkly. The old man's projected thoughts had the ringing resonance of a cathedral organ.

He looked around that other small cabin. The tall ancient in the blue woolen blouse and peasant pants sat in a carved wooden seat before the ship's controls. And what strange controls they were! The long panel consisted of rainbow lights that swirled and pulsed. There were no recognizable instruments, no levers, no studs, no calibrations. To maneuver them the ancient simply thrust his hands within the rainbows and kneaded the palpable effulgences as if kneading dough. Behind him were shelves neatly stacked with round breads and cheeses; on the floor nearby was a great foaming vat of some kind of malted brew. There was a copper dipper

swinging gently from one side of the vat.

Wayne wondered about the power. When, from astonishment, Lady veered offside and up, he looked down at the copper boat's belly. There were oars projecting out of the copper, a dozen to each side. They were made out of the same shining rainbow material as the controls and they moved in rhythmic unison to dazzle his eyes with the color shifts.

When bewilderment subsided and Lady was close to again, Wayne ventured, "Where are we going?"

"Home," said the old man.

"Home? Proxima?"

The old man laughed. He pointed. Wayne looked ahead at the familiar pattern of suns and satellites that all men of Terra view with leaping pride, and he knew.

"Come! We must hurry! Evil days have overtaken our homeland!"

"But who are you and what—"

"Menna, Waino!"

There was no time to pluck even a few of the questions from the plethora that roared up in his mind; with a flick of its copper tail the improbable starboat outdistanced Lady by parsecs and Wayne was left floundering in a sea of doubt and wonderment.

Wayne's hands and mind told Lady to follow as best she could and presently they were flinging down into the benighted storm that raged on the small green planet's polar cap. It seemed a singularly inappropriate place to attempt planet-fall but the demanding urgency in the ancient's piercing blue eyes brooked no second thoughts. If he said here, here it must be. The manship strained through the raging stratosphere, following the copper

boat's winking beckon. It appeared doubtful that either of them would make it intact, but something deep in Wayne's cells insisted that failure must not be. And suddenly he knew. It was not his skill or Lady's, nor the combination; it was the old man's mind holding them up, guiding them in, pulling them after like a puppy on a long leash.

The deep snow cushioned the jolt when they made their skittering landing. Wayne yelled out. Every tooth in his head was loosened by that last flaming lunge into the night-darkened snow. For a long moment he just sat there. The tooth-loosening jolt had the effect of bringing him back to what passes for sanity. He shook his head savagely against the roaring in his brain. It was preposterous! The copper star-boat. The ancient, with his rainbow controls and his rye bread rounds and his beer vat. The whole thing was impossible! Logic demanded that he dismiss it all and take up his unwelcome life from the moment when he had pulled the time-lever beyond eternity. In his torment about Chuck, he had wanted nothing but to be dead. So. He was dead. Wasn't he?

He let his face fall forward, groaning. Let it happen. So be it. Let oblivion take him. To hell with it all.

Came a tapping on the hatch. Rat-a-tat-tat. Come! it said. Hurry! Open the door! We haven't time for nonsense! Wayne straightened, grudgingly. He scowled in the direction of the shadowy hatch. The rapping became a dull fist-butt pounding. He swore as he eased himself out of the billowed cushion and weaved across to the hatch. His thumb jabbed the button that spun the inner lock open. Lurching out, he opened the outer door and gaped at what he saw. A wild beard-wreathed face with eyebrows lashed by wind-tossed snow rime. A night gaunt. A phantom.

The tall figure shouldered in hugely. Its fierce blue eyes flashed around the cabin, ignoring Wayne for the moment. It shrugged off snow and devout dissatisfaction with what it was seeing.

"Mita hervia!"

Wayne recognized the expression of scorn; he didn't even need the snort that went with it. "Come out of this Hüsi's contraption, son! Come!" The tall rawboned creature grabbed hold of Wayne's tunicked arm, pulling him toward the hatch where the storm keened and wailed. "We've a long way to travel and the bitter dark is full on us."

Wayne stared. Yes. It was the man from the copper boat. It was him all right. Yet—different. Younger. The long beard had yet much oaken-brown in it and the eyes were less sunken, the torso and arms better sheathed, the movements more virile. Strangeness, this. The old man in the star-boat had brought him here to be greeted by his younger self...

Wayne snapped to when his rescuer slapped his shoulder and hiked him off into the snow tunnel he had dug down to the manship. The up-path was cramped and tortuous; Wayne was glad to reach the surface, to stand up to the driving wind and pucker a wondering look around him. Not that he could see much, and the northern blast all but raped him off his feet while it turned the marrow of his bones to ice. He looked up, to orient himself by the stars, in vain. The great bowl of open sky was amass with churning black; snowfall had spent itself momentarily to nagging eddies like blue wraiths; the wind from off the pole was like a great army of howling savages. The desolation was of itself to make a man shrivel up and die.

Wayne gave a wistful backglance at Lady, buried deep in a drifted mountain. Already the wind imps were busy covering the burrowed tunnel; in a hour there would be nothing here to indicate her existence...

Wayne had visited strange cold planets, but there was something peculiar about this cold, something that ripped out the elemental terrors of the beast from the very nuclei of his molecular being.

"Come!"

The bearded one's shout was lost on the wind, but Wayne caught the urgent directional flail of his mittened hand. From where he pointed came an eerie ululation, a lupine howl of infinite despair, to chill Wayne's bones even further. The unknowable terror of the primitive gripped his insides and froze him to the crusted spot. Now he saw the tall frame of his rescuer thrust into the wind toward a drifted knoll where dark shapes moved vaguely in the deeper shadow. Wayne shuddered at the thought of being left alone and on foot on this bleak benighted tundra; he forced his legs to move after the dwindling figure, fast.

"Tulla!"

Wayne's veins heated up from his run. He looked around him at a ring of feral flint-white eyes. At the tall man's shout the shaggy gray animals groped up on their feet, their bellies dangling with balls of snow and ice. Without conversation (which the yowling wind made impossible in any case) the brown-beard fetched out a parka from the wooden sledge parked in the knoll's deepest shadow against the storm. Wayne stared at the ornately carved troika while the tall man rehitched the eight wolf-dogs to the reins. Gratefully, he slipped the eimme-trimmed parka over his dark space uniform.

"Get in," the bearded one advised. "I will run alongside for a time. Well do better if the dogs have not so much to draw."

He waved away Wayne's ornamental demur and Wayne climbed in among the furs. The cold still gnawed at his bones; his feet were already numb from it. Even his mind seemed to be congealing. A scream at the dogs, a whip-crack, a straining of harness, and a lurch of runners that jolted Wayne's cold-locked jaws loose, and they were off, southward, with the demoniac wind of the north at their back to lash them out of its frozen domain.

The rhythm of the iron strips gliding and sparking fire on the blue crust, the snug warmth of the shaggy white bear furs, and Wayne slept. Slept like one demented by exhaustion. It was as though the torment of his years as a Destroyer and the nightmare of Chuck Sotomeyer's death were only dreams and this a quixotic waking to reality. Not a reality spun from childish illusions where all is warm contentment and pleasure. No. Rather a cold, bitter-cruel reality, yet nevertheless of dignity and satisfaction in striving, as against cynical all-kill. The dog's ululations, knowing that the next stop was home and food, the crack of the whip, even the harsh song of the wind, all of this formed a kind of compulsive lullaby. A remembered thing. Yes, His cells remembered it. It was within him, deep. Buried in the time-thread of his ancestry.

Only once did he wake. The sledge had stopped and overhead the sky pulsed with strange asolar light. He jerked up in the furs and turned. The north sky was cracked open with cascading splinters of blue-white brilliance. While he stared in awe at this spectacle and at the silhouetted figure standing twenty feet to the rear of the halted sledge, arms outstretched, face uplifted, he heard the brown-beard call out:

"Ukko! I have found him! I have found he whom you sent to us in a lightning bolt, to help us in our great need! Kittos, Ukko, kittos !"

A mittened slap on his shoulder brought him awake. The strange nightride across the bleak wastes was over. The bearded one waited only until Wayne moved and sat before he strode across the dark snowpath toward a rime-driven log house with a steep slanted roof and high chimneys of stone. Light like pale lemons splashed out onto the corniced porch. Wayne saw dark figures emerge from somewhere in the rear of the building to loose the dog team from harness. The dogs growled their impatience for their well-earned food and warm sleep.

Wayne jerked himself quickly out of his fur cocoon. His feet burned like fire but, now, at least they were alive. He hurried to the open door where the brown-beard waited for him in the flickering oil-lamp's outsplash. He gestured Wayne inside while glancing back critically to see if the dogs were being taken care of properly. Something displeased him; he brushed by Wayne and vanished into the dark, muttering.

Pulled by a primitive's need for warmth, Wayne sought the stone flagging of the high-leaping log fire. He removed his steaming parka and squatted, oblivious to the prickling fires in his hands and feet, to everything but the flaming warmth. It was a while before he stood up and took account of the rest of the room.

Somehow, already he knew that this was the common-house of the village. In the main it was one long room with long cross-legged tables and benches to seat two hundred. Ornaments were few. There were some colorful handwoven rugs on the oiled pine floor; lamps backed by tin reflectors gave life to the log walls and shone upon a tattered banner at the head of the master table, a space-blue flag set with a familiar dipper-pattern of silver stars.

When the great front door slapped shut to hold back the blast of icy wind, Wayne turned. The tall man with the brown beard tramped to the fire, first, and as if ritualistically, removed his outer clothing and ice-dangled leggings. He took no notice of Wayne for now.

"Elmi!" he shouted in the direction of what must be the kitchens. "Perkele! Where is the hag! Elmi!"

A fat bundle of a woman appeared.

"Kallia, woman! Food! Must a man starve in his house?"

The apple-cheeked apparition vanished, appearing a moment after with an enormous pitcher of foaming brew and huge mugs to go with it. Behind her a girl of fifteen or sixteen, slat-thin and

slag-eyed, moved like her satellite, bearing a tray of food. The brown-beard tramped to the table, beckoning for Wayne to follow suit.

“Drink!” he cried. “Eat! The others will be here soon to gawk at what Ukko has sent us.” He raised his beer mug.

“You will have little of peace presently. And precious little food. Make the most of it, my son’s son!”

Wayne fell to. The great slabs of dark bread, the wedges of yellow cheese, the meat porridge laced with forest mushrooms and herbs, with the dark kallia to wash it all down—were an animal joy such as Wayne had not known since boyhood on his Proxima farm after a muscle-pounding twelve hour stint during harvest. He devoured and drank with relish and forgot even his questions and his wonder at being here. He was here; in some fantastic way he belonged here: it was enough.

Through the delicious diffusion of hattia, when his belly could hold no more, he stared openly at the tall man with the long brown beard. There was cosmic virility to this man. He had the look of the forest, too. A stag’s tawny mane. A bear’s muscular stamina. An eagle’s sharp cunning. Yet there was more. Much more. What, it would be hard to put into words, but it came from deep behind those lambent blue eyes. A kind of godlike majesty. Dressed like a primitive, on a primitive world, this man was not. Standing before the High Terran Council, who decided the fate of worlds, this man would not flicker so much as an eyelash. His glance compelled. His carelessly flung suggestion was a lesser man’s soul-strained command.

“Why do you look at me, my son?” He showed strong white teeth when he laughed over the brim of his mug. “As if you did not know me at all!”

Wayne set down his mug, still staring.

"I don't."

The brown-beard roared to his feet. "You don't know me! ME!" He whirled wrathfully toward the kitchens. "Elmi! My robe!"

The old woman had been drowsing, head bent to her prodigious bosoms, by the kitchen door. She blinked up, then snapped her fingers into the hallway; moments later her daughter floated in among the folds of a magnificent garment of finespun goat's hair. It was dyed a brilliant blue and figured everywhere with cabalistic patterns made from purest silver. They were like panoramic constellations; Wayne thought while the brown-beard permitted Elmi and her daughter to assist him into the robe that if he allowed his eyes to follow the patterns those silver stars made something would happen to him, something wildly wondrous.

Now, with the dignity of a star-king, he faced Wayne. "You know me—now?" he thundered.

"Only that I saw you first in an Astro dive, playing some kind of harp—"

"My kantele. Jo. But what is this dive?"

Wayne made an effort to explain. "You told me I must follow you, then you vanished. Later, in your copper boat—"

"Boat? Boat?" The blue eyes sparked sun-fire. "Ah! I have pondered me on the idea of one day roving the stars and—a copper boat with Otava-rainbow oars, you say?"

While he paced he stroked his dark beard. "Yet," he rumbled presently, "you have the impudence to pretend not to know who it was called you down from behind our lost sun?"

Wayne managed an apologetic grin. From behind them came a blast of wind when the door was flung open and shut, then a sly boyish chuckle.

Turning, Wayne saw that two equally extraordinary figures had burst in on them out of the storm. His eyes took in first the chuckler. He was young, quite young, dapper in skin-dose fawnhide. His shoulders were wide almost to the point of abnormality, his waist, under a wide serpent's skin belt, flat and narrow. His face was a young god's, bronzed perfection, and the golden curls that caught the oil-lamps' light were carelessly long, so that they splashed sunlight over his flat-to-head ears and his wide forehead. His blue eyes were merry with devil-care; his wide passionate mouth alive with good humor.

With a dancing swash he moved, somewhat theatrically one might say, into the brighter light; he whipped around the harp strung on his back and gave Wayne a wink while he sang:

"Know you not our greatest wizard? He who charms the moon to dancing? He who bested Iko-Turso? He who fought the giant Vipunen? Who alone returned from Tuonela? Know you not our Wainomoinen?"

"Silence, Lemminkainen." But the robed wizard was unable to hold onto his scowl and smiled wide before he laughed to ring the rafters. "As you can see, this no-beard youth fancies himself a minstrel. When he is not seeking a sword fight he is making up songs for the maidens. He imagines that his crow's throat might even one day equal my own mellifluous song-magic."

The golden youth, Lemminkainen, grimaced and twanged a raw chord on the strings of his kantele. "The hundred maidens of Saari did not complain of my 'crow's throat' when I sang to them on their island!"

"That was because you were the only singer they had ever heard."

"Jo. And the only man. Nor did they complain of aught else when I made my rounds." Memories of those darkless midsummer nights

brought back his lusty good humor. "Another time, after I had slain the serpents of Sjojatar and lopped off the head of Pohjola's Master in fair fight, escaping by the hair on my teeth from the hundred warriors of the Black Crone—"

"A little less bragging would suit me well," said the second newcomer. His voice was low-pitched, its intent somberly purposeful rather than scornful.

When he stepped forward, Wayne took him in, from the black boots pooling melted ice onto the pine slabs, up the long dark-clad shanks, the black pukko belt, the near-black jerkin opened at the throat and showing a burnt umber V of strong throat and a large Adam's apple, to the fierce red beard like fine spun bronze. His face was long, gaunt, haggard almost, except that the indomitable valiance and heroic poise of head and sharpness of deepset eye well matched the others.

"Well spoken, friend Ilmarinen of the Magic Forge!" Wainomoinen gave his ceremonial wizard's robe a toss and flashed the golden-haired Lemminkainen a look so thunder-browed that it would have floored a lesser man. As for Lemminkainen, the Beautiful, he merely grinned.

"I meant only to instruct our young visitor. There are many things he must know if he is to be of any help."

"Niin," Wainomoinen nodded. "There is much to be said before we seek our rest in the chambers of Utamo." He beckoned them all back to the master's table. "We may as well drink and be comfortable about it. Standing here weeping like women will not bring back that which is lost."

Even grim Ilmarinen of the copper beard permitted a small smile to leak out when the wizard raised his kallia mug for the toast of comradeship to outlast the stars.

Lemminkainen stroked his kantele as if it were one of his

innumerable conquests while he sang:

“ ‘Dearest friends and much-loved brothers, Best beloved of all companions, Come and let us drink together, Since at length we meet together From two widely sundered regions.’ ”

Wayne sipped, thinking that these three strangely familiar men of heroic cast could scarcely dream how “widely sundered” the regions were...

VI



And so it was, while the wind-demon howled and pounded at the log walls of the village of the Vanhat, Wayne Panu—whose destiny had been to serve the Terran Fleet in its latter day matrix of All-Kill—listened with mounting wonder to the incredible tale of the Stolen Sun...

“Nün.” Wainomoinen put down his empty mug with a crash, then wiped the foam off his moustaches with a dainty movement that ill-matched the lightning in his eyes and the thunder in his scowl. “The Hag of Pohyola has always hated the Vanhat, and the decades and centuries have only served to whet her perverted desires for vengeance.”

“Why? Why does she hate you?”

Wainomoinen’s shrug was to cast off an incubus weight from his broad shoulders. “Many reasons: The Sampo Ilmarinen forged for her. The Star Mill of endless resource. We stole it back from the greedy, devious crone out of famine and great need, and in the great sea battle that ensued the Sampo was shattered into small pieces. We thought it was lost until it fell out that she perverted it to destructive evil. Ei. I have seen all of this on the great loom where Ilmatar forever weaves that which has been, is, and shall be. In my

visions and my dreams I am permitted, being near to Valmis."

"Valmis?"

"Those of the Otava folk who are ready to be called. To become a part of all that exists. To shred themselves as did our more worthy ancestors before we left the Bear; to fling the smallest parts of their beings into the stars and become truly one with everything that vibrates and holds the sky together; to know all there is to know of what Ilmatar weaves."

The light in his fierce blue eyes was so bright, suddenly, so rich with a transcendental ecstasy, that Wayne dared not look long on it. He turned sharply. The others experienced it, too. Even Lemminkainen was silent, abashed. Wayne thought his question, only. You mean, to die? You are saying that the Valmis are the dead, gone into Tieva?

"No," Wainomoinen said softly, in a moment. "The Valmis are not dead. They are alive as we can never be. They are within every marshflower that dances on the Spring wind, of every wandering mote that rides the sunbeams that seek out the small barn cracks where the grain is stored; they are within every fire-leaping sun..."

For a moment, when Wayne blinked up, it seemed as if the wizard's strong-etched face blurred. He could almost see the wall's logs and the sealing gray mud between them right through the diminished molecular matter that was Wizard, Chieftain, and Mentor for all of the communal Vanhat villages. He knew why. It was because Wainomoinen was near-Valmis, near to the Becoming Of All—and because he, Wayne Panu, was blessed or cursed with the powers of the esper and of empathic transference. He gasped without sound, held his breath, stared, waited.

Across the table, Ilmarinen the Smith gave a low animal growl deep in his throat. His long muscle-strung arm reached across to take hold of the wizard's robed arm, as if to hold him from

vanishing by primitive force.

“Let us talk further of Louhi and of our stolen sun,” he said in that low rumble of words. “There will be time for the Mysteries of Otava and the Valmis later.”

Wainomoinen’s face came back clear-cut and filled with resolve. “Jo. Forgive me, my sons, my comrades. We have a task and a frightful one.” He whipped toward Wayne, speaking in crisp monosyllables. “Louhi of Pohyola hates us. Each one of us has dared to defy her. Lemminkainen slew her human consort, before she moved her island into the sky by her Hüsi’s magic. I, too. Nün.”

“Where does her power come from?”

“It has been carefully garnered, sifted out of All-Things as the Valmis sift out good. Louhi has, in her endless life, consorted blatantly with the most evil creatures and demons from the darkest comers of the sky. Creatures so unnatural and cunning that even your Ussi, with their fantastic machines, have not even detected their presence in the black stars. Her delight in wickedness has sucked evil to her befogged island outside of time and space for so long that now Pohyola is naught but one great sponge of horror.”

“What form does it take? I mean—”

“We know what you mean, No-beard. Before stealing our sun Louhi flung seven plagues upon us. Seven deadly plagues to blight our crops and poison the milk in our mothers’ breasts. What form, you ask? Hails of iron from out of the heavens. Needles that prick children in their beds, so that they shrivel into gnome-things and die. The worst of the Seven Plagues was the last and it was brought on us by Louhi’s demon-sired daughter, Loviatar.”

“Loviatar seemed to be harmless, living in her hut in the Hollow,” Lemminkainen put in, out of impatience with inaction. “Ugly, she was. And one pitied her, shambling and weaving all the way from Ulappala with only a crooked rowan stick to serve her as

eyes. Ai. Loviatar was blind and hideous, so that each of the villages through which she passed fed her their best and the children sang her songs and brought her wood-flowers to smell, since she could not see them. Only every village she passed was stricken down and every child at whom she pointed her crooked hag's-rowan died with convulsive fits. It was not until Wainomoinen caught her away from the foxfire-lit Hollow, which was bound to Pohyola and Louhi with some unspeakable bond, that he was able to call her by her true name and end her malignant business."

There was a black silence, now, then Wainomoinen bawled for fat Elmi to bring more kallia. They drank the brackish brew somberly and without song or mirth. Witch Louhi's malignant, unending vengeance swore upon the roving offshoot of Otava hung over them like the everdark storm that prowled the wastes. The wind in the eaves-cracks was the Crone herself, cackling.

"How could she steal our sun?" Wayne blurted. "How could even such a witch do this?"

"Not she herself, perhaps," Wainomoinen sighed darkly. "Those she frolics with in a manner I prefer not to know."

"But to take away a star around which nine planets revolve! It can't be done without upsetting the whole balance of—"

"We do not have Ussi knowledge of these written down and computed matters," Ilmarinen admonished tartly. "We know what we know and what we see. When we look up and do not see the Sun we know that it is no longer there."

Sol, like any star, is composed of hot gases, Wayne told himself, wisely silent about it. Gases which produce a fantastic amount of energy. Now, if Louhi had the perverted wisdom to snuff out the light and energy, at the same time leaving the mass intact...

"Jo." Wainomoinen nodded gravely, as if he had read Wayne's

thoughts. *"Suns are born and suns die. Perhaps it is that Louhi has reached forward into Ilmatar's loom and killed our Sun prematurely."*

Lemminkainen leaped to his feet, crashing his fist against the table. *"Perkele! If that is so, then we are lost! For no man can change the pattern which the Creatrix of the Universe has woven!"*

The wizard stroked his long beard carefully. *"I am not so sure. You are Ilmatar's beautiful Golden Apple. She would not easily see you destroyed, nor could she lightly be tricked by the Hag of the Rock."*

Wayne's mind floundered for other answers. *Could it be that Louhi had at her disposal forces and sciences unknown to the far-flung Terran Empire, as yet? Was it that he—Wayne Panu of the Destroyer Fleet—possessed some spark of scorned Ussi knowledge that could thwart the witch before Terra became a frozen lifeless ball? Was that why Wainomoinen of the Copper Boat had guided him here? Whatever, he told himself, he would move whichever part of heaven and Earth it was in his power to move, to save the Vanhat and the planet. He would risk any danger, give his life gladly. This he vowed, and he would tell the three heroes this, not in words, but in his every action from this moment on.*

"How—how long—?" he struggled out thickly.

"We don't know. This is the time of all-dark, but this year there will be no Spring thaw, no green buds to peep out of the black soil, no fish leaping in the mountain streams, Tapiola's birds will not sing. There will be no Midsummer's all-sun festival of singing and dancing. Ei. Only the storms and the ice creeping down from the top of the world and the bottom of the world until the two ice floes crash. By this time everything on our small green world will be dead. All of its waking dreams, its struggles out of the sea and into the forests, will have been for naught. The shaggy ones to the south of our Northland may burrow themselves in their caves deep as they

can, but Louhi's cold will find them and slay them. Soon, all too soon, this world and all of our sun's worlds will be only cold blue ice stones flinging themselves around a sun whose power to give life has been stripped away by star-demon's sorcery!"

Wayne roved his chilled mind back to his boyish vid-lessons of Terra. Yes! He saw it all again; he felt the clutching terror that those spurious pictures, dramatically contrived to tug an offworlder boy's heart. First the bubbling masses. Then the creatures moving within the depths of the warm oceans. Then the shambling, stalking lizards, Tyrannus Rex with his slavering razor-tooth jaws. Then the cold. The creeping cold. Just as Wainomoinen said. The great glaciers moving relentlessly down toward the equator. The monsters were shaggy mammoths now, and soon they, too, would vanish with the rest.

The Ages of Ice! Unexplained. Mysterious. A whimpering exodus into eternity...

Louhi! Louhi of Pohyola!

"But—"

"Yes, son?"

"It didn't happen!" he cried fiercely. "It didn't!"

"No? Tell this to the starving villagers. Go outside and cry out into the sky that the light is still there, that the dark is not upon us!"

Wayne flushed, winced. "Don't you see? Don't any of you understand? I'm here—from far in the future! Terra's future! Our world didn't die. It survived. It went on and on—greater and greater—until it splashed far out into the stars!"

The heroes exchanged glances. Wayne saw that they needed convincing and lots of it. He painted a lively picture of an Earth beyond their imagining; of the hundreds of Levels, of the Deep Fleet,

of the thousand star colonies wrested by force and All-Kill, of the technical supremacy that made Terra top-dog in all the galaxy, until the Mephiti—

It was the copper-beard, Ilmarinen, who silenced him with a wrathful bear-growl. "Enough! We will hear no more of this Hüsi's blasphemy. I for one do not believe a word of it."

"Nor I," agreed Lemminkainen. "Louhi could take lessons from such a world."

Wayne groaned and gave up. They refused to understand. They were stupid primitives, for all their giant's muscles and heroic posturings. He turned to find Wainomoinen's blue eyes studying him sharply.

"Ei. It is you who does not understand, son's son. Your mind has known so much of machinery that it is a machine itself, incapable of admitting what does not click into each proper slot." He silenced Wayne's bursting protest with an uplifted hand and a furrowed scowl. "I know that you are pained by what you are forced to do in your world. But has it occurred to you that this is because you are young? You will come around to the general mode of thought, presently. You will." He nodded and sighed.

"No!"

"Yes." There was sudden sadness in the kingly planes, replaced as quickly by a thoughtful frown. "Perhaps, after all, that is why Ukko sent you to help us!"

"How could such a frightful regimen of kill-training help?" Ilmarinen asked.

"Because that is what the Witch of Pohyola understands. Her roving in the loom of time, her dealings with strange creatures beyond space, have put her out of our reach."

Wayne nodded, gratified. "With Ilmarinen's help I can make the

Vanhat some terrible weapons which—”

“No,” Wainomoinen said. “Ussi artifacts are useless against such evil as Louhi’s. No. It isn’t with his destructive machines that young Waino will help us. It is rather—” He broke off brusquely, touching his forehead then his heart in an odd gesture.

Wayne read the gesture and felt a chill of self-contempt skitter along his spine. When Lemminkainen and Ilmarinen both turned cool stony looks on him he knew that they understood his part in the witch-battle, too. Not blasters. Not gaseous clouds of all-kill. No. Rather, the cynical cunning of the prowler through trackless space, the predator, the world-killer. Wayne had come among them to fight fire with fire, evil with evil. He must circumvent Louhi the Witch-Hag the way these three heroes could not, with the corruption in his mind...

Wayne fell into the village life, damped as it was under a sunless sky, as a hand slips into a well-worn glove. In spite of his alleged super-sophistication, he felt that he belonged. He welcomed the scant meals, the foraging, the burrowing through icy drifts to distribute provisions and do what could be done for the sick, the endless numbing cold—like a flagellant welcomes the knotted whip. Wainomoinen’s patient teachings of wizardry that might save him in a crisis, Lemminkainen’s trips with him into the nearby forest for food and fuel, Ilmarinen’s instructions in supernal smithery, all of this made him forget his gnawing belly and, for a time, the doom that had overtaken the planet.

“I still don’t understand,” he told his chief mentor, on one of their rounds to parcel out meager amounts of grain and smoked fish. “How can it happen?” he demanded. “It didn’t happen! The Earth did not die!”

“Did it not?” Wainomoinen countered wryly. “Is it that you

have seen the whole of Ilmatar's weaving? Is it that the pattern cannot be changed—or that there is only one pattern, after all? Not an infinite number, at the Creatrix's mood and whim?"

Wayne gaped. "Many patterns! Worlds of if!"

"Niin." Wainomoinen stopped to caress an emaciated child with eyes like saucers and a middle puffed by hunger. "And if it did not happen in our pattern here, did not someone with hero's blood prevent it? Things do not just 'happen' nor do they 'not happen,' son's son. The causes and effects, the near-misses, all of this is a subtle part of Ilmatar's weaving."

The stores in the Greathouse granery and in the smokehouse diminished along with hope itself. Occasionally the young men's numbing patience, ice-fishing on the lake's middle, where holes could be hacked out still, would be rewarded with a powan or a salmon; once a brace of Tapiola hunters came whooping triumphantly into the Greathouse to announce a bear kill. The hibernating animal had been discovered quite by happy accident, half-frozen already and, in any case, destined to sleep forever. But one winter-thinned bruin did not go far among two hundred. Tapio's forest was dying. The reindeer herds had long since been slaughtered because there was no hay left and the hanks of dried meat dwindled on the wooden pegs attached to each rafter.

The men became gaunt-eyed ghosts, halving their own rations so that the sick and the young would survive; ghosts, floundering the deep snows for trace of game. One day, checking his line of copper snares on a frowning ridge above the wide lake, Wayne interrupted a muffled figure kneeling down at one of his all but invisible circles. The figure was crying out in moaning ecstasy, while loosening the noose from the neck of a skinny white rabbit.

"Hey!" Wayne yelled.

The furred figure jerked, startled. Then, cramming the beast in its parka, it rose up with a leap and ran. Wayne yelled out and galloped after. He was furious. Share and share alike was the law; every shred of food was to be brought first to Wainomoinen at the Greathouse. Even the grubs children sought like bear cubs in rotted logs.

He caught up where the valley's floor met the rise, where a thinness of drift crust broke the flying figure's pace. Wayne hurtled himself, belly-flop, down the iced drop, at a tangent that carried him onto the dark flounderer. They clashed in a crust-smashing roll. With an animal's grunt, Wayne brought the halt with him on top. The lack of fight when he spreadeagled the trapline thief surprised him a little, but not much. There wasn't much fight left in any of the villagers by this time. As a top manship pilot, Wayne had always eaten well and his farmboy stamina was still there in spite of the hunger-pains.

"Hey!" Something odd about the figure when it sobbed and made a feeble try at loosing the grip on its wrists. About the sound of that sob and the resentment of the torso-to-torso propinquity. Wayne let go a wrist and flipped back the parka hood.

Eternal dark had about given him cat's eyes by now, and what he saw made him swear a choice oath. A pale triangle of scared face set with enormous gray eyes, surrounded by a sunburst of brown hair tinged with auburn fire.

"Perkele! A vixen!"

"Let me go, coward!" When he didn't, she spit full in his face.

Wayne slapped her down, frowning. "You aren't from the village. I've cased all the girls, much good it had done me. You're the metsa creature! The one they call Varjo the Witch!"

"Just because we live in the forest," she said bitterly.

"We?"

"My grandmother's blind." This explained something.

"So?"

She writhed again, fiercely.

"Get off me, you—you No-Beard!"

Wayne grinned and kissed her red lips. "Not just yet. I kind of like it here. It's been a hell of a long time."

When he shifted his long legs between hers, the girl burst into a passion of sobs. Startled, Wayne lifted slightly.

Slightly was enough. Varjo arched forward with her full lithe strength; her teeth sank into his bare wrist so hard they almost met. Wayne gave a bleating yell of surprised agony. He jerked to his knees, blinking at the dark smear of his blood on the girl's mouth before she dragged herself free. He stared down at the spurting blood guttering the dark snow. He couldn't afford to lose much, damn it! What with the scarcity of red meat. Damn her! He vised his right grip above the wounded wrist for a stauncher, lifting shakily up on his feet.

"Hüsi vampire!" He snarled after her, as the village night-robber they called Shadow melted into the pines.

It would be a smart move to get back to the village, have the bite treated. Human bites were well-known to be as virulent as any dog's, and who said Varjo was human, anyway? Wainomoinen or fat Elmi would know the herbs to use for coagulating and preventing infection. But hell. He was mad. Too damn made to do what was sensible. He'd follow the vixen's trail before Itsu, the wind-demon, covered it up forever.

Moving into the black lumped shadows of Tapiola, its vegetation iced into immobile phantoms, he used his pukko to nub off branches

of scrub; his face-scarf and these twigs served to fashion of tourniquet of sorts. It was too dark to actually see Varjo's snowprints among the tall hoary ghost trees, but a stubborn fury driving him, and a release of esper-power, kept him moving. He switched aside low branches, endured their indignant backlash; he nosed the drifts like a wolf on a spoor; all the while he cursed Varjo with every variation of space-oath he could remember, inventing a few of his own.

Now there were occasional whiffs of wind-flung wood-smoke to tantalize him deeper into the forest where, the villagers and even Wainomoinen had warned him, one did not venture. He began to notice now how the terrain dropped stealthily, how the tall evergreens turned into gaunt skeletal bracken, then how the snow itself thinned and finally disappeared altogether.

When he reached the Hollow itself, he stopped, his fast-paced pant gurgling off into a gasp of unbelief. He stared. The Hollow below him was a snowless, treeless, verdureless bowl—a deep cup gouged out of the Earth, as if an island had at one time lifted off here and taken unholy wings. From the lip on which he stood, for all the wide circular circumference of Loviatar's Hollow, was nothing but pall black ash, the abominable lees of a patch of the planet that had died. This nether place of Pohyola, the inimical flown Time Island, did not even possess the wicked vitality of the befogged witch-farm. In destroying Loviatar, the hideous blind plague-bringer, Wainomoinen had killed her home base, too. Killed it beyond recovery.

Yet—look!

Here and there, thrusting through the soot-black, were unnatural heads, inverted cone-shape heads of leprous fungi. The toadstools were taller toward the heart of the Hollow, their tilted heads purpler, and here they glowed with an eerie transfulgence like devil's foxfire.

And here was Loviatar's hut. It squatted like some gray animal that lurks in seeming humble innocuity, yet broods, waiting until its victim is totally off guard before pouncing...

The smoke rising from the hut's chimney went straight up. Straight as a gray thread. There was no wind. Not a whisper of sound. Not one animal nor one bird sought this snowless sanctuary.

Wayne pinched his eyes downward, hesitating. This, then, was what the villagers still feared. Loviatar's Hollow. They feared the residue of the plague-bringer; the very air she had breathed was polluted by her evil. No. The evil Louhi had planted here wasn't dead. Not quite. Some drainage of human soul was feeding it, nursing it back to full strength. The lambent fungus was the sign.

And Loviatar's hut was tenanted again.

The numbness in his upheld hand, the throbbing in his arm, and a kind of stubborn compulsion, pulled him in a stumbling rush, down to the hut.

"Varjo! Let me in, witch!"

When, finally, the door cracked open, Wayne rammed a boot in so that she could not close it again. A heavy jolt of shoulder and he was in.

One fast look took in the lot. One miserable room, immaculate, like the village huts, and with the usual open hearth fire, cooking pot athwart; a mean pine table set with cracked earthen dishes and a thick tallow candle to soot up the low ceiling and cast shadows along the stark bare walls to the bunk bed in one corner and a pine-needle pallet in another.

He turned to Varjo.

Without the furs she was sapling slim, child-young in one simple garment like a limp bleached rag. Her feet were bare. Her triangular face, with those enormous deep gray eyes, showed defiant fear.

Desperation, too. The way her little calloused hands curled into fists as she faced him suggested a wild forest thing who had been fed on curses and crusts all of its days.

Wayne gave a gesture indicating peace, so that she would relax and not breathe so hard. He smiled wryly. If Varjo was a witch, then the witch business wasn't what it used to be.

"I'm not going to kill you, you little thief," he told her. He held up his left arm. "Look what you did!"

"Nün! Serves you well, No-Beard!" she flared.

From a slip of a girl "No-Beard" was an insult. It impugned his manhood. The Vanhat, like the ancient Chinese, deferred to age, not hothead youth. Years brought wisdom and experience and large reindeer herds; "no-beards" were unsure scatterwits. Wayne had attempted to fall in with the beard fetish but it itched him and bothered him, so, in spite of the howls of the elder heroes, each morning he scraped his face clean with his pukko.

He countered her implication with a wide grin. "You know better, witch. One moment more in that snowbank and—"

Her scarlet face stopped him. "Ai!" she clucked, lifting his limp tourniqueted arm. "How deep!"

"Had I known you were that hungry I'd have given you the measly rabbit." His glance roved to the hearth, where hung the emaciated white life-fragment, dripping its last blood into the cooking pot.

"Sit," Varjo said.

She whisked about the pitiful mishmash of belongings, selecting an undergarment from a box of neatly folded rags for a bandage and a sung. First an herb poultice that stung like fire and set Wayne to coughing with its gaseous pungency. The wand-lithe warmth of her nearness made his heart hammer. Varjo, in spite of her firm

breasts and womanly thighs, couldn't possibly be more than sixteen, yet her teaching was of the forest; she had seen the animals mate and give birth. She was a child of nature, her life one of self-denial and dedication to her ancient grandmother; her wiliness was a fox's; cunning and craft were concomitants of life itself.

Her lank chestnut hair showed auburn glints in the firelight and fell gracefully about her bare neck and throbbing throat. The three-cornered pixie's face with the dimpled chin and those incredibly large liquid gray eyes—like a field mouse—began to get to Wayne. Here was a girl who had had nothing, or next to it, all of her life. Who expected nothing. Blows, perhaps, Or a fire of faggots. Who nibbled at the grainhouse stores like a mouse, stealing only what she and her grandmother needed to survive, then fleeing into the night like a shadow.

Wayne watched her intent face as she dressed his arm, the deft movements of her strong hands; he saw no witch. Others might. Not he. It was impossible that this mouse-eyed creature of the woods could be evil. She had defended herself from chastisement or-and rape the best way she could. He couldn't very well blame her for that!

A weird moan from the pine bunk startled him out of his reverie.

Varjo moved across the room anxiously. She bent down and stroked the amorphous lump under the dark homespun blanket. She crooned to it softly. Then, unmindful of Wayne now, she took a bowl from the table and filled it with broth from the steaming fire pot. She knelt by the bed with it.

"Your grandmother?" he asked.

She nodded, eyes shining with tears. "I thought she might already be..." She let the fearful word wisp away.

Wayne moved his chair closer, and watched Varjo spoon the thin gruel into a toothless inbent gap of mouth like a dark funnel.

Rheumy eyes stared blankly up from a face so wrinkled and black that it looked like a monkey's face. Wayne repressed a shudder. This woman, besides being blind, could never have been even tolerable. She belonged deep in a forest. He thought about blind Loviatar...

While she fed the old crone Varjo crooned to her as a mother sings nonsense to a baby, now and then pausing to stroke her limp mottled hands.

"Since she can't see, or move any more, she likes me to talk and sing to her. I make up words."

Good thing some snooping beldam from the village had not caught her performances, Wayne thought. The gibberish smacked of heathen incantation. "Tell me about you two," he said.

Varjo poised spoon and sighed. "There isn't much to tell. We came from Ulappala ten or eleven summers ago—"

"That's where Loviatar came from," Wayne mused. "What's it like up there?"

"Wild," Varjo said. "Wild and beautiful. It is north and east of Imari, near to the land of the Norseman. Ulappala is on a fjord, with rugged cliffs on either side and the wind blows always and the sea smashes on the gray rocks. The ground yields a scant harvest and grazing for the herds is scant, too. Ai, Ulappala is a grim cold land but my first small memories of it are warm ones." She ended on a wistful note.

"What about Loviatar?"

Varjo avoided his eyes. "I was very young. But I lived in the middle of the horror. I saw my mother and father die of the pestilence she brought. Mummu had the fever, too. It marked her. It made her ugly, and blinded her. That was one of Loviatar's pleasures: to make ugly, like herself, then die.

"But Mummu didn't. She recovered; she fled with me down to the

Lakes. I was her eyes. I was stupid and childish, but I learned fast because I had to. Every village we tried chased us away or tried to stone us. It was the fear. Loviatar had traveled from village to village, too, begging. Their fear of another brought them to the point of insanity. Especially when they saw Mummu's pocked face and staring eyes. One place they cast us in the lake to drown, but somehow we didn't. That frightened the villagers into a panic. As you know"—her voice dropped to a naïve whisper—"water will not accept a true witch."

Wayne swore. He rebelled fiercely at all this talk of curses and supernatural powers, this in spite of the thousand-times-weirder quirks that alien evolution took in the deeps of space, in spite of Wainomoinen's grim lessons about Louhi and her brood. What he was seeing in graphic montages was a four year old girl leading her blind Mummu across the chill rocky tundras, through cattail fens and dark forests, seeking sanctuary. Being kicked out bodily, threatened with the fire, living lives of unrelieved terror. It would turn anybody into a creature of virulent hate for his kind.

"Didn't you try Wainomoinen's village? Imari?" Surely the sorcerer himself, full of Otavan wisdom...

Varjo nodded slowly. "Wainomoinen was gone. It was the time when he had journeyed in secret to seek out Loviatar and destroy her. She knew he had the power and she kept moving from fen to marsh, from cave to thicket. When he returned, it was barely in time to save Mummu and me from the flames. The faggots were already lighted, but Ukko sent a summer hail like great rocks of ice. Wainomoinen said it was a sign..."

"Still they wouldn't take you in?"

"No. Wainomoinen told us to stay until Lemminkainen could bring us back to Ulapalla. But Mummu was afraid and I, moreso. In the night we fled. Lost in this forest, we found the hut. Mummu was sick from the fire-terror. This was shelter, at least, and nobody

would come near us. So this hut has kept us alive all these years, and the forest has fed us and clothed us."

With your little night raids into the village for extras, Wayne added silently. He said, in a land of growl, "It was your grandmother they feared. If you had gone in alone, first, then gradually—"

"Leave Mummu!" Her mouse eyes leaped. "How could I? She saved my life! They would wonder at seeing a child—"

"Sure, sure. They'd ask questions and you'd have to answer. Vanhat children are respectful." He cracked a fist against the wall angrily and began to prowls the room, hearth to door and back. "These tilings are hard for me to swallow. Stonings! Drownings! What kind of people are you?"

"Is it that where you come from they are all so wise and—"

"Hell no!" He grimaced.

When Varjo brought the spoon close to the lipless gap once more; the gap clamped shut, resisting her feeding. Varjo let the bald monkey's head fall gently onto the pine-needle pillow. It seemed to Wayne that the twisted jaws had set forever, while the eyes took on a new film of emptiness.

Varjo saw it, too. She bent down to kiss the shrunken face, sobbed one bird-cry of heartbreak, then straightened to face him with those lustrous huge eyes of hers.

"Perhaps you, too, will know the depth of true fear, Outlander. When you hear the Mistress of Pohyola cackling on the rocky headland and feel her talons ripping out your soul."

Mummu died so quickly, so silently, it was as if somehow she had only been waiting for Varjo to find one friend among a world of enemies; now she could let go. Varjo wept without sound when they buried her; not in the Hollow itself, but at the rim, where the earth was flint-hard digging but honest dirt.

Varjo picked up her small bundle of clothes and, when she hesitated at following him into the dark forest, Wayne put his good arm around her, tight and insistent. The villagers would accept Varjo now. Damned if they wouldn't! They had feared her Mummu because she was blind and ugly, like Loviatar herself. But all that was passed now, and who could fear this fragile mouse-eyed woods waif?

The Imari dogs met them on the snowtrail baying and yelping. Wan lamplight flickered from the oiled skin windows of the huts. The dogs sniffed Varjo and found her toista; when a couple of them tried furtive nips they got a taste of Wayne's hard boot instead.

"Hüsi lapset!" he stormed at them. "You're next in the stewpot, don't worry!"

Varjo's ask-nothing defenselessness had won him completely.

Wainomoinen's worried scowl for Wayne's safety vanished when he saw who was with him. His face became a stone.

"Perkele!" Lemminkainen dropped his snowshoes out of astonishment and Ilmarinen's mouth gaped within that bronze bush.

"What is this you have caught in your snares?" the wizard greeted them, with an air of lightness that rang false.

"Perhaps Waino would allow me to relieve him of such a burden," Lemminkainen grinned and bowed low.

"Off to your task!" Wainomoinen told them. "You and Umar

have a long day's trek, and many more, ahead of you. There is no time for wenching, nor energy to spare."

Reluctantly, glancing back again and again, Lemminkainen followed Ilmarinen's lead into the dark. They were, Wayne knew, to cover the halfmoon fringe of villages sprawled along the northern edge of the great Lake, to help the other communes where and when they could. For, in spite of the constant wailing of the children for bread and the imminent threat of cannibalism when sanity would begin to blur, Imari itself fared better than most of the communal farm and fishing communities. Thanks to Ukko and to Wainomoinen's sagacity.

The wizard studied Varjo casually but keenly while the two were fed.

"So this is the Shadow that robs our traps and nibbles at our barley bags."

Varjo seemed to shrink every time those blade-like eyes sought hers. Wayne patted her arm and gestured her to make the most of their allotted rations.

"How are you so sure it was she every time?" Wayne asked "Might some enterprising villager not take advantage of these tales of the 'Shadow'?"

"That's Ussi talk!" Wainomoinen bellowed severely. "We Vanhat are not like that and well you know it."

"Forgive me, Father. I spoke out of pique." He glanced at Varjo's humbled head, and frowned. "Why must we all pick on the child? Call her 'witch'? Despise her?"

Wainomoinen sighed deep. "We do not expect you to understand these things. You have not seen."

Wayne shrugged and pushed away his plate. "I don't want to see people cast into water or burned. If the water or the fire accepts

them, they're innocent. They are not witches. Great!"

The wizard smiled for the first time. "Tell me, Varjo," he asked gently. "You do not take salt?"

"When she has something to sprinkle it on she does," Wayne snorted.

"Kulla." Wainomoinen remained patient. "Now perhaps you will tell me..."

"Gladly," Wayne said.

He went into a rapid-fire recital of how he followed Varjo to the Hollow, of the story she had told him, of her fanatical devotion to her Mummu, leaving nothing out. Elaborating on the suffering and deprivation, as Varjo had not, conscious of the fact that he was coloring the pathos, doing it deliberately, anxious to win Wainomoinen over. Wayne was all too aware of how deep-sunk were the fearful superstitions of the Vanhat, and Wainomoinen, by his very position as Elder Wizard among them, was no exception.

"Was I expected to leave her there to starve, alone?" he demanded.

The face of brown crags and noble planes seemed to pale with a prodigious weariness. "I will try to put wisdom into your head, young Waino, son's son. You think us ignorant primitives, next to savages, because we cast our seines in Ahto's waters for fish and beg from Tapio and his Mielikld the hunter's boon; because we dig our hands into the rich soil of the world we have grown to love as if it were Otava itself—for these things and others of our simple lives, you term us ignorant and what you call superstitious."

When Wayne opened his mouth to protest, the Wizard interrupted. "No! I see it in your thoughts as in a clean mountain pool. Remember what I told you of Otava, of the Valmis. Our less advanced branch of the Otavat chose to remain simple—we chose

to ignore the potential for creating machines and cruel mindless cities. Simplicity is our blessing and we cherish it. The clean fields of stars are the same as the round drops of water rushing down Kaatrakoski's cliff-side. All is all, beginning and ending with the smallest flecks of Creation. Jumala and Ukko are infinitely small as they are infinitely large. It is the same thing. All is part of Ilmatar's weaving."

"You told me about Otava and the Valmis," Wayne said, a little abrupt in his anxiety for Varjo. "What has all this to do with the girl?"

"It has to do with Louhi. Louhi is a perversion in the tapestry, an evil thread. All that lives with Louhi and surrenders to her will, through weakness or ignorance or whatever, partakes of that evil."

"They tried to burn Varjo and Mummu, right here in Imari!" Wayne's voice blazed with indignation.

"Had you seen the seven horrors, your sword of wrath would be two-edged. Many children died in agony. Many Mummus. Every household felt the dark hand of death." His fierce eyes took on a supernal glaze. Wayne caught half of his inward mutter, more by esp than by ear, before the wizard remembered he was there and cut it off. "I should have done it long ago. I should have—"

"Should have what?"

"Never mind." Wainomoinen rose and clapped his hands together sharply to bring old Elmi bustling in out of the kitchen. "Elmi, find a place for this—this child to sleep."

"Jo. The Koski hut is empty since—"

"No. Not in the village. Here. The small lean-to near the stores-room is about empty, since there are no fur pelts these black days. Yes. Fix a cot for her. See that she has what she needs."

"Yes, master." Elmi's fixed stare when the girl slipped out of the

huge chair was not friendly. She would do as she was told but she would not like it. Herding the mouse-girl toward the kitchen hall, tight-mouthed and bristling, she whipped her round body about on its axis at the Wizard's sharp, "And Elmi—"

"Jo, master."

"Tell no one. Not just yet. Understand?"

"Jo, master."

"The lean-to door has a lock on it, has it not?"

"Jo. And a stout one."

Wainomoinen nodded; the flicker in his blue eyes meant nothing and much. Elmi bobbed her head vigorously and bundled out, careful not to touch her new charge.

Wayne found that his cheeks were burning. This byplay disturbed him. The people of the village were not to know of Varjo's presence among them. The prejudice and the fear was not dead, not yet. Louhi's newest and most shattering outrage, taken with the driving cold and gnawing hunger, had made the Vanhat vulnerable to violent mob action. Since they could not reach Louhi herself, someone closer to hand might do, to release crazing emotions.

"What did you mean?" he asked Wainomoinen as sharply as he dared. "You ought have done something long ago? What ought you have done?"

"Nothing, Waino."

"Tell me." Wayne got up and faced the wizard full.

"All right, then. I ought to have burned Loviatar's hut to the ground. I ought to have furrowed the Hollow ten spans deep and then sowed the Hüsi's cup waist-high with sea salt and powdered grains of silver."

The days dragged by. The dark deepened. The killing ice moved down from the boreals. The planet began to die. Even the shaggy mammoths took their place under the moving death, in blue glassy showcases as if on display. Tapio's children died. The hairy Norsemen and the builders of the Great Circle of Stones died. Only the Vanhat, by some perverse Otavan magic deep within their cellular structure, some Ukko's fire, kept stubbornly alive. They had special words for it. Vakisten. Vdkisten ja sisu. In spite of the unreasonableness of it. To spite Louhi. To demonstrate a depth of stamina under impossible odds. They lived when there was no sense to it. No sense at all. They should be dead with the rest, but they rejected the inevitable. They just would not die; they would not give Louhi the satisfaction.

Wayne cursed them for not giving up and wept in secret. Lemminkainen and Ilmarinen did not return. Wainomoinen sought the Silences daily, entreating Ukko for a sign, for a smokelike wisp of hope in a black storm of desolation.

Doom took hold of the planet and squeezed.

When the last of the barley and rye were gone and the people were living on pine bark and pithy roots, Wayne prowled the triple circle from hut to hut twice in each sunless sun's span; he didn't need Wainomoinen to tell him what he was to check for. Now that the dogs had been eaten, the storehouse was empty, there was only one source of food left. Themselves. They must eat one another, so that some would survive. The idea was not even repulsive any more, rather it was simple logic. Yet this must not be, Wainomoinen decreed. It must not happen.

One day, on his weakening rounds, Wayne heard a sharp bleating wail. A child's scream in pain. It tore across the dark path between the curve of huts. A child! Yes, that would be first. One has given it birth and nursed it, so that it does not quite seem—"No!"

He wheeled about, zigzagged, sniffed the low wind, found the hut.

His boot, with the full strength of thigh and buttock behind it, ripped off the inner wood trip-lock. Banked fireglow gave him only tenebrous crimson light, but after the pitch black it was enough. Something grayish white moved in the shadows of the room's single bunk. Wayne reached it in three strides. He stared down and it was few seconds before he could choke back his horror and move. It wasn't the baby. The baby was there, puddling its tiny hands in the blood that gushed from the young Karkenen widow's torn throat. The woman was trying to quiet the baby's screams, trying to caress it, trying to gurgle out soothing sounds from her dying throat. Her eyes were wild with a primal fear.

A furtive sound from the foot of the bed swung him sharply. A thing, a gray-brown thing, was gliding like oiled silk from bed to floor to table to window. When the creature turned, before it vanished through the ragged hole in the stretched deerhide window, Wayne saw its eyes. They were large and liquid, and they blazed deep red in the fireglow.

He picked up the blood-smeared baby crawling on the dead woman, hiding its face against him.

"Kettu!" he muttered. An aboriginal's panic in the face of the dark unknown crawled along his spine.

Kettu. The fox. The fox from hell.

"Kettu."

Wainomoinen stared into nothing with angry eyes, while Wayne handed the blanketed bundle over to Elmi, who said "Voi, voi!" and snatched it away from Wayne with an accusing glance, clucking away at a trot. Somehow Wayne got the idea that he was to blame. He turned, frowning his questions at Wainomoinen.

"Yes. Kettu is the slyest of Tapio's creatures."

"Somehow this one managed to survive, came into the village out of a desperate urge to find food and—"

Wainomoinen muttered unknowns in his beard, closing his eyes and shaking his head slowly. Wayne stopped short, waited.

"Ei, ei. I was fearful, yet I hoped..."

"What are you talking about?" Wayne blared.

Wainomoinen looked at him critically hard, then his deep eyes gentled. "You don't know, do you?"

Wayne shrugged, scowling. This was no time for the wizard's esoteric riddles!

"Elmi has many duties, too many to care for Widow Karkenen's baby besides. And her daughter is, as you have seen, not bright."

"So?"

"Would you go and fetch Varjo for me? Perhaps Varjo would take to herself the chore of minding and nursing this motherless infant." His thick dark brows quirked oddly. "Varjo has kept to her room, out of sight, but we must all do our share if we wish to share what food there is left. Go."

Wayne went, with a sour taste boiling in his craw.

He returned alone, white to the lips; he tried to say something, but his tongue was glued to the top of his mouth.

Wainomoinen said it for him. It was as if the wizard had been there and seen.

"She is deep in sleep," he said. "Not sated, perhaps, yet not hungry. Blood is life. Had you not interrupted her feast, there would have been less blood to stain the baby's clothes and yours." He went on flatly. "You could not waken her to ask why Varjo's mouth was rusty with dried blood. Lempo's evil mists are still on her."

Varjo's eyes leaped when she woke to find herself bound tight to the low bed with raw deerhide thongs. She whimpered when Wainomoinen bent and wiped the telltale blotches of oxidized iron-red from her face and her throat, where the blood had dripped. Her fawn's terror sought Wayne's eyes. All Wayne could see was that pale triangle of face and small dimpled chin changing—metamorphosing—the middle of it thrusting out until it became a sharp furred snout, the mouth widening, the rabbit's teeth now fangs, the large liquid eyes glowing with crimson flecks like the fungoid phosphorescence in the Hollow...

"What is it?" Varjo begged.

Wayne moved a hand but his jaw was locked tight. A rush of self-guilt was choking him.

"What did I do?" Varjo turned to Wainomoinen.

Wainomoinen told her, simply and bluntly. Then, when she had sobbed for awhile, he said, "It wasn't your fault, child. It was the Hollow. The residue of Louhi's evil in the Hollow."

"I—I don't understand." Mouse-timid, again.

"After Loviatar died the Hollow seemed to die, too. That was why I didn't do anything about it except to bid our people shun it as they would Hüsi himself. Yet, it wasn't dead. Not quite. It needed strength. It drew this from your soul—yours and Mummu's. Living in that contagion place, breathing the air of this small under-Pohyola, you fed it and it replaced what it drained out of you with its own contagion."

Varjo's white face twisted. "Then I am of Louhi and Loviatar! I am wicked and lost! Lost, lost, lost!"

Wainomoinen made a sharp invocative sound. "We can't be sure of that, yet. For Mummu it was too late. But, if you are truly one with Louhi after your years in the Hollow, she will call you. She

will point you a way to serve her or—”

“Go to her?” Wayne cracked out.

“Niin. We must wait and see. Wait and see.”

Wayne stared at him while novas burst in his brain. He had repelled the monstrous, rejected it, but it had spawned in spite of his disbelief, spawned and sprouted and borne evil fruit; now he must accept the incredible, the wondrous, the thunderbolts. His duty was plain. Unwittingly he had brought dead and horror into the village. He must fear with the rest of them. Fear and fight, only he must be more cunning even than Kettu, the fox. More cunning than Louhi herself!

“Will the bonds hold her if the evil takes hold again?” he asked in a dry whisper.

“No.”

Already Wainomoinen was pulling on his blue sorcerer’s robes and preparing for an ancient ceremony. Wayne stood by while the wizard sang the old songs against elemental evil, conjuring what had hold of this girl to flee back into the black places in the stars. Varjo screamed a panther’s scream when Wainomoinen put the Mark on her forehead and her breast. Then she sank back with a mouse-squeak against the pine-needle pallet, spent and weak and death-pale from the spell Wainomoinen cast on her.

Wainomoinen left. Wayne lingered, stared down at the pale fragile dryad with the big gray eyes. The hate in him drained away. Varjo had been so vulnerable to the dark stuff of evil lurking in the Hollow. A tormented waif. How could she know what was happening to her? And if she knew, where else could she go? Nobody wanted her.

Well, he thought, she was safe now. Safe in a web of magic. Safe from Louhi and from herself. Lying there with her eyes closed, her

cheeks brushed with color from her unnatural feast, that little pulse leaping in her throat like a captive bird...

When he willed it her eyes fluttered open.

"Varjo," he said gently.

"Jo, rakkas."

"You know that I love you."

"Yes. I would love you, too, if I dared."

Wayne took hold of her bound wrists. "I can't let this happen to you. They'll have to kill you. I can't let that happen. I can't!"

She sighed a tremulous sob. "What can you do? Wainomoinen pretended I might be saved but he doesn't really believe it. You saw that?"

Wayne nodded fiercely. He sank to his knees. His lips brushed her roughly. He let his head fall on her bosom, passionately. He groaned resentment and rebellion, even against the wizard.

"What must I do? What must I do to free you, Varjo?" he begged.

Something stirred deep within her mouse-eyes. "Only the wizard's silver pukko with the rainbow handle can release me from the Power." When he jerked up, blinking, he saw that her eyes were now soft and pure as two forest pools, color-muted by the surrounding verdure. There was no hint of request about her statement, much less demand.

Wayne kissed her and stared, a long time.

VIII



The hollow glowed below them with an unholy effulgence. Varjo

moved down toward the hut. Wayne stood immobile for a moment that was like a breathless eternity. He thought how his hands had trembled when he had moved into Wainomoinen's sleep chamber, stealthily, like a burglar, and with a burglar's intent. Seeing the long bearded figure lying there under his blue coverlet, almost he had cried out and ran. He must not do this thing! It was a sacrilege against Ukko himself. And yet...

The trembling stopped, the sweating; his breath stopped, too. Something deep inside his cells pushed him to the edge of the bed, something forced his hand to grope under the pillows and find the pukko, the silver symbol of Wainomoinen's Power...

"Are you sure, rakkas?"

Seeing him hesitate, Varjo had come back up.

Wayne shrugged.

"You are giving up your people, your honor, for me!"

He turned to her roughly. "I give up nothing. The Vanhat are not my people; anyway, they are as good as dead. Why should I stay and die with them? As to honor, I have none. I am a killer by profession. On a scope that would make even Louhi sit up and take notice."

Varjo's eyes were dark pools. They brimmed with curiosity, but there was no sense of shock. She was like a child now, with no trace of equity or inequity, only naïve selfness.

*"You mean you did bad things?**

"Very bad."

She sighed and moved close. "Tell me about it," she urged.

"Later. Let's go."

Wayne's efforts to light the fire only set him to choking from the smoke billows, but when Varjo took up the chore the flames fairly

leaped, right out of her small fingertips. Lifting her up to kiss her red lips, Wayne felt a rush of blood pound through him at a sudden difference in the girl. A passion of fire leaping in her eyes. This was no mouse. Not this warm-lipped clinging creature, alive with breathless passion and physical wants. Maybe it was the blood, maybe the return to her true home. Or maybe it was the blush of first burgeoning passion, and with a kindred spirit of evil yet!

It was there in her eyes, in the curve of her blood-red mouth. Wayne was not of the village. He had defied them, even Wainomoinen—for her.

He kissed her savagely. Her eager mouth. Her eyes. The trapped bird in her throat. Behind them the fire leaped.

“We’ve got to hurry!”

“Hurry?” She giggled and removed her outer clothes in one deft twisting movement, dropping them to steam vague animal odors on the hearth. She wore only that same simple sack-like dress, or one like it; it served her for a nightgown as well and, clinging thinly to her budding curves, it suited her well. The form was a dryad’s but the flashing availableness in her eyes was a trollop’s.

When Wayne pulled off his parka, she laughed.

“I’m not sure what you mean.” She avoided his grab with a coquettish dance step. “Nobody comes here. Ever.”

“They will. Wainomoinen will find his pukko missing and he will come. I can hear him now, swearing a storm and bawling for Elmi to fetch men. Men and torches.”

He eyes clouded. “What will they do?” she pouted. “Burn the hut and raze the ground with salt, silver, and the Power.”

Varjo moved into the curve of his arms with a confident shrug. “Wainomoinen can’t hurt me. Louhi won’t let him!”

"What makes you so sure?"

Her eyes flashed. "I—I'm just sure."

"Don't be. It's true that Wainomoinen can't touch Louhi herself, especially since he can't get to her in Pohyola. But what are you to the Witch? You're only an accident, a happy accident. Why should she bother to protect you?" Wayne pulled her to him with a lustful grin. "Never mind. We'll die together and—happy, eh?" His hands moved to cup her firm young breasts.

She stiffened doubtfully, then gave a panting laugh. Her polymorphic being vacillated between childish shivers of terror of the leaping fire and the abandoned desires of a vixen witch. Years of breathing the invisible taint of Louhi's residual sorcery in this thrice-cursed Hollow had about done its work; the way she had torn open Wayne's arm was the first phase; turning kettu to kill the Karkenén widow and drink her blood was the second. Giving herself to lust would strengthen the evil bonds and would align Wayne deeper on the side of the demoniac...

They made wild passionate love. Wayne's odd prowlings and sniffings of the hut, as if he sought some focal point of evil, found him a vat of berry juice that had fermented. He dipped up a cupful and drank. He whistled and whooped. They were both swilling and embracing again when, suddenly, Wainomoinen's voice rang out in his mind like an admonishing tocsin.

They were here! Wainomoinen and the Imari men were poised with smoking flambeaux at the rim of the Hollow. The wizard's face was uplifted into the dark sky, invoking Ukko. His voice was thunderous with anger and resolution. Wayne's mind looked for a sign of pity for him, of fore-bearance; there was none. The wizard's degree of total exorcism and erasure of the wicked was immutable; it brooked no trace of leniency. Not for any wide-eyed waif. Not for Wayne. Twice before Wainomoinen had been swayed by compassion. No more. Wayne had been told, over and over again.

He had chosen Louhi. Well and good. So be it.

Wayne lifted Varjo to her feet. "W-What is it?"

His fingers were tangled in her long hair; it seemed to be on fire already. Her eyes were deep with drowsy content, but the way his muscles went stiff around her suddenly made her pout.

"Can't you hear their boots crunching on the dry sod? Listen! They're on both sides of us!"

Varjo gasped, then held her breath intently. "It's the fire in the hearth," she said.

"No. They're putting the torches to the logs in a dozen places. This hut's dry as tinder. It'll go up in one glorious burst." He made a wry face, then grinned, and curved his arm around her with a resigned shrug. "No matter. We will die together, my little Shadow." Varjo wriggled free.

"I—I don't want to die! I'm young! I've only started to live. You showed me what it is to be happy, to laugh and sing. Now I have to die!" She ended in a desolate wail. Wayne swore a bloody oath, striding the pine floor. Varjo watched him with eyes that beseeched. He was so tall, so strong. He had defended her twice before. He had even stolen Wainomoinen's sacred knife to cut her free from the bonds of Power. He would restrain the villagers from this act. He must!

Her fists pounded his chest. "Call to him!" she cried. "Make him stop!" Wayne shook his head. "No. I know Wainomoinen. If he had any qualms about destroying us he is over them. Once he has made his mind up..." He shrugged.

"Look!" Varjo screamed.

"Hüsi!" He stared at the puffs of smoke that were oozing in where the dried mud between the logs had cracked and dropped clods. From left and right the smoke rolled across the adzed planks.

In moments the smoke would become flame.

He watched Varjo's eyes widen in remembered fear, watched her desperation leap into panic.

"No," she moaned. "No."

Wayne went to her and took hold of her arms. He held her at arm's length and shook her until she stopped whimpering and her despairing look became sudden animal anger. Anger at everyone. At Wainomoinen and the Vanhat. At a world that had beaten her and threatened her all of her days. A flaming burst of all-hate that turned her eyes into crimson pits and curved her mouth into a fanged horror.

"Listen, Witch!" Wayne faced her full, with a kind of crafty smile. "There is a way—think!"

"Way?"

He shook her again, savagely. His fingers bit her flesh brutally. His trapped wolf's snarl matched her feral rage.

"You know where the Way is!" he rasped. "Think!"

"Think, Witch! Look!" He pointed at the way the lower logs were charring and little tongues of fire sputtered to embrace them. The lines of flame widened while they stared.

"I don't know any Way!" Varjo moaned.

"Yes, you do. I have seen it groping across your mind. Louhi has whispered to you in the night, telling you that when you have matured in evil you may come to her. You have grown up, Varjo. You have drunk blood. You have perverted me into a thief of sacred things. Now is the time. Now!"

One whole side of the hut was blazing. The hot breath of hell fanned them in compulsive waves. In a moment, when the flames reached the single window, tunneling-in oxygen would sweep in

Wainomoinen's vengeance in one great roar of ravening flame.

"Varjo!" Wayne shouted above the crackling. "Save us!"

The girl gave one last swirling look at the torrent of fire that surrounded them, then fell to her knees. For a chilling second or two Wayne thought her witch-self had reverted and that she was praying. Then he saw that she was scrabbling and clawing at a trapdoor at the room's center.

He bent down to help. Varjo was wailing and mumbling in crazy rocking phrases; every sentence ended in the screamed implore, "Aiti!" Varjo was indeed praying. To her stepmother, Louhi of Pohyola.

When Wayne lifted the trapdoor he disclosed a black gape cut into pure stone, and a dank rotten odor like the released ghosts of a million unspeakable sins. But there was no time to think about it. Varjo was screaming her gibberish and dropping onto a progression of steep steps spiraling down, down. Nor was there time to snatch a light from the torment of fire from which they fled.

Wayne thought he heard the roof collapse above them when the implosion struck.

PART THREE

VIPUNEN THE INFINITE

"Vipunen, in songs most famous, Opened then his mouth yet wider, And his jaws he wide extended, Gulping in the well-loved hero, With a shout the hero swallowed."

Kalevala: Runo XVII

IX

◀ ^ ▶

The descent of that stone corkscrew was like a forever thing, but eventually Wayne felt a breath of stirring wind on his face and a kind of lessening of dark. What form the light took, as they groped off the last step that wasn't there and down a half-round of corridor that echoed back their footsteps hollowly, was difficult to determine. Until, as the sulphurous green glow increased and Wayne saw stone, he decided that it came from the wall. The sidewalk and the arch above them were covered with a greenish-white slime, phosphorescent, so that Wayne allied it with the fungus of the Hollow. Over the years the spores had worked their way up, or down, or crabwise across Ilmatar's time-tapestry, to sprout up in the dead black ash.

"Where are we?" Varjo whispered, shuddering close to him and away from the slime.

"Pohyola."

"But—"

"I know. How can we go down and be up? Don't ask me. Louhi is full of time-tricks and space-tricks. You begged her to save us and she graciously permitted us the Way. What was needed was the catalyst, the tie—you're it."

"Oh."

Varjo was a little girl again, and scared stiff. She clung to him as they moved into a wider hall, now. The wind that soughed and skirled through unseen fissures in the rock carried with it wisps of fog and a rank odor as of an animal cage in an extraterrestrial zoo. Wayne gagged from it and tried to hurry them at a faster pace, toward the foul smell's source; yes, to it and beyond it.

Beyond it was not so easy.

Varjo screamed when she saw the snakes.

Wayne sucked air sharply and pulled up before the high black

gate around which the leprous worms were wound. No. It was all one great tangled length of lazily gliding horror that covered the iron barrier, from the crossbars at the base to the needle-sharp points thirty feet over their heads. When the worm detected them, it moved sluggishly. Its flat corpse-gray heads weaved toward them, lethargic still from an infinity of time at its guardian post, in excessive boredom. When the olfactories in the multiple heads were pleasantly surprised by a diversive intrusion after all this time with nothing to do but sleep, the Gate Worm opened all of its eyes. The sudden blaze of topaz light made them jump back.

"W-What is it?" Varjo gasped.

"I seem to remember something Lemminkainen told me. How once, when he was denied entrance to the Witch's Castle for some great feast or other, he sought a way in from below, through the dungeons."

"We're in the dungeons?"

"Yes. The Worm guards the under Way, as the sentinels with the great thunderhorns guard the Cliff. The purple fog that never leaves the time-island makes it impossible to land on it by air."

The Worm opened its jaws, hissing and slavering pleasurably. When one of the heads struck so close that they felt its warm fetid breath fan their faces, Varjo screamed, "Aiti! Help!"

"Louhi won't help us," Wayne said. "I have a feeling she is taking all this in and enjoying it." He drew Varjo back from the corrosive flecks of spuming ichor when the Worm made hypnotic sinuous movements with three heads, then lashed out again, one after another. "What can we do?" Varjo wailed.

Wayne whipped out Wainomoinen's pukko, thrust the girl behind him, and lunged at the nearest head. It dipped, but the surprise of an attack after all these centuries, and the magic in the silver blade, caught it unaware. Lopped clean, the head flopped on

the black stone, still writhing. But where that head had been a moment before, another grew in its place, thrusting out from the whipping neck like repulsive lightning.

"You can't!" Varjo moaned. "Not even with Wainomoinen's magic can Louhi be defeated, not on her evil island!"

"Who wants to defeat her?" Wayne shouted. "I came here to join up!"

"To be with me," Varjo said. "Of course. Meanwhile..."

The Worm had not retreated, not by a whit. The bravado of the intruder and his sharp pukko only served to excite its sluggish emotions and its anger. All of the heads were flailing and hissing now, and it seemed to Wayne that its muscular girth swelled and grew. The stench was overpowering.

Wayne sheathed the blade under his wide leather belt. Ignoring the hissing, the burning eyes, and the stink of it, he leaped from their cover behind a curve in the corridor to the middle.

"Worm!" he cried. "Hide your tongues or I will flay them with Ukko's fire! Creep back into the bowels of this time-rock, Vile, and hide thyself in the deepest crevices you can find or I will find you and destroy you with a mighty hail of steel from Ukko's house behind the sky!"

The Worm hissed louder than before; it coiled and uncoiled, rearranging the multiplicity of its convolutions for an all-out venom strike that would turn this puny braggart's body into a corroded spot on the stone floor.

Wayne's heart flopped inside him. Involuntarily he moved back a couple of steps when the heads came closer. From somewhere in his brain he seemed to hear Louhi cackling. "Worm!" he cried, "if you do not heed my singing, I will swell you up until you burst; I will seek out your mother and your foul ancestry! I know you well, Vile!"

Syojatar was your mother and a sea-fiend was your father! Syojatar spat you out in the water because you were evil to hold longer in her belly; Hüsi, for new mischief, saved you, toad's vomit! He sent Pahalainen to nurse you out of her black teats and, as is the way of great evil, Louhi drew you to her time rock as to a lodestone for all that is monstrous. You are nothing but Louhi's chattel, Vile! Make way for a hero, before I remove you from existence, misbegotten spawn of Syojatar!"

The Words of Origin, oldest of ancient magic, did what even Wainomoinen's magic knife could not. The fact that Wayne knew, from Lemminkainen, who the Worm was, took away its effectiveness as Underway Guardian, for the time, until Louhi could give it new power. The heads shrank. The tongues vanished. The Worm shriveled to the size of a garden lizard and crawled away into a small dank hole in the rock.

The Gates were open.

The masked warriors in crimson who showed Wayne and Varjo into Louhi's presence genuflected, then vanished. Varjo fell on her knees when she saw the Hag on her green throne, carved out of the horns of Vammatar's giant ox. Wayne faced the witch full, knowing how Louhi despised weakness. "Ho, Starman!"

"Ho, Witch!"

The Hag wore flames, scarlet and yellow flames; at least it seemed so the way the colors leaped in her robe when she waved her snake-stick at him and made abrupt convulsive movements with her humped spider's body. Her face was pinched-in and dark as sin itself, her bones brittle to petrification, her skin fine-combed into a parchment inscribed in runic evil. The lipless gash that served Louhi for mouth was a downslung twist displaying a parrot's black tongue when she spoke; but it was the deepset eyes that dragged one down into the black shines of Manala.

"On your face, Varjo, stepdaughter of Loviatar!" And when the girl had cowered and shivered to suit her, she gestured with her hissing want. "Now, come closer so that I see how ill-favored and puny you are."

Wayne helped Varjo on her feet and moved her reluctantly closer to the green throne. The girl's eyes fluttered faintly when she lifted her head to face the witch.

"Well?" Louhi spat. "Say something, ill-favored offspring of a tree-toad!"

Varjo mumbled, forcing back a sobbing shriek.

Louhi cackled loudly. "You saw that I am beautiful to behold, is that it? That you are pleased with my appearance?"

"Yes, Mistress of Pohyola," Varjo squeaked in jerks.

"That you would like to embrace me did you but dare?"

"Yes, Mistress." Wayne held her on her feet as if she were a rag doll.

"Nün. You begged to be allowed the happiness of visiting your lonely grandmother, is it not? And to bring your strapping big lover along for her approval. So?" The last word was a pistol crack.

Wayne said, "Yes, Mistress. Varjo has been kicked around all of her life. She wants no more of Earth. She wants only to stay here in Pohyola with you and serve you."

"Nün. And how can such a skinny ugly tree-toad serve the Mistress of All Evil, may I ask?" When Wayne opened his mouth in a mild protest, she added, "Never mind. I can make her beautiful. So beautiful that even my first-born will be jealous of her." She screamed for her vassals. "Take the wench away and bathe the stench of the accursed Vanhat off her. Feed her. Put some meat on those ill-matched bones."

Wayne grinned impudently. Louhi scowled black. "You laugh at me, Starman?"

"At your pretense of having no heart, Mistress." Louhi rumbled with amusement. "You think I have a heart?"

"What passes for heart these days. After all, you did save Varjo and me by showing her the Way."

The Hag stroked her snake-stick into hissing and crawling up her arm, fanging it affectionately. "So I did, Starman." Her eyes glittered and sparked when she took him in, from his black space-boots to his tousled bare head. Wayne was ready with pre-prepared meat for her mind-dig when those soul-raping eyes lingered on his. He hoped and held on, and when the barrier began to crumble he gnawed his lip for distraction, paced, and recited doggeral verses to lead her needling probe down garden paths.

"Mary, Mary, most contrary, How does your Island grow?

With spells and smells and dragon wells
And poison pots all in a row."

"What is this Ussi nonsense?" she shrilled irritably, and pushed her esp needles in further.

"Give me a pukko to hide in my bed,
Here comes Old Louhi to chop off my head"

"Enough!"

"I have more," Wayne said innocently. "How many miles to Pohyola and—"

"Silence! Think you, Starman, that I don't know what you are doing? Think you to trick me—Louhi of Pohyola!"

Wayne stopped pacing and laughed. "Nope. I could not hope to do that, Mistress. I merely wished to make a point."

"And?"

"That I have something in my head besides milk and sawdust. That you have need for such as me. Human beasts you can breed in plenty"—he gestured at the two slope-browed, neckless brutes guarding the entrance to her throne room—"however, such a one as I, with trained cunning and the ability to see into minds (save yours, of course) do not come often. I am a rare combination of useful attributes, Mistress."

"Niin." Her mouth sucked in hideously while she considered. "And just what did you want from me in return for your valuable services?"

Wayne grinned. "A square meal would not go amiss. It has been many weeks."

The witch eyed him sharply while he wolfed down the meal her servants hustled in at her handclap. "Niin" she observed sententiously. "There is nothing like starvation to bring out the potential for craft and cunning in a man."

Refined tortures aren't in it. Seeing the manner in which you stuff your shrunken stomach is like seeing the cold, gnawing death I have decreed for all the Vanhat. I am pleased."

Wayne grinned and nodded, chomping apace. When he regretfully pushed the trencher away, with a gratified belch, the Hag cackled. "Then it was hunger that drove you from Wainomoinen, my arch-enemy?"

"And love for Varjo." Wayne's eyes searched the arras behind which the girl had been taken. "May I see her?"

"Not so fast! So. There are hungers and hungers, and when one hunger is sated the other shows its lecherous face."

"I love her," Wayne said.

“Niin.” She gave her snake-stick a wicked swish. “You expect me to believe that Wainomoinen’s future son, a thousand times reborn, has abandoned his purpose—for that miserable forest trollop? You expect me to believe that? Had it been my first-born, trained in the arts of love, I might believe. As for Varjo—”

“Tastes differ,” Wayne said.

“So they do. Some of the star-demons who have scared my bed over the centuries would send the brave Vanhat heroes quaking under theirs. As you imply, it is just possible that your starman’s lecherous instincts have been refined to—no matter. In any case, Louhi does not accept any of this—including your endless bragging about ‘useful attributes’—on faith. Louhi has no faith.”

“Perhaps if I tell you about myself? Or show you—out of my mind?”

“Perhaps. You may try.”

“I am from the Terran Deep Fleet. I was born on a Colonial farm under a small blue sun called Proxima Centauri.”

“I know this star. A feeble thing, as suns go.”

“My name is Wayne Panu. My task was that of Destroyer for the Fleet. My brain was umbilicated to my starship, and together we would descend on primitive planets and destroy all of the life on them, so that our Fleet and then the colonists could take them over without later problems. Earlier, we found colonies raped and ruined by rebellious natives, even when pacts and agreements had been signed. The Fleet cannot be everywhere so—”

“Killing them off right at the beginning seemed the logical thing to do. I agree.”

“Without having made friends with them or, in many cases, even seeing what the natives were like—”

"Was that prudent? Wouldn't some of them make good slaves?"

"Our machines make better slaves. We tried the slave bit, as in the old days on Terra itself. It seldom worked out. Our colonists are all too willing to work hard to gain living space. Then there were strange diseases, strange inimical animals. Stripping off but low-grade vegetable life worked out much better."

"A neat efficient system, I must admit," Louhi grudged. "And I am their top Destroyer," Wayne bragged. "So you say." She fussed with her hissing stick as if resenting others borrowing her evil ways. "Now, if I may see some of this for myself, in detail." She mumbled her lipless mouth in expectant relish.

Wayne showed the crone, from out of his memory vaults. But with great care. There were innumerable all-kills to choose from for Louhi's delectation and, more important, to impress her with his usefulness. He chose the bloodiest, but he was very heedful not to allow any wisp of compassion or dissatisfaction with his Destroyer's duties to leak through.

Louhi was amused and impressed. Her eyes glittered with pleasure.

"I am inclined to give you a chance to prove your worth, Starman," she said. "Also I admired the way you handled the Worm of the Gate. It will take me some time to coax him out of his hole, thanks to you. No matter. You have plucked the brains of the three Vanhat heroes for all they are worth, no doubt. This alone may prove of some value to me. This information is available when I wish it, I presume?"

"Why not, Mistress of Evil?" Wayne grinned slyly. "I was trained to take advantage of every opportunity. I am used to being on top, with the winners. Wainomoinen's cause is a loser's. I'm with you, Louhi!"

She was plying her needles again, and deep.

"You would see your mother planet die without a qualm?"

"What is this Earth to me?" Wayne shrugged. "Anyway," he added with a faint ironic smile, "it will not die; not completely."

"How do you know?" Tartly.

"The facts are obvious, aren't they?"

Louhi growled curses deep in her spider's body. "Maybe I will relent, just a little. Maybe I will ask Vipunen to—" She broke off abruptly.

"Or is it that you want the heroes to live a little longer for your further—amusement?" Wayne said quickly.

The Hag showed her gums, then rocked with cackling laughter. Wayne joined her merriment and their ghoulish duet echoed and reechoed across the great throne room, so that the line of red-eyed corbies roasting on the rafters awoke and screamed in contrapuntal chorus.

"All this is most diverting," the Witch of Pohyola interrupted the cacophonous acappella, "and I like you well, Starman. By Ketoilinen and the purple serpents of Lempo! Yet, something rankles me, withal, deep in my ancient craw."

"What may that be, Mistress?"

"Varjo. You say you love Varjo."

"I say it and I do."

"You know, of course, that she has no soul at all by now. That it has been eaten out of her body little by little, from her years in the Hollow?"

"I know this."

"Ai. Had she not been what she is, she could never have found the Way, nor brought you with her." Her eyes were sharp gimlets. "You

desire this fen toad?"

"I have already taken her," Wayne admitted.

"Niin. Had you not done as you did you would not be here in Pohyola, stealing Wainomoinen's magic and—what happened at the hut." She scowled at him doubtfully.

"I keep telling you, Mistress, that I am trained for evil. I belong here. I ask nothing but to marry Varjo and stay here forever doing your bidding."

Wayne sensed her doubts full well. Devious as the Mistress of All Evil was, she found it impossible to trust anyone; that Wayne possessed cunning and intelligence and telepathic talents bothered her. That he skillfully avoided her mind-needling bothered her even more. She mumbled her gums together in deep thought, while the huge black candles on either side of her green throne sputtered and guttered and made grotesque shadows on the dark wall. Her snake-stick hissed in rhythmic accompaniment to her eldritch crooning.

"I have it, Starman!" she exploded suddenly. "We shall revert to the old methods."

"Such as?"

"You shall be put to the test. You wish my Loviatar's stepdaughter in marriage, and my good will. Very well. Prove it by performing tasks, impossible feats, in my behalf. Thus shall you earn my granddaughter and my trust."

Wayne sucked in a deep breath. Dealing with the Witch of Pohyola was like walking a tight rope from planet to planet with a blade poised over his head.

"Impossible feats?" he gulped.

"The impossible should not be difficult for such a great hero as

you claim to be," Louhi quivered with sardonic cackles. "Let us see. What shall be the first? Yes. I have it. On the bleak snows beyond Manala, high on a table of land where the wind never stops its howling, there is a creature known as Hüsi's Elk. A creature of enormous size and cleverness. The Master of Us All, Hüsi himself, sang up this monster in a playful moment, then, when he was tired of him, discarded him there at the top of the Earth where he could not ravage the entire planet. I have thought his horns would be tasteful just above the doors of my feasting-hall, to impress my demon friends when we have our fêtes. Bring them me."

Wayne swore silently, his thoughts leaping to weapons Lady carried within her; the manship was, he hoped, still safely buried in the Terran drifts.

Louhi caught his thought. "No, Starman. No Ussi's magic. You will be allowed only a bow and arrow, snow-shoes, and a spear. Bid whoever you wish to fashion them for you. And the time shall be an agone one; you shall have no darkness for added hazard." She cackled pleasurably. "Not that you will need other hazards to defeat you. Hüsi's Elk is enough."

X



The Northland wind danced and piped across the crisp-packed path dropping toward the Lake; overhead a pale yellow April's sun bore down, cold yet, but hopeful. Snow-rags tossed about. Wayne stood where Louhi's tune-magic had placed him, staring up at the sun until his eyes burned from it. What joy to see the Sun! What heart-bursting joy! To see it, to know that soon now the thick-iced Lake would begin to melt; the sagging white burdens the forest pines bore would begin to drip off into rushing rivulets. Then white-breasted swallows would build their nests in the thick green

branches; Tapio's small animals would heave their burrows; Osa, the lumbering black bear, would leave his winter haunt to fish for powan where the ice still laced the lapping water's edge and the birches thrust out pale green buds.

Wayne's eyes and his soul ached to see the way the sun lavished its prismatic colors on each roving snowbit Nün. He must move, cast off these poetic fancies and be about the task the Hag of Pohyola had mockingly set for him.

To kill Hüsi's Elk.

A name rang in his mind like a bell. Kauppi. He must find Kauppi, the Lapp. Kauppi, the weapon-maker. Young as he was, the Lapp who had forsaken the following of the herds for the crafts allied to the hunt, was renowned in the whole wide peninsula, even south to Carelia, for his talents with metal and hide.

His long legs carried him downtrail to a knoll of spruce forest and through it. Powder blue smoke wind-drifting over a stand of white birches drew him to the forge by the Lake; Kauppi was earnestly at work at his forge. Kauppi was a handsome wide-faced lad with a somewhat stubbed nose that inclined to be always peeling off. He wore his hair in long blond plaits, Nordic style. Some said he had Norse blood. His knotted brown arms were bare to the shoulder and the ermine tassels on his blue and red vest swung in lively fashion at each ringing stroke of his hammer.

Wayne's feet, crunching on the path to the hut where Kauppi lived with his aging mother, made him blink up.

He grinned wide as he set down the hammer and swiped a hand over his dripping forehead.

"Paiva, Waino!"

Wayne approached, but a thrill of wonder prickled his neck hairs. "You know me, young Lyylikki?"

"And why not?" Kauppi laughed a boy's laugh. "You are young Wainomoinen from over the mountain, Imari way. See! I have your silver-alloy javelin all ready for you." He squinted his smoke-blue eyes critically down the length of his handiwork, turning it slowly to eye-test its straightness. "Yes. It will serve you well."

Wayne took the spear and, to his own surprise, hefted it and mock-threw it with a hunter's knowledge of its proper use. This, after Lady and the flame-bombs!

"Yes. I am pleased."

Kauppi nodded, content. "And your snowshoes are gutted and dry-stretched. As to your crossbow—" His wide freckle-dotted face made a dubious grimace. "But enough! Let us not stand out here in the wind. Your journey has been long, eh?"

"Long, yes."

"Come into the hut. Aüti is away with a cousin who is in childbirth; I shall prepare the bark tea myself if you think you can stand it. Or beer, perhaps?"

Wayne found a seat while Kauppi bustled.

"Tea by all means. Kuppikumma goes down better at this hour."

Kauppi nodded and passed a plate of small cakes across the table. There was polite discussion about the spring planting, how the fish were biting under the Koski, the waterfall of white thunder at the far end of the Lake which never quite froze, and of the reindeer herds. Wayne admired the long spear and the snowshoes at length, sipping his tea and waiting for Kauppi to explain about the crossbow.

The prelude was when the freckled forehead between the wheaty braids puckered up in creases of self-disgust. From the row of bows set in notches behind neat rods fastened to the walls with copper wire, Kauppi sought out the newest. He handled it with a kind of

rapture in his eyes and in his fingers as well, and no wonder. Wayne accepted it with a low long whistle.

"What a beauty!"

"All is as you instructed me, Waino. I'm surprised myself that I remembered what the boy you sent told me. I know you are a singer, and wizard, too, they say, but—"

"A boy, you say?"

"Jo. A boy. With careful instructions about what you wanted for this hunting trip, whatever—"

"Tell me about the boy."

Kauppi shrugged. "An ugly choice, if I may say so, and surly to boot. Name of Kuhervo. He pounded on the door in the middle of the night, frightening Aäti into a fit. He would not come in, just stood there like a Hüsi's thing rattling off your instructions and saying I must drop everything for your needs. I must have everything ready by this day, he said, then vanished into the forest like a troll."

Wayne started to ask more, changed his mind. "No matter, as long as the work is done."

"But I am explaining, Waino, that it is not done! Instead of well-tempered yew or oak the bow is of iron laced with silver and cord of Saari's doehide, as you see, and—" He shrugged his wide shoulders in bewilderment. "Beautiful, jo. I take much pride in my workmanship and will create nothing slipshod. Yet, if I may say so, it is impractical. It will kill nothing!"

The crossbow shone in his hands. Wayne felt the well-crafted weapon sing and vibrate with starborn power when he bent it, notched the cord, and thumbed it. A treasure for a star-king. Yet, more was needed.

"It suits me well," he assured Kauppi. "All that is needed is the

song-magic for the finishing touch, and I must be the one to sing this into the crossbow if I am to wield it with any hope of success."

"Against what, friend?"

"Against Hüsi's Elk!"

Kauppi made one final effort to dissuade Wayne from his impossible venture into the North, then, seeing it was useless, strapped on the snowshoes for him, helped him into his heavy gear for the frozen trek, and himself fastened the shoulder harness on that held the weapons, the silver-shot javelin, the curved crossbow that gleamed with blue fire, and the sheaf of red-gold arrows to go with it.

The Lapp's years of following the reindeer herds provided Wayne with a crude fawnhide map of his initial week's trek before he would reach the table of highland of which Louhi had spoken; that which lived in the souls of the Vanhat as a half-legendary place of demoniac winds and evil monsters, a shunned nowhere.

Wayne slept as best he could, huddled against the looming scarp, the Top of the World. His belly ached from his steady diet of dried venison, hard cakes, and tea. Up this far north and at this season, there were not to be found even the tufts of summer grasses which the Lapps shared with their herds for vegetable nutrient. And his brain roiled at the prospect of facing the teratogenic animal of Hüsi when the twilight glimmer that served for night was ended. Still, he was exhausted, and finally he slept.

The climb was straight up and fraught with peril at every toehold. He dared not stop, once he got started. The wind plucked at his parka and his climber's pickax faltered more than once, so it must have been his throat-torn screams to Ukko that prevailed. His numbed hand groped upward like a thing apart from him and possessed, while he clung to the fragile axhold with the other.

Like a miracle, the lip of the table did curve inward when that last upreach came. He strained himself, shivering with a kind of insane desire to let go and fall, now that his exhausting feat was over. He slid, screaming. His blunted axblade caught a projection of rock under the blue snow crust, held. It was like Jumala's hand, grasping his, offering silent courage when the too-far point had been scaled.

He flung himself in a crashing spraddle across the icing of snow at the table's edge. He lay there, numb and helpless, for a long time, sucking in dribbles of oxygen from the thin spacial atmosphere. His attenuated muscle cells begged for sustenance as his lungs begged for oxygen; he fumbled a stony cake of rye flour and the dregs of the dried deer from his pack and chomped, without much interest in living, mechanically; then fiercely, when the blood began to burn in his veins and force itself through the numbed capillaries of his frozen members. He would not let Louhi defeat him! Damn her black soul! He had an impossible task to perform and he would do it, pushing aside death and despair at every step!

I will, he sobbed. I will!

His jelled tissues stung, reviving; he moved to a sit and then up on his feet, by spurts and limping muscle jerks.

Then he snuffled the wind like an animal on the scent. Yes. It was there: A kind of rank unholy spoor borne down on the driving wind. He pricked up his ears for sound of the Elk, above the mindless roaring of the gale that sucked up snow and made whirled grotesque sculptures of it on the wide plateau.

Nothing, first. Then—

A faint snuffling, a series of low snorting shrieks. The animal had detected that something new had been added.

There was an intruder up here at the World's Top, someone who might provide a moment's fun and games before the monster vented

his anger at such impudence.

Now a roaring bellow, a sustained stentorian resonance that shattered the sky. Trumpeting challenge and bane, it swept across the nightmarish flat like an Ukko gone mad. The terror it carried with it turned Wayne's knees to pudding and his heart to curdled milk. For seconds, no more.

"Ukko!" he shouted. "Stay by my side!"

He whirled, straining his eyes across the field of white grotesquerie for sight of the animal. Nothing. Now the sound stopped and the echoes of it battered him from all sides. There was a craftiness about the silence that followed. Even the wind lowered to a maniacal moaning.

To move toward it was the sheerest land of stupidity; his whole organism rebelled against such an act. Yet he forced his legs to move, to take up the hunt. Under a sky like polished slate he pushed wind in the direction of the strongest scent.

Then he saw it.

Hüsi's Elk was indeed a thing of enormous size. Its bulk was enough in itself to frighten a man into a gibbering primal jelly-thing. This must have been how the first caveman felt, encountering Tyrannus Rex for the first time. The intense compulsion to be dead, to burst his heart by sheer effort of will and thus relieve himself of such an excess of horror and basic mind-destroying fear.

And Hüsi's Elk was worse.

This black bulk, looming against the steel sky, was created by malignant magic and was indestructible.

Lizards and all manner of small creeping things clawed at Wayne's spine. For a split second his heart did stop beating. Then—as if to die and get it over with—he moved. Closer to the dark monstrous shape.

Hüsi's Elk did not move. The great raping antlers were like a small forest against the weak-eyed sun behind the beast, lining its incredible hugeness in sooty silhouette. It seemed to linger on the brink of the juggernaut's rush that would, in another moment, seize hold of Wayne like a toy and impale him on that forest of spikes, play with him a while, then toss him screaming off the lip of the escarpment.

Wayne crouched, forgetting fear. He gripped out the spear Kauppi had made for him, aimed it well and fast. It left his shoulder-thrust heave with a prayer to Ukko riding on it. And it struck home! It hit the animal in the whitish chest where its heart was if it had one. It hit deep.

Still Hüsi's Elk did not move.

Wayne began to be cold with gripping fear and wonder, still his hands moved to notch an arrow into the crossbow. He took careful aim. He scowled at the immobile bulk. It was then the roaring trumpet spoke again, louder than thunder, closer. And it came from behind him.

He cried out in fear while he spun around. Now he knew! He knew! Hüsi was filled with tricks, like his brightest pupil, Witch Louhi. The hulk into which he had lost his spear was made out of rotted logs and willow-branches and swamp roots. Its hide was of pine bark; its eyes were frozen globes of ice. And while he wasted his strength and his prayers on this mockery, Hüsi's Elk was circling him for the kill.

The unholy beast trumpeted again, pawing the snow.

Then it moved, like a wall.

Its eyes glowed with crimson hellfire; its foul breath troughed the snowcrust like a blast from some baleful Hüsi's furnace. Wayne screamed in primeval terror, but his reflexes, out of astute training, plummeted him out of the catapult-wall's path in a sidewise roll of

sudden motion.

The beast missed.

Redirecting its bulk was a slow matter. So was Wayne's unballing and floundering to his feet. Again the mind-shattering roar, rageful now, and confident.

Wayne's hands shivered on the crossbow, fumbling out an arrow for the one lost somewhere in that wild tumble. He tried to tell himself: it is the fear. The elemental fear of what Hüsi has spawned.

"Do not fear! Show no fear!" It was as if Wainomoinen's voice, calmly decisive, were counseling him as he did during the wizard's lessons. To demonstrate fear of the thing was the first step toward defeat.

Wayne mumbled the Law to himself, and prayed to the Power of the Valmis, while he notched a gold arrow into the crossbow and aimed it squarely at the creature barreling down on him. To his astonishment, the beast gave a wild shriek and wheeled.

Hüsi's Elk ran from the magic crossbow! Ran like a great panicked ox. Wayne leaped up with a cry. To have the creature elude him, escape, was equal to having it kill him—in Louhi's evil eyes. His impossible chore was to kill it and bring her its antlers. Nothing less would do.

"Ukko!" he cried silently. "Put wings on my boots!"

He ran like wind, like Itsu himself.

Worlds fled by in the chase. Suns were born and suns died in sputtering anguish. Over all the wastes of Hüsi's bleak domain did he follow the beast. Over all the heathers of Kalma. Before the gaping maw of Surma, the star-serpent; behind the towers of evil Lempo; beyond the cascading borealis; beyond the pole and into the stars themselves. Hüsi's Elk ran. Wayne Panu ran. He ran and the Power of the Vanhat Valmis ran with him, carrying him along on

the wind that fans the tapestry that Ilmatar weaves on her rainbow above time and eternity.

When the beast found itself at a brink, a drop, it slowed, snorting and panting and pawing the ice. Its great tongue lolled from its efforts; its lips shuddered and slavered. Those lambent red eyes, like suns when the forests of Tapio burn, glared back at its pursuer. Which way? Which way now? It chose a rising headland spotted with dry trees like witch's fingers; it reached the high place and now it was cut off.

From the scant spiny shelter of the witch copse, Wayne notched his arrow, knelt on one knee, and took aim.

"Ukko!" he prayed. "Enemy of Hüsi and all things loathsome! I am your weapon! My body, my mind, and my soul are of you now. I am the smallest part of the smallest part of your totality. Still—I am of you and of the Power!"

He made the crossbow sing its magic song.

Hüsi's Elk fell, screaming.

XI

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Louhi looked down from her green throne; Wayne stood, legs apart, among the antlers as if in the middle of some spiny thicket. He said nothing, waiting, while the witch rumbled with grudging admissions of his success in having accomplished his first impossible task. Hüsi's Elk was dead and here was the proof of it.

"They will go well over the great entrance to the Castle's feasting-hall," Louhi gloated. "My demon friends from the Black Nebula will be jealous."

"You are pleased with me?"

"With the antlers, yes."

Her shrunken bones writhed and made flames of the iridescent robes. Now Louhi held up one finger. "I am pleased with you to this extent, Starman. As to your second impossible task, it must be more than just impossible. Impossible, it seems, is too easy. Let me see..." She fumbled her snake-stick in her black claws, blinking her ophidian eyes rapidly for a long moment. "Yes! I have it! The Serpents of Manala! Yes. That shall be your second trifling chore. You must plow off the heads of the thousand serpents that live within the quaking bogs of Manala, and bring them to me for the evil magic contained in their venom."

Wayne faced the Hag without a flinch. Louhi would despise him and destroy him if he showed one trace of fear. He must not allow himself the luxury of despair. But—the slimy, sucking Marshes of Manala! The trembling fen of the loathsome White Worms! It was impossible to stand upon its treacherous reaches or to endure the noisome stench that bubbled up from its bottomless depths—much less to be expected to lop off all those abominable heads!

"Well?" Louhi demanded irritably. "Shall we forget the whole thing?" She sounded mockingly eager about it.

"No, Mistress," Wayne found himself shouting. "I will do this rifling chore for you. But," he added, leering, "may I sleep with Varjo first?"

Louhi cackled, raw-throated. She assumed a pose of an indignant parent. "You may not, lecher! What do you think this island is?"

Wayne forced a sardonic laugh. "I think many things, Mistress, but I prefer to keep my thoughts to myself."

"And well you should," she grumbled. "You may eat and sauna and sleep, no more. If you perform this impossible task nicely for me, I will permit you to at least see Varjo."

Wayne bowed.

"Thank you, kind Mistress."

None less than Ilmarinen the Wondersmith would do for his needfuls in performing the impossible task that Louhi had laid out for him this time. The plowshare that would behead the White Worms of Manala must be sung by the sky-forger himself, Ilmarinen of the red beard, maker of the incredible Star Mill.

Wayne sought the smith out in his rocky cave. It was here that Ilmarinen had found, long ago, the residual rainbow metals of Otava, of the ships that had brought the Vanhat to Terra in times too dim to contemplate. Here the Power was strong. Here in this lonely cavern on a cliff like a star's wuig Wayne found a younger Ilmarinen than he knew, stripped to the waist so that the matted copper wires on his muscled chest dripped with wet, and the orange fire from the gaping forge fired his red beard redder and leaped in his deepset blue eyes.

His eagle, wise Virrokannas, who soared the country round while the sorcerer was at his tasks and warned his master of interlopers, swooped down to observe Wayne and flutter his great wings in warning. At a word from Ilmarinen the steel-penned creature returned to his niche above the forge, yet kept his jaundice-yellow eyes alert for mischief.

"Jo," said Ilmarinen, after thought, "I can build you such a plowshare. It will be of silver interlaced with the Otavan rainbows at its cutting edge. I will sing into it the Power, so that it will cut their heads off, well enough. But how shall you stand fast on the shivering marshes to use it?"

Wayne's smile was a grim pitiful thing. "I have thought long on my task. It is in my mind that you shall create for me a robot horse with some kind of anti-gravitational device built in that will—"

“Niin,” the smith interrupted. “None of your Ussi nonsense, young Waino! With whom have you been consorting, of late?”

Wayne grinned wryly. “Only our old friend the Hag of the Rock.”

Ilmarinen’s eyes flashed like sapphires. He stroked his beard and poked at the fire until the sparks danced ballets. “Let me see if I understand your toista words. You wish me to build you a horse with wings that will bear you up a span above the swamp, and the silver plowshare as well. A steed of gold whose nimble feet can withstand the corrosion of the worms’ venom.”

“Precisely, friend Ilmarinen. And now to work. There is not one moment to waste.”

“Why the hurry?” the copper-beard grumbled.

“There are those who cannot bear the sunless cold much longer,” Wayne told him cryptically.

Ilmarinen shrugged. “Then you must help me to find and melt down the ores we shall need. Think you stand by and idle while I build you these playthings?” Ilmarinen’s growl turned into a grin, always a surprise on that long, dour, copper-clad countenance.

Together they toiled, wrenching both gold and silver from the bowels of the mountain. And rare earths such as wolfram, samarium, gadolinium and thulium.

And where they could find them, miniscule flecks of the Otavan metal that glowed on their fingertips with all the colors of Ilmatar’s rainbow. While they mined and melted, they sang. They sang the old songs of Power. And presently Ilmarinen’s hammer sang with them, striking the iron anvil in boisterous rhythms which echoed across the cave and far into the fingers that groped down into the mountain in search of ancient secrets. The magic of the Old Songs was meshed and molded into every reshaping of the shining marriage-of-metals.

Wayne gaped at the golden steed with the rainbow hooves and quivered a sigh for its beauty. And at the silver plowshare Ilmarinen had fastened behind the wooden saddle he had carved with runic symbols.

"Now I am ready!"

"Not so fast, Waino! You will need armor against the deadly spittle of the serpents and their high-leaping fangs."

"Whatever you say, friend Ilmar."

Shoes of iron streaked with the rainbows, a mail-coat of red gold, gauntlets made of thunderstones from the sky, greaves of gleaming steel. All these Ilmarinen hammered and sang for him, while Wayne manned the bellows and fed the insatiable fire.

Wayne asked Ilmarinen the way to the Marshes of Manala but it was Virrokannas the eagle who left his perch with an impatient shriek and skimmed the sooted rock ceiling toward the daylight.

"He will guide your Kulta, your fleetfoot. Not that you need any Virrokannas to show you the way. All men know the way to Manala; all men go there some time in their lives, be it only in their minds. Hüsi himself is happy to point out one of a multitude of devious paths."

Wayne pulled Kulta's reins short on the hillock of long blowing grasses and windflowers where the eagle had left him. He watched its dark shape dwindle in the wash of golden afternoon sunlight. He sighed when Virrokannas vanished. The blithe song of the cuckoo in the lacy tamarack forest on the hills he had left served to accent his unease, his loneliness. Such a glorious June day. Back in those green hills, with their rushing streams and neat patches of bursting grain on the slopes and bottomland, the cosy farmhouses, all was serene and bountiful. Wayne remembered the Proxima farm of his boyhood, the com stalks shining in neat rows under the sawtooth fangs of barren crystal. He felt a sharp pang.

Ahead of him—Manala.

We must not linger, he told Kulta. There is no time for dreams.

Quickly he assembled the plowshare and hitched the golden animal to it. While he did so he sang to Ukko, songs Wainomoinen had taught him in the howling night. One glance down at the gray-misted fen was sufficient. One whiff of the nauseous odor of putrefaction mingled with blinding acids was enough and more. He held his breath, not to rack with coughs and pukes.

Easily. Slowly. Softly. With never a back-glance at the bright spring-sung meadow he was leaving, he set Kulta's course down into the mists. He must be hard on himself and on others, if he was accomplish his purpose. Hard as a diamond and as cruel as stillbirth. Even Varjo...

It seemed as if Kulta herself shivered when she flung them down the steep bare hill like a golden cannon's ball. The sharp blades of the plow thrust deep into the occasional tufts of weed at the fen's edge, before the ground began to quake and stir beneath them as if moved by some subterranean giant's hand.

The Worms woke within the purple-black fog. A thousand hungry repulsive heads writhed out from picker-holes like crimson mouths. A thousand serpent throats began their monstrous hissing roulade; it grew and grew into a hurtful sibilance of obscene anticipation.

I must not look down. I must not look at them.

An army of slaving ropes lashed the noisome fen. Wayne dropped some heartbeats on the way. One thing he knew. He must not falter. He must believe in the Power. He must never for one single eyeflick release his grip on the belief that Ukko's Power would bear Kulta up, send him flying in golden shuttles across the hissing and the corroding venom and the fangs and the mind-tilting stench.

I must believe in the Power.

I must not look down.

I must trust.

These litanies he repeated over and over, keeping a firm steady grip on the reins and guiding Kulta in straight sure lines across the marshes. That first tearing horror was gone, now, and so long as he didn't look down and actually see them, writhing and leaping and drooling venom...

Back and forth. Like a nemesis with a single purpose to her existence, Kulta's fleet muscles of gold carried Wayne and the plowshare on its destructive path. Wayne didn't even know, at first, when the task was finished. His mind, his will, each separate cell of his body, was so concentrated on being an apex of the Power, that he didn't let go, not until Kulta reared up on her hind legs, uttering a single scream of triumph. Only then did he let go of the Power. And when he did let go his long body sagged, lurched, weaved, then fell on the grassy hillock in a faint as deep as death.

XII

« ^ »

The emotion that flashed across those small hell's windows in Louhi's contorted face was dismay. Or at the very least, annoyance. Annoyance at seeing Wayne before her throne again. Alive.

"These were all I could harvest," Wayne told her, flinging a hopsack filled with snakes heads before her. "I trust they will do. But the Worms of Manala are dead, all of them."

Louhi pinched her deepsunk eyes at them, and mumbled something virulent and unflattering. She fondled her fanged stick's head impatiently.

"Now what task shall I—"

"You promised me that I could see Varjo," Wayne reminded.

"Niin." She turned to scream at the red-clad brutes guarding the entrance to the throne room. "Bring the wench in!" She turned to Wayne and gave a shrill brief cackle. "You shall see how busy I have been while you have been prancing and idling about, Look now!"

His first sight of the new Varjo brought a gasp of wonder. Could this really be the raggedy little waif with the mouse-eyes who stole game out of his snares? This radiant spectacle? For Varjo was superb, astonishing, lipsmacking! Not only was it the sheer opalescent gown that floated behind her as she moved across tide black floor like a Babylonian queen, nor the silver girdle and the halter that webbed out her special charms in a pattern of shimmering diamonds, nor the crystal slippers on her once-bare feet, nor the tiara set in her high coiffed flame of auburn hair, with the tinkling silver bells set in it to match the emerald-set ones dangling from her shell-pink ears; no, it was the new lapis-lazuli iridescence in her eyes, the bint of color that wasn't rouge, the fullness of bosom, the lacquered coral at her fingertips when she moved a hand gracefully to her jeweled throat.

She moved toward Wayne with a glad cry. Wayne felt his pulses sing in his temples. His loins ached with want. Moving to crush her in his arms he ran smack into an invisible wall. Varjo, too.

"Hey!" He whirled on the witch. "Am I not allowed even one embrace? One kiss?"

Louhi was the prudish duenna again. "Do I not know what just one kiss can lead to? Eipa. Take the girl out! Out! You have had your look, Starman." When Varjo vanished, after a last yearning look at Wayne, a look with rapturous promise in it, Louhi cackled, "This is to spur you on, Starman. To whip you into a froth of even greater effort." Her scowl was a storm. "I have pondered and

pondered on the third and final task which you shall undertake. It seems that I must outreach myself in the selection this time. If I am to be saddled with a sly fox of a starman, I—"

"A fox sly in your behalf, Grandmother!"

"So you say. Quiet, while I move into the Silence and think!"

Her furrowed eyepockets pinched shut; her toothless gums began to mumble, as if appealing to unseen beings for their dark council.

Wayne sucked in a painful breath before he spoke.

"May I suggest?"

She snarled before the hell's windows opened on him. "You? I am so senile that I will let you outfox me in this?"

"Just a suggestion." Wayne shrugged, humbled. "I heard you mention one Vipunen."

"Vipunen!" Her wild cackle woke the corbies on the rafters. "You think in your starman's bragging swash that such a wart as you may dare to move out among the Isot!"

"I know nothing of Vipunen. I only toss it out for your consideration."

Louhi blinked her Hüsi's eyes at him for a long moment. Then she began to cackle; her ghoulish merriment grew and grew until the rows of black-winged elementals above them screamed and echoed her glee to the highest towers of the Castle. She drubbed her snake-stick on the green bones of her throne and roared still louder.

"Very well," she cackled. "You have set your own task. So be it. Seek out Vipunen the Infinite. Find the star-eater! Address yourself to Vipunen. Lose yourself in the labyrinths of the Isot, but first, say farewell to all that has limit and boundary and sanity—for you can never return!"

The Witch Louhi herself must lead him down the twisted

cave-path below the dungeons and across the sky-island, for she alone had dared to have dealings with Vipunen the Infinite. She alone knew the insane path that would lead him where even she had never dared journey. By the nebulous light of a lantern filled with light-worms she led him through mindless labyrinths to a great black hole, like the hole in the bottom of space.

Wayne teetered on the brink, crying out in immeasurable terror.

“No! No! I’ve changed my mind! I don’t want—”

“Fall, Starman! Fall into Vipunen!”

Louhi’s snake-stick jabbed the small of his back viciously; Wayne toppled with a forlorn cry, while the dissonance of her cackling died away in a rush of rustling wind and he fell.

Vipunen.

Vipunen the Infinite. Vipunen the Unthinkable. Wainomoinen had sidestepped the legends of Vipunen, among all the others he had related to Wayne in the howling dark. Vipunen, of all the wild beings that infest that-which-lies-beyond-the-knowable, was the least containable in human thought. It was impossible to imagine him for long without the soothing comfort of madness.

Feeling the rush of eternity fan his falling body, Wayne tried not to think where he might be falling. He must not think where or he would go mad. And that must not happen!

Ukko! Be with me!

He fell fell fell fell fell fell fell fell fell fell

There was no end to his fall, for Vipunen was infinite.

Yet, even infinity must fold back on itself eventually; Wayne permitted himself to wonder which part he would land in. It was useless to consider the whole organism. Which part, then? An organ? A gland? A section of thumb-cells, presuming that Vipunen

had thumbs?

A gelatinous bounce terminated his fall. It was pitch dark. Wayne tried to stand up but sticky digestive substance clung to him in threads and the surface under him pulsed and undulated gently. From somewhere below him there came a rumbling thunder of sound and he found himself fighting off oozing waves of odd-smelling glandular outflow. He danced to keep on his feet.

The secretion stung when it touched his flesh. It wanted to digest him. This must not happen! The mindless cells that functioned around him were but doing their duty, but that duty would all too quickly remove Wayne from existence and change his energy into theirs. Still, this fumbling intruder was a puny ort, unworthy of much effort. The energy in it was feeble to nonexistent. The glands relaxed.

When other things moved on him Wayne whipped out Wainomoinen's pukko (Louhi had avoided its magic, indeed, much of that magic was lost by the taint of theft) and stabbed at these wandering biotics until they decided he wasn't worth their attentions. The whole functional process of the area he had landed in moved sluggishly, infinitely slow by human measure, at a god's pace.

But where? Where was he?

The darkness panicked him, yet the gulf above his head was so vast, his esper's senses told him, that he felt no acrophobic horror of confinement.

Where? What part?

Crouching, sucking in the warm fetid air, something happened that told him where. From far, immeasurably far, to his right, and way up, came light. Light and a windy torrent of air, together with a violent bellow of sound that tore his eardrums. And a lethargy, god-slow shudder of movement. As if—

The movement sent him tumbling against a wall, hands over ears to shut out the tormenting bellow. The light reflecting down on him as he lay blinking and shivering cold sweat, was red. Blood-cell red. And there was something about the wide arching curve of wall that implied an answer to his question.

The long drifting reddish light was the clue.

He was in Vipunen's mouth. Vipunen was yawning.

He took advantage of the light, and the semblance of sanity restored by his new knowledge, to clamber up on his feet and blink widely around him, to study the terrain, as it were. The lingering halflight showed a sky overcast with swirling pink mists. The torrential gale and the thunder had diminished to a spanking breeze that plucked his wide-sleeved blouse; his eardrums were immune to any sound for the time, from the beating they had taken. Slowly the light began to fade as Vipunen returned to his slumbers. The dark was fearsome but—

Good. The organism was supine, sleeping. Innumerable things were going on within the infinitude of Vipunen's carcass; Wayne could not begin to imagine what shape that incredible carcass might be. It was foolish to even try. But now that he had a peg to hang his racing thoughts on, he would take it from there.

He rummaged through long unused drawers in his cranium for things he had learned as a boy, about anatomy, about biological function, about cellular and arterial and organic processes. Vipunen was not human. The old Vanhat legends made him an oversized man-type, but this Wayne believed to be an error from the hints Wainomoinen had provided. The Vanhat, fiercely simple, rendered their legends into terms which they could best understand. So Vipunen was a "giant," an ageless giant with ageless knowledge to impart, if crafty old Wainomoinen in his later years could force it from him...

In the fire-songs Wainomoinen had done just that, dared to seek out Vipunen and prowl his bowels literally, to wrest this ancient knowledge from the giant. Roused from a few centuries' sleep, famished, piqued by Wainomoinen's flea-scratches and bawlings for him to wake up, swallowed the wizard. As a matter of fact, he enjoyed him. Never had he such a dinner, such a morsel, was the way he put it.

The wizard did not share his enthusiasm.

"Now destruction falls upon me!" he cried out in Vipunen's belly. (He likened it to Hüsi's darkest dungeon.)

So, before the juices could begin the process of assimilation, Wainomoinen fashioned himself a boat...

Wayne's mental floundering among his early vid-lessons in animal biology led him nowhere. He was completely lost in a bewildering maze of veins and glands and islets of Langerhans. Besides, some innate conviction born out of his esper's and emper's talents told him that Vipunen was utterly unlike any form of life he had studied in his lessons or encountered in his years with the Fleet. Vipunen was beyond space, as human minds were able to conceive it. He was of the Isot, the Big Ones, those Outside. And Vipunen (for all the legend) did not eat meat. No.

Vipunen lived on pure energy.

Louhi herself had provided him with a clue. She had made that one slip when she said, "Maybe I will relent a little. Maybe I will ask Vipunen—"

This could mean but one thing.

Somehow, with her thousands of years of brash witchery to back her up, splashing out in all directions and times, always on the alert for bigger and better wickedness to feed her boredom and her fanatical passion for evil, Louhi of Pohyola had touched minds

with Vipunen, here in his incredible Outworld beyond normal space. She had found the bunghole to this other Space and uncorked it. There was nothing supernatural about it, actually. Nothing was "supernatural." It was simply a random discovery of a heretofore unguessed-at phenomenon. And it took a witch's impudence and illogical acumen to discover it!

Perhaps Vipunen was amused, perhaps curious. Perhaps he had always been vaguely aware, in his star-browsings, of another microcosmic world existing far below him, with spaceships darting about its stars like so many minnows in a tiny pond. To him Mankind represented neither a boon nor a threat. If he destroyed any accidentally it was like a man stepping on ants during his daily constitutional.

Louhi had made him aware of them. And the wily witch had actually used Vipunen to her purpose. By perverse mind-magic she had pointed out to him a certain delectable star for him to eat. This one, she wheedled, was especially delectable. Never had he tasted such a delightful tidbit. His palate would be simply ravished!

And then she had proceeded to guide his tongue-tentacle through the bunghole so that he could suck out the energy from that small sun; not all of it, mind you, but the way a child sucks most of the juice out of an orange, but not every drop. There would be enough left for the feeblest land of light that was scarcely light at all, and enough residual star-energy to keep the hated Vanhat on her green-forested satellite from dying all at once...

It was a makeshift thing, was Wayne's boat, a craft which any self-respecting Vanhat would have hooted into kingdom come. But it was the best he could do with the soggy materials at hand and nothing but his pukko to hack them off with. His spacer's lighter had provided just enough illumination to finish his task and haul it to the stream that gurgled upward, as judged by the yawning gap. The best strips came from a glutinous gristle fiber beyond a chasm

between where he had fallen and the wall. It was tricky hauling them across, but he managed. Leukocytes began to give him trouble; he staved them off with his pukko, then went back to gluing the strips together with the sticky substance that lay thick and malodorous on the creature's spongy tongue.

Working, Wayne sang the Old Songs of Power. A chilling thought possessed him suddenly. Would any of the Otavan magic serve him in this Outworld of the Isot? Was he not even beyond Ukko's Power? He shuddered and kept on singing. He must not lose hope or he was lost...

The boat, or raft, as it might more properly be called, (Wainomoinen had built a boat, so Wayne, too, termed his ill-fashioned effort) moved so fast onto the rushing upstream that he had barely time to snatch up his improvised tendon-fiber oar and leap on it before the swirling arterial flow carried him forward into the great benighted cavern like a chip bobbing on a roaring spring torrent out of mountain snows in sudden thaw. His intention was to let the oar serve him as tiller, but the seeming sluggishness of the aortal upflow of Vipunen's strange blood turned out to be so rapid here in midstream that the best he could do was to cling to the raft fibers with both hands, and try to keep his head above water, at least most of the time. When the churning rapids increased to bubbling top-froth at junctions in the mainstream, Wayne gulped for air from under.

But Ukko or happy chance was with him and the rushing stream led him always upward where, he had decided when he built the raft, he must go.

To Vipunen's seat of consciousness. To Vipunen's brain.

In his mind he saw the infinite creature much as Wainomoinen had first seen him. Lying down on some inconceivable bed, sleeping. And how Vipunen could sleep! Millenia fled by while Vipunen snored away, in his god's time-concept. One of his minor worries

was that he would not be able to awaken him, to make mental contact with the giant. In the old legend Wainomoinen had plagued Vipunen unmercifully to make him regurgitate him, besides making him divulge the secrets the wizard sought. He had given the giant the bellyache of all bellyaches, jabbing him with his pukko, tormenting him as well out of his wizard's box of tricks. He had Vipunen calling him a "Dog of Manala," beseeching him to quit his liver, unhand his heart, and untwist his spleen.

All of this byplay, Wayne knew now, was based on the basic understanding which the singer's listeners had of human biological function, and no doubt brought out many a knee-slapping guffaw at some of the razwer innuendos of Wainomoinen's peregrinations through the giant's innards.

But Vipunen was not really like that. The Vipunen of the legend was couched in terms the farmers and fisherfolk could grasp. There were Vipunens and Vipunens. The name was only a semantic effort to give form and substance to a phenomenon of shattering proportion.

This Vipunen was Infinite.

This Vipunen had eaten Terra's Sun!

XIII



Wayne was able to use his oar, saved under his body, now. The capillaries into which the cell-feeding flow had thrust the raft moved more slowly now and he was able to select his own liquid road whenever he reached a fork. He prayed to Ukko and strained his extrasensory capacities to the utmost; just what he was aiming for was foggy-dim, but it all boiled down to one basic must. He must make contact with Vipunen on a mind-level and the place to

do it was here—in Vipunen's brain.

Vipunen was asleep and that didn't help. Awareness was dormant and so was the capacity for telepathic communication. One thing helped, though. Up here in Brain the cells glowed with a land of pulsing gray fire. Wayne thought: it must be Vipunen's diet. The star-energy the giant lived on gave his infinite brain an inner light, even in sleep.

Wayne brought the raft to a bank and climbed onto the spongy shore. The shore and the cavernous network of definable cells all throbbed with that same inner consciousness-glow.

He sank down to his knees; then flopped, face down. He lay there a long time, exhausted, hungry, thirsty. The rhythmic pulsing of Vipunen's brain cells under him was oddly comforting. He yearned for oblivion, for sleep. But the tormenting thought of the Vanhat villages and a planet slowly turning into a ball of ice because the energy it needed had been sucked away by this Outspace thing called Vipunen, would not permit him more than a few moments's inactivity.

His thirst was physical torture. He lifted; then, on impulse, he ran to the edge of the stream, cupped up some of the turgid liquid, drank it. At least it was wet and—

Yes!

He wasn't wrong! It did help! Not only did it quench his ravenous thirst and relieve the rasping parch in his mouth and throat, but the ingested energy in the arterial flow thrust vitality and new life into his cells. After all, Vipunen took his energy straight. It was only a matter of kind and size.

Restored, refreshed, Wayne's agile mind went to work. As he had with Lady, he thrust his consciousness up and around him, up and down and around—in radiating circles, striving to find some key-point in the enormous mass where he could empathize and then

make mental contact.

It was a long time before the vibrating light began to intensify, subtly, very slowly; then he felt Vipunen's half-wakened mind-presence encircling him, studying him.

What are you what are you what are you what are you what...

There was no stentorian voice, no sound at all, only the soft gurgling of the capillary stream and the faint pulsing of the brain tissue. Wayne felt his muscles stiffen up, his heartbeat thunder over the other sounds. Vipunen was waking! Wayne's mental radiants were waking the giant!

There were no words, only thoughts, but Wayne was used to that. Only this time the sleepy-casual question moved on him from all sides, imploding in his brain. Vipunen was not much concerned yet. He was grouchy with sleep, for one thing. The intelligent consciousness needling his brain was like a pinprick. He would erase it in a moment. Meanwhile...

Who are you who are you who are you who are you who are you

This time the reiteration implied an admission of a life form that recognized itself as such.

In the instant that followed, Wayne knew. He knew. He knew why Wainomoinen of the Copper Boat had called him down out of the stars. Wainomoinen of the Copper Boat must have known that it would take someone like Wayne, with his special empathic talents, to make contact; just as Wainomoinen the Younger must have sensed Wayne's purpose in stealing his scared pukko and running off with Varjo. It had to be him. No other could have persuaded Louhi that he was with her; he was a Destroyer, trained to ravish and kill...

He could have wept.

While his thoughts scrambled and seethed hopefully, the self-light in Vipunen's brain cells brightened. Grudgingly. Vipunen pushed languid probes into this life-molecule that had intruded his brain and scooped out bits of information about it.

"Who are you? What are you doing in my mind?"

Now the questions were clear-cut and acid pungent. Vipunen was annoyed.

"I am of the Vanhat!" Wayne forgot himself in his anxiety and yelled aloud. "We live in a microscopic universe far below you, O Vipunen! I come to beg a boon!" He put humility into his shout and a tincture of reverence. It seemed fitting to speak to the Outspace giant as to some manner of deity. Besides, it might help. Vipunen's body was amass with destroyers.

Silence. The light converged, intensified on Wayne so that he had to clap shut his eyes or go blind from it. Vipunen was reading him further.

"What is this boon?" Vipunen thundered, as if he already knew or guessed.

Wayne breathed in deep for courage. This was his moment. And by his moment hung the future of nine planets and an Empire. That it must have happened so as to produce Wayne Panu and his moment, paradoxically, did not signify. Wainomoinen had said it: Ilmatar weaves many patterns.

He was suddenly engulfed by a shuddering sense of insignificance that included the whole of his universe. Of what possible importance could this be to Vipunen? What he had to say? The green valleys. The killing cold. The descending wall of ice. His sudden vertigo dizzied him to his knees.

"Give us back our sun!" he blurted.

Vipunen was still tired. His rest had been interrupted. He was

cranky, bristly as a bear whose hibernation has been cut short by a persistent flea.

“Give us back our sun!” Wayne shouted again. “You drained out the energy from it. Put it back before it is too late!”

The light receded, abruptly.

Other factions of Vipunen’s infinite brain were involved with other problems, more important ones. The twilight wait was agony. Wayne’s arms and legs went numb with cramp. He dragged to his feet and paced the high gloomy cavern and the river’s edge in hopeless frenzy. How had he dared? How could he possibly hope to win out against a creature like Vipunen?

Even Louhi hadn’t believed him. Not quite. The whole thing about Wayne performing three great deeds to win Varjo was a charade to her, too! She was not that easily fooled. He had tried to fool her by falling in with what-ever tasks she set. Killing Hüsi’s Elk. Plowing off the heads of the Worms of Manala. Leering over Varjo, poor lost gamine that she was...

“Die, Starman!” He could almost hear her cackling about it now, as he had telepathed her small slips. “Perhaps you think that by marrying Varjo you will lord it over Pohyola after I am gone? Is that it? I will never be gone! I’m eternal and Pohyola is eternal! It is you who will be gone and the sooner the better. You with your miserable pretensions, your single feeble life-span! Thus do I destroy all heroes who suck on the paps of the Power! Ai! Even Ukko himself cannot overcome Louhi of Pohyola!”

Vipunen must have gone back to sleep, damn him!

Rage possessed Wayne now. A passion of white-hot rage. The monstrous ape! Going around gobbling up stars like gumdrops, never stopping to consider what havoc he was bringing to whole civilizations! The Fleet, with their planetary all-kill, were appalling. But this — this —!

"Vipunen!" he screamed. "Wake up! Fetch our sun out of your hideous belly and put it back where it belongs! Damn your infinite hide!"

He fisted out the sacred pukko and jabbed the side-wall, over and over. It was as nothing, but it was all he could do.

Slowly the light increased, pulsing circles that had their concentric apex in Wayne.

"I know what it is that you want me to do. I know. And I could do it if I wanted to. It has not yet been assimilated. It is stored down in my tissues."

"Then do it! Now!" Wayne raged.

"Why? Why should I bother? The crafty little mite-mind that urged me to take it promised me the rarest of treats. It was hardly that. Very second-rate, in fact."

"Wouldn't you like to get back at the witch?" Wayne prompted. "Do her in the eyes for putting you to all that trouble for so little?"

Vipunen yawned. "It would give me mild pleasure, yet the trouble I would go to in returning the energy to your puny star would only be compounded. No. I think not. Go away, thing."

Wayne's brain exploded. He must persuade the giant at all costs. Vipunen appeared to be a self-centered snob and a sufferer from incredible ennui, but he had to have a weak point and Wayne must find it. Wayne went into a passionate plea for Terra, describing in detail the wondrous beauty of the wide shaggy forests, the thundering seas, the people, the—

Halfway, he stopped. No good. Vipunen was drowsing again.

"Go away, thing. Go away and let me sleep."

"I can't! Not until I get what I came for!"

"I am offering you your life. Go away, before I am forced to flick

out your existence."

Wayne leaped about as despair began to overwhelm him. He screamed curses at the giant. He begged, pleaded, cajoled. Then he ranted and swore at him some more.

"Away, thing," Vipunen said. "I have had an exhausting millenium and I am very weary. And I am beginning to become vexed with you, thing."

"How—how long will you sleep?" Wayne gasped.

"A few centuries more, by your reckoning."

"Centuries!"

Wayne's heart and soul dragged the slimes of Manala. Vipunen the Infinite's time schedule was in ration to its size; his days were Terra's light-years.

"Please—!" he bawled. "Listen to me!"

"I have listened. And I have refrained from allowing my anti-virus armies to kill you, as they are eager to do. You have bothered me far too long already. Goodbye, thing."

The light dimmed. Vipunen slept, and from the capillary river Wayne heard a multitudinous wave of approaching sound. Vipunen's white blood-armies were moving toward the viral bit of existence that was irritating the giant's brain cells, moving in for the kill.

XIV



The white killers, always on the lookout for microbial and viral intrusion, seethed up hugely out of the capillary in a chattering surge of determination. They were like a bubbling surf moving on him.

Wayne stared in a fascination of terror. There were millions of them. Millions of infection fighters, all to rid Vipunen or one infinitesimal scrag, one organic driblet, one ort, one thing.

Wayne backed away from the cleansing surf and into one of the great caves of sharply defined cells. He was sweating in every pore from the sudden heat. The leukocytes were like luminous protean flames, like a fever, bearing down on him to shrivel him into nonexistence.

What could he do?

He turned and ran deep into the cave. He ran, his breath tearing out of his lungs in rasps, until he struck a blank rubbery wall. He was trapped. On they came.

The Power!

The Songs of Power!

If only he could think straight. He had to, or all of his cunning and his flaying efforts were for nothing.

“UKKO!”

He wailed the name while the pale seething mass of luminous gray shapes filled the cave and neared.

“UKKO!”

Almost without volition words began to pour out of him.

Wainomoinen’s Invocation of the Power. A plea to the Valmis who were part of everything, even Vipunen.

“Valmis!” he cried. “Have pity on those of your people who are not ready! Take from the Power—beseech Ukko—give us this boon!”

They were bubbling toward him, closing him in, smothering him with their numbers. But now they stopped. Something invisible yet palpable stopped them!

Wayne saw this but distantly. His totality, his very genes, the ions of the molecules of his cells, his ALL, was straining to hold on to the thread of Power that Ukko and the Valmis had tossed him. He must not lose it. The axiomatic truth was:

One: He must believe in the Power, utterly.

Two: He must force every molecular part of his being to perform his directed act.

Three: He must know the pinnacle point, the precise moment for the bursting-out of the Power.

“NOW!” He gathered the whole thing into a microcosmic-macrocosmic unit to split time and eternity wide open.

“NOW!”

Vipunen’s brain-cave swirled suddenly with Presence. They were with him, or the part of them which could help. They. The Valmis. All here to save their backward cousins from extermination. They made a wall through which Vipunen’s blood soldiers could not pass. It was the first step.

Wayne waited for the second.

It was the ancient who had sidestepped Time to save his people from Louhi: it was Wainomoinen of the Copper Starboat. First a rainbow slash across the dark, like a pukko cutting Space, then the boat was there, hovering, glinting jauntily, its rainbow oars poised.

White-bearded Wainomoinen wearing his tattered blue wizard’s robes, stepped down. Wayne was rooted to the spongy floor, so the wizard must go to him and release some of his concentration so that he could move.

“Is it—will they make him give us back our Sun?” Wayne cried.

Wainomoinen’s craggy face was one illuminated smile. “Yes, my son. You have done it!”

"Me! But I couldn't do anything with the giant!"

"They can, now," Wainomoinen chuckled. "But don't underrate yourself. You brought them here. You were the vessel. Remember, they have no existence as we know it. They can only act when someone close to the Power, like you, has keyed his belief and his strength to the highest possible pitch; then they draw on Ukko's Power and things happen. But it was you, my son! You battled your way here to force a change in Ilmatar's weaving. Everything had its reason. Even the loathing you had for your Destroyer's task."

Wayne blinked hard. Even Varjo ...

"Yes, Varjo. She was lost, long before you ever met her. Her love for you helped, too, as did yours for her. Jo. Remember the girl in the Astro drinking tavern? The one who cozened you out of your three-months' starman's pay by her pathetic story and her appearance of woe?"

"Um. Yeah. I was wondering who Varjo reminded me of."

"Nün. And the revenge you would take on this girl was, after a fashion, taken on Varjo."

"What does that makes me?" Wayne asked bitterly.

"It makes you human, my son. And more. Every facet of your being, every breath you have taken, all has been woven on Ilmatar's tapestry toward this moment. The good and the bad. The noble and ignoble. Ai! Ilmatar makes use of many strange strands in her intricate weaving. Yours is stout and strong and spun from fine gold!"

He plucked Wayne's sleeve, pulling him toward the boat.

"But—our Sun!" Wayne protested.

The hoary face crinkled. "As to that, you think that a man can

lift up a star in his hands and replace it in the firmament bodily? Ei. Only Ukko can do that, by forcing Vipunen himself to return what he drained off. Only Ukko himself can reseal the gap that Louhi opened—after we are back in the spaces in which we belong.” His skeletal fingers curled a beckon. “Come!”

Wayne took his seat next to the old man. He marveled again at the deft way those bony hands thrust into the gyrating rainbows and kneaded them, sending the copper starboat streaking up and out of a Vipunen who diffused to make them a tunnel. Wayne thought to ask about the rainbow controls and the oars, but why? He wouldn't understand, anyway. Wainomoinen sang softly to himself; conscious of gnawing hunger, Wayne helped himself to bread and cheese from the shelf, washing his simple meal down with kallia from the foaming vat.

“Where are we headed?” he asked, chomping.

“To get you back to your ship, young Waino.”

Wayne felt a sharp swift hurt. “Then I must go back to—”

“To your destiny. Yes. To take your proper place in Ilmatar's many-dimensional pattern.” He grinned jovially. “After all, I only borrowed you.”

“Will I find the way back?”

“Why not? Lady knows the way.”

The thought of Lady lifted the darkness a little. “What if I don't go back? I don't think I could do those things any longer. Destroy. All-kill.”

“You must go back or—”

“Die. That's what I tried to do after Chuck ...”

Wainomoinen nodded gravely, then a smile quirked up the white-beard on one side and his eyes crinkled. “Perhaps things will

be different, now. Perhaps you will help make them different."

Wayne considered. Yes. It was possible. Man had at last met his match in the Mephiti; and Wayne had touched minds with one of their young. Just a hint, but a hint that could open the door to a whole new millennium. The Mephiti were not evil, any more than Man was evil. They killed for the same reasons and, their equality would force a change:

And Wayne Panu might crack open that door.

He shivered on the side of the drifted white mound that contained Lady. The trembling strength of Wainomoinen's farewell embrace was still on him, like a cloak to warm him forever. "Hyva von!" Wainomoinen quavered at him through the rock-crystal window, before the starboat lifted into the dawn, became an amber moon, a winking star, then a nothing.

Dawn.

Yes. The horizon was bright glimmering sunglow. Wayne gaped at it and his eyes streaming. It was the low morning breeze, he said, shrugging away the wet. The wonder of it! Ukko had completed what Wainomoinen of the Copper Starboat had started and in which Wayne had played his part. Marveling, gulping back the lump in his throat—then whooping in sudden joyful delirium—he watched the first fingers of the taken-for-granted light steal across the endlessly white arc. The white was tinged with blue from a clean clear sky. Now the recovered treasure of daybreak splashed liberally, carelessly, rapturously. New light. New energy. New hope. Pure gold.

Wayne was a prideful pillar bending only slightly to the west wind. He waited for what would not happen. No. It would not happen. Wainomoinen of Imari would not come tramping and bellowing from around the snowy hummock, as before. That

brown-beard was probably drinking with his hero comrades, Lemminkainen and Ilmarinen, drinking and boastings that he and he alone had brought back the stolen sun. Which, in a way, he had.

Wayne thought of Varjo and pushed the thought away. What would happen to her? What had already happened...

Taking a leaf from old Wainomoinen, roving the stars alone across Ilmatar's multi-dimensional tapestry, Wayne forced down the mallard's egg that kept rising up in his craw; he sang, he sang loudly, one of the old songs. And while he sang he went to work scooping away the drifted rime from the manship's hatch. It would take a while to warm up Lady's electronic arteries and the journey ahead of him was long, long, long.