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He was a human bomb sent to destroy humanity

Tramontane

Emil Petaja



First Book Publication

IMMORTAL VENGEANCE

About TRAMONTANE:

This fourth science-fantasy novel based on the Finnish legendary epic, *KALEVALA*, seemed like a good idea because there are actually *four* important heroes in these wonderful legends, and this novel completes the cycle, concerning itself with the prophecy of the Great Return when the Vanhat seed shall return to Otava, the planet of their origin.

Kullervo is the "bad one" of the legends. Ugly, sullen, despised, he was actually born out of evil. He kicked his cradle to pieces and refused to drown when the wise women flung him into the river. As a vindictive cowherd slave he changed cows into bears and this killed all of Ilmarinen's household. Like Manfred and Oedipus, he was predestined for tragedy and doom. However, he is surely one of the most fascinating characters in all mythology. Jean Sibelius, the great Finnish composer, chose his tragic life for the theme of his magnificent symphonic tone poem, *Kullervo*, one of his finest works, involving choruses, soloists, and a sweeping Wagnerian nobility.

My *Kullervo Kasi*, a prototype of his ancestor, is the spawn of a leakage from a dark dimension of matter-energy that is incompatible with the life-forces in this one. Therefore, *Kullervo Kasi* is the natural choice of the Starwitch Louhi to find the tag-end remnants of the Vanhat existing somewhere on despoiled Terra and destroy them. . . .

—EMIL PETAJA

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TRAMONTANE

by

EMIL PETAJA



ACE BOOKS, INC.

**1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York 10036**

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To

KEN SORENSON

THE WRECKS OF TIME

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PART ONE

WAYFARER

"And the friendless one reflected:
'Wherefore have I been created?
Who has made me and has doomed me
Thus 'neath moon and sun to wander
Through the starry wastes forever?'"

KALEVALA: *Runo XXXIV*
(Rev. SONG OF THE VANHAT:
Runo LI, Cir. 5168)

I

IF ONE'S DESTINY is to be expunged like some monstrous mistake by a death-squad of three perverted louts, then the new hell-hot colony planet of Ryler 8 on the frontier of known space is as good a place for it to happen as any.

Better.

Fed by seven star-suns, the lately formed world still seethed savagely under its rusty red shell; Mothership Control had named it according to precedent in honor of the pioneer, Captain Ose Ryler, who discovered it. Ryler and all his scout-ship crew had been charred into meaningless flakes by the then unguessed gaseous discharge from one of the cracks in the hell-planet's crust. Ryler 8 was of ugly sanguinary color and uglier disposition, an uneasy stepping-stone to Still Further Out. Custom entitled it only the hardest, most desperate of Mothership colonists; its motley bag of humanity included misfits and problem types of many

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varieties who had to be finally decanted from their Mothership *somewhere*.

Kullervo Kasi was such a misfit. If there were any hidden character traits on the worthy side of the ledger they could not be detected in his wide dour face, in the animal slope of his thick shoulders, in the lumbering splayfoot gait his ill-fit cast-off boots displayed. His sackcloth blouse had been patched up out of hydroponics tank shoddy; his pantaloons were forever dirty; his thick hairy legs were bare from knobby knees to half down his knotted calves, whereupon the one mismatched bright note took over. His synth-wool stockings were self-knitted, unusual in itself, and they were vivid blue. Kullervo Kasi's stockings brought smiles even from the quasis programmed to do handwork for the Mothership computers. From others, colonists and regulars, they brought frowns or open jeers. They didn't suit that face, that grotesque body. This odd bid for beauty was out of keeping. It was a bone of contention for more universal contempt. He would be better off without them. His ugliness of form and nature must be unrelieved, total.

Sloughing along across the brittle orange terrain, head adangle, Kullervo Kasi made no slight demur against his fate. The kicks, when he didn't move fast enough, didn't register. Besides, the Dantesque agony of twisted rock landscape, plus the near-intolerable heat outside the Colony Bubble, precluded coherent thought. His fate was a foregone conclusion, predestined in his genes.

Kullervo Kasi. The name itself was alien. More than just alien, out here at the star frontier, where alienness was a common commodity. There was no information about him on his current Mothership, nor indeed on any of the ten thousand Motherships that wheeled the galaxy and beyond, spitting out human pips by the thousands and ten thousands whenever worlds could be found that would tolerate them. Of course Kullervo had been displaced from Mothership to colony to Mothership to another colony so often that perhaps it is no wonder that his Nee-ship, not to mention his age, antecedents—his very Nee-number on Central Recordship—was missing. This, of course, was not entirely new. Births were of course controlled rigidly but hole-in-corner

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alliances were not unheard of among so many billions of billions.

Kullervo's existence was scarcely noteworthy in Man's great splashout through his galaxy and well beyond (in Motherships now, the small planet of his origin was so dimmed that its very mention brought wincings of contempt, as if Earth were a dirty name) in a titanic pattern-wheel that brushed on some three hundred thousand star-colonies at latest count. Who cared who he was? Get rid of him! This time hope it would stick. His Placement card would run through the record-computer again, stamped "Kullervo Kasi—Origin Unknown," and off he would go. Not for long, unhappily. His temperament, some aura he cast off, would cause grown men to shiver and children to hide and throw rocks at him; it happened over and over again. It happened in direct proportion to the available space, to the establishment of new colonies so desperate for muscle that they would take even Kullervo. Robots were expensive. Man was cheap. And if ever a man was expendable, that man was Kullervo Kasi.

Ryler 8 was finis. The period at the end of Kullervo Kasi's worm's existence. In a milieu where man fought against androids and cybernetics to give his own children a chance to get born, an excrescence like him was scarcely tolerable. Like so many other colonies with atmosphere that was breathable but not for sustained periods, certainly not over generations, Ryler 8 wore a plas-dome over its only city to shield its new citizens from the pitiless glare of those seven great eyes, to reduce the heat and keep them and their frugal necessities from shriveling away until the next time the Mothership returned for a look-see. Away she went to offer teat to one of her other offspring, always hoping that each new colony would stick and later provide room to slough off more of her endless supply of children.

"You are an ugly bastard, Kullervo." The heat exploded one of his executioners into breaking the torpid silence. Kullervo acknowledged the gratuitous shove that went with the insult by swabbing sweat out of his eyes so that he could move along faster.

Two sniggered approval. Three, as a gesture of hostility

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encompassing the whole of his new hellish home and the distasteful job at hand, decided to find fault with one.

"Knock it off, Pot," he grumbled. "The sucker's going to get blasted and chucked down that volcanic fissure when we get to it. Isn't that enough for you?"

"No!" Pot's voice was a raw crackle from his parched craw. "It ain't enough! Not nearly enough, All Crud played around with my little sister!"

"Bat-dung! I saw the whole thing. Those vicious sluts at the kangaroo court only twisted what happened to look like that. Your little sister was needling the creep, like that bunch of brats do every morning, waiting on the corner for him to come out of his hole so they could shag rocks at him. Your sister ran up and spit in his face. Kullervo grabbed hold of her arm—"

"He touched her, damn him!"

"So?"

Something in the tone riled Pot into a snarl. He swung out a mean hook; Al ducked easily. "Hell, I didn't mean anything, Pot. Your sister's only twelve. What I meant was he only just touched her arm, krissake. So what? Those damn kids do that every morning. Shag rocks at Kullervo when he comes out of that hole he sleeps in since they kicked him out of the dorm. Call him names. Krissake. What would you do?"

Pot wiped off sweat. "Kids got nothing else to do. You can't blame 'em. Teach-meck's on the blink and no damn place to play. Got to have *some* fun." He stared blamefully at Kullervo's broad bowed back, then, on impulse, grabbed him and spun him around. "Look! Take a good look, All Look at that puss! Wouldn't you say it was made to get spit in?"

Al looked. He looked carefully, for the first time. Curiosity stirred vaguely through the boiling heat. Like most of the other men he had ignored Kullervo as beneath his notice. Too stupid to even yell about it when the colonists' kids screamed bad names at him and hit him with rocks, or when somebody jolted him out of the way on the narrow dome streets.

Maybe there was more to the guy. Maybe.

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The face was too wide, as if somebody had taken hold of those hairy ears and pulled hard. Kullervo's nose was a misplaced lump, not so much oversize as it was distorted. The mouth was purple and wide. The dry-cracked lips bled a little, but it was the big animal teeth, spaced with gaps between, and the tongue lolling out like a hog liver, that made it impossible to even laugh at the guy. His hair straggled like a pile of urine-soaked hay over scabby ears. The eyes seemed to have no color whatever, or else it was because they were set in so deep and the puckers around them were so deep that it just seemed so. The shapeless chin had a cleft in it like another lipless mouth and was vaguely obscene. His chest, bare where the blouse had been ripped in the manhandling during the street-court trial, was heavily matted with yellow-gray hair and there was more of it on the backs of his stubby-fingered hands.

"Yeah. You're right, Pot. You're damn right." He whistled thoughtfully. Colony Captain Ralph Langois had been right when he didn't interfere with the kangaroo court, when he took the word of the vicious scandalmongers who said they had seen Kullervo slinking around during the sleep-periods, molesting kids. Nothing was proved and nobody, even Captain Langois, really believed there was anything to prove. But there was something about Kullervo. . . . Something unnameable. Something that hinted that with a creature like him any outrage was possible, even probable.

Captain Langois' job of running Ryler 8 was no easy one. If just having Kullervo Kasi around made people behave like that then the thing to do was get rid of him. For good. No shunting him back to the Mothership next time it called. Do them all a favor.

"Cap Langois was right to stand by the kangaroo court's decision," Al said aloud.

"Sure he was. We're a democracy, ain't we? What the majority says goes, don't it?" He gave Kullervo a forward shove with his boot. "Only why'n hell did Cap have to pick us?"

They reached the brink of the volcanic fissure. It was deep. The writhing crack belched up tendrils of vomit-making

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gases. You couldn't see how far down it went because of those angry orange-red clouds.

Pot shoved Kullervo Kasi close to the drop; all three of the kill-detail backed up and raised their blasters. Kullervo stood at the drop, his ugly face washed by the sudden dawning of the largest of the seven suns, which Ryler 8 termed morning. This hot star turned Kullervo satanic red, made him blink and grimace, standing there by the volcanic wrinkle, arms dangling helplessly. He seemed not to understand what was about to happen to him, yet when the muzzles of the three long blasters converged on his misshapen body his hands moved up in an age-old gesture of surrender.

Surrender wasn't enough. Die, Kullervo Kasi! Die!

The poisoning fingers stayed, as if to savor this death or reluctant to cause it. Then, awkwardly, Kullervo moved. His right hand darted like a hairy spider into his torn shirt. Something bright and pointed caught the new red sunlight. It made the executioners blink from the backlash, lower blasters.

"Sucker's got a knife!" Pot cried.

"So? Get him before he decides to throw it."

"No! I want it! I need a blade. Looks like a good one. No use letting it go down the drop with him."

Pot moved forward warily. For the first time Kullervo showed fight. Like his curious blue stockings, this bone-handled blade was a personal talisman. His and his alone. He must not lose it, even in death. When Pot's strides brought him within feet, Kullervo jumped aside with an animal yelp. He went into a crouch, made his antique weapon cut the air between them in swift inconclusive jabs.

Pot grinned and touched his blaster's trigger-stud. Fire leaped. Kullervo gave a wolfish howl and flung himself flat on the crusty ground. Like all his movements, it was lumbering and awkward, but for the moment it paid off. He managed to undershoot the deathline. Yet it put him at a disadvantage because he couldn't use his knife as Pot rushed him, angrily. He did attempt to arch up enough to hurl the poinard blade at his enemy but, with a laughing

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shout, Pot leaped, planning to bring his heavy boot down on Kullervo's wrist.

Kullervo dragged his arm back to save himself from crushed bones. The eight-inch blade caught in a flinty outcrop of laval rock. The boot struck down on Kullervo's fingers and wrung an involuntary scream of agony from him. The blow made him lose hold of his precious knife and sit up, shaking the broken fingers as if to shake off the ravening demon pain. It was half a minute before he remembered his treasure and groped down for it, left-handed.

Pot looked at it and swore.

The silver-steel blade had an ancient look to it and that animal-bone handle, blackened by eons, was archaic beyond belief. It spoke of primitive ways on a primitive world.

When he saw what had happened Kullervo Kasi loosed a great cry. It ululated from the depths of an anguished soul. Triangulated between the rock shard and the ground the knife blade had snapped off clean at the bony hilt.

"Damn thing was no good anyway," Pot rationalized. "Too old." Still, he was not inclined to be happy about it and he took out his anger on Kullervo. "On your feet, crud! We got a job to do!"

Kullervo Kasi's pale deep-set eyes were rooted on the broken blade. He began to moan. Nothing else seemed to matter. He didn't hear Pot or feel his boot nudge. He picked up the handle and the blade and held them close to him, crooning hard gritty sobs of intolerable grief for the loss of his one and only treasure, his one and only friend. He was alone. Alone. Alone. His secret thing, his *pukko*, was broken and useless.

"Get up!" Pot commanded. The others waited, grumbling. The big sun was beginning to blast. They were supposed to have finished by now.

Kullervo wailed his grief, rocking back and forth. Then, at Pot's volley of curses, his wide face turned up ominously. He rocked up on his feet, making raw animal sounds deep in his throat. Then he began to talk. The first words anyone within memory had ever heard him say. It wasn't space-idiom. No. It was a roaring torrent of biting alien words like rocks being crushed by raging tides. A language for-

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gotten for millennia, spewed up out of Kullervo Kasi's cells in a storm because of what had happened to his *pukko*.

Pot rolled back under the wave of harsh noises. Al called out, "C'mon back here! He's gone ape! Stand away! I'll cut the sucker down!"

Pot wrenched his eyes away from what had always seemed a docile beast of burden, a butt for every man's errant hostility, and what had suddenly about-faced into a thunderstorm of unbridled fury. Then all three of them started blasting.

Kullervo turned on them with a feral snarl. Then, with a doleful croak like a crow's caw, he ran to the brink of the fissure and jumped.

They gaped cautiously over the edge at the swirling cloud masses of demoniac color and frightful stink. Not even a sigh came back up to them as the ugly unwanted lump of life-tissue vanished into the raw planetary wound.

II

WHILE IT WAS NO novelty to be prodded awake by something sharp, this time an angry difference made Kullervo Kasi leap to his feet faster than usual.

Where was he? Why could he feel pain? For that matter: *why was he?*

His eyes told him nothing. It was dark around him, dark and dank and cold. While his sleep-sanded eyes dug around him for hints, his hands groped the corner he lay in, finding the stony angles indeed clammy and tomb-like. The dark and the cold suggested death (not the fiery death of Ryler 8, surely!), but the biting hurt in his forearm didn't. He labored his mind over thoughts of being alive and guessed he must be. His legs and arms were prickling and tingling as from a long sleep, as his blood began pumping sluggishly out of his heart and around his arterial channels.

"If I'm not dead . . ." All his life Kullervo had talked

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to himself, since nobody else would unless it was something derisive or to issue him an order; usually both. "Or maybe this is Hell? Is this Hell, I wonder?" Someplace he had heard about where bad people went when they died, and there was no doubt at all that Kullervo was bad. Wicked. Evil. He had been told so often enough and there was no reason not to believe them; *they* were so clever and important.

Kullervo sighed.

He was content, in a way, Before, trying so hard to understand what life was all about, with nobody patient or interested enough to help him (even to hook him up to a machine), he had been left with an ever-present sense of burning shame about himself. Maybe it had something to do with his mother. He didn't know much about her, since she died soon after he was born. She wasn't much good, he was told or overheard: he couldn't remember for sure. What happened was that she had birthed him secretly behind the trash disposers, then tried to open one of the sealed hoppers and throw him in. She couldn't get it open, fainted out of weakness, and Kullervo was left there for the Mothership's kitchen menials to find next morning. Later, when he was five or six, he used to sneak out of the orphan's sector of the great wheeling starship and down to the trash grinders and obliterators. Laying his cheek against the warm thrumming surface of a giant machine he would imagine *it* to be his mother. Nobody liked him, even then, so Kullervo had to flounder out things for himself, and with his thick skull that wasn't easy.

His father? Who knows? Perhaps nobody, not even the white stars salted across the endless skies. . . .

Nobody had liked him, this much he knew all too well. Why? He had only to look casually into one of the polished surfaces of the great cookers in the kitchens where he toiled. The medics who demicrobed him and made him live didn't. His teachers didn't, usually finding an excuse to expel him from their classes as a disruptive influence. So this is how it had ended up. Down here in the stygian dark where nobody could see how ugly he was.

A coldness that was alive slithered over his legs. Reaching down to fling it away his hands discovered that it had

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fangs on one end. He found that out when they bit into his arm.

"Owwwww!" he howled. His wolfish protest echoed dolefully across the dank stony surfaces.

Now he knew what had wakened him. A nibbling serpent. His howl rippled a sea of hissing around him and a sinister rustling. Snakes. Hundreds. Thousands. A dungeonful of them, slithering like great black worms over and under and around each other; now, it seemed to Kullervo Kasi, moving methodically toward him to fang the intruder.

Kullervo loosed a small whimper and tried to climb the wall behind him. There were erosions in the masonry between the great rough stones and he managed to find chinks for his boots and clamber up away from that ocean of reptilian flesh and fang.

He clung there, whimpering and waiting.

He thought maybe the snakes were curious or that he was warm and they liked warm. Then he thought about his *pukko*. His treasure. He felt under his blouse where he had fashioned a kind of pocket against his hide. Yes. It was there. It was broken in two. It wouldn't help him much against all those serpents, anyway. But he still had the pieces. He had that much. The broken *pukko* and his blue stockings.

He was shivering so hard from the chill that he knew it was only a matter of time before his fingers would be numb and he'd have to go. Desperately he thought when that happened he would run. He would probably fall and then all those fangs would dig his flesh and kill him for sure; but he would try. He went a step further. Why wait until his hands and feet were numbed? Do it now!

About to drop, he was aware of a faint glow of light blossoming off in the dark, outlining the high curve of a long tunnel. The light grew and brightened. It swung to and fro in a zigzagging arc, bisected by shadowy sprouting fingers.

It was a lantern, an ancient wooden lamp fed by fat-oil, a clumsy thing. The man holding it up was big, stooped, and his attire matched the antiqueness of the lantern. He wore chain mail over leg-tight hose, a vivid scarlet cowl

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over lank slag-blond hair; a thick broadsword clanged from his wide back, bent as he walked toward Kullervo's spider-cling.

"Down, dungeon worm! She wants you!"

"Wants *me!*" Out of wonder that anyone would have use for him, and relief, Kullervo dropped in front of the burly warrior, happy that the black serpents fled, hissing, from the light.

"The starwitch, Louhi, dung-hopper! Come!" He fondled the palm-greased butt of a whip he carried slung over his shoulder significantly.

There was no more conversation. Kullervo shambled after him down the long corridor, and others, up long flights of stairs, bemused but grateful to be out of the snake dungeon. He never thought to disobey anyone; it didn't take whips. They told him what to do and he did it. Still, there was a small spark of new rebellion within him, a spark that had leaped into being the instant he had looked down at his *pukko* and seen that Pot had broken it.

As for now, to be warm would be enough. And food. Most of his tasks had been in and around hydroponics tanks and kitchens; the more disagreeable chores, of course. But there was always food, even when it was the next thing to garbage.

Narrow steep stairways led them up, up, up. Kullervo was weak from hunger and cold; his belly gurgled plaintive hints; the warrior in red and black muttered angry thoughts to himself whenever he bothered to glance back to see if Kullervo was still dog-loping behind. The spiraling climb seemed endless. Kullervo held onto his spinning head. Finally, where an enormously high peaked entrance was clothed in soft folds of rich black velvet, the cowled swordsman pulled up. He clunked his boot three times on the stone for a signal.

Kullervo heard a harsh hideous scream penetrate the velvet.

The warrior grabbed hold of Kullervo's arm, pushed him sprawling between the folds of curtain. Kullervo's bowed legs tottered him ludicrously half across a floor like polished black onyx; his impromptu ballet carried him very near a

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dais covered with vivid green fur carpeting, a dais with a high intricately carved throne on it.

When he saw the figure on the throne Kullervo bleated, knees buckling and flopping him face down on the black floor an inch from the viridian green fur. He lay there, panting for breath, not daring to look up.

"Look at me!" the figure on the throne shrieked.

The demand was not to be disobeyed. Kullervo Kasi arched up, crawling his hands from under him, careful not to touch the carpet. His obedience was that of a hunting dog; as for the creature on the throne, nobody would dare to do less than she commanded.

Louhi, the starwitch, was perched in the center of her carved throne, here at the center of her tower chamber, more like some bird of prey than the empress which her trappings suggested. Her shrunken bones were bundled in soft green furs like the carpeting, only of a lighter, more delicate shade and much fluffier and downier, as if her robe were made from an unborn star-animal of the mammoth breed which had provided the enormous rug. A thin slice of window cut in the tower rock leaked in uneasy light and sifting fogs, but it was from two stardragon flambeaus leaping spectrally out of high dark cups that Kullervo was able to view the true horror that was Starwitch Louhi, Hag-Mistress of the wandering space-island once called Pohyola. Rooted on a small planet once called Earth, Louhi's island had, by her witchery, taken off starward on eldritch voyagings to the darkest, most evil corners of the universe. Louhi possessed infinite evil, garnered to her island as if it were a sponge to soak up all that is wicked in time and eternity. One of her tricks was a time overfold, by which she remained alive on her befogged space-island eternally, while generations of her human slaves came and went.

"Yes, star-scum!" she gibbered down. "I am Louhi. This is the Black Castle of Pohyola!"

Kullervo gurgled, gaping. Her face was black as pitch, like a wrinkled animate lump of coal; it was quite inhuman now, contorted by such emotions and deeds as must never be told. Her eyes were like a condor's, or some worse

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star-spawned bird of prey, crimson edged and bleeding into blank holes at the center that seemed to be pinpoint windows into her diseased soul. Kullervo thought he saw *things* crawling around behind those windows.

They looked at each other for a long moment, Kullervo frozen into near-idiocy, Louhi savoring his bowel-twisting panic. It was ugly looking at ugly. Louhi measured Kullervo carefully with her eyes, her yardsticks for evil. She gave him a toothless grin then, and a horrendous cackle that frightened what scuttled along the high rafters over her head. She lifted up her snake-stick and made it hiss, pointing it at him.

"Up! Up on your feet!"

Kullervo climbed up clumsily.

"Who are you?"

Kullervo's lolling purple tongue darted back between his thick cracked lips.

"Kullervo Kasi, Mistress."

The starwitch flung spittle between her toothless black gums. "What else are you, Kullervo?"

"Kasi," he gulped. "Kullervo Kasi, nothing else."

"Kasi. . . ." She swore. "I like that not." She pinched her eyes nearly shut, while flat shafts of light struck him with the force of gimlets into his brain. "How do you know what you are? Who gave you these names?"

Kullervo lolled his tongue thoughtfully. "I don't know, Mistress. I only know that's who I am. That's all I know."

"Your father?"

Kullervo shrugged.

"Your mother?"

"She tried to get rid of me in the trash-machine after I was born but she couldn't get the door open."

"So? Yes! I believe you. You are too lackwit to make these things up. You were born with that name branded on your cells. There couldn't be another. There shouldn't have been even one!" That horrific cackle again. "Did you know that? There should never have been any like you? You are made of matter and energy that offends the very star-fire in this universe. Did you know that?"

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"No, Mistress."

"It is true. You are a mistake, a seed-leak out of some dimension that all within this sphere of existence must abhor whether it will or no. Of course half of you is human or you would have been squashed out of existence a long time ago."

Kullervo pondered, grimacing. "That is why they hate me," he said finally.

"Yes. That is why they hate you. All but Louhi. I love you for the very reason that they hate you. Do you understand that, worm?"

Kullervo blinked up at her. To be loved by a creature like the starwitch of Pohyola was, after all, something. He must be grateful for small favors.

"Where did you get those blue stockings?"

Kullervo gawked down at his legs with glum pride; his arduously knitted joys were sodden from sweat and blood; there were holes in them, yet they were still more or less whole. Seeing them brought a rush of something like happiness.

"I made them myself. I stole the skeins, dyed them myself. I watched one of the cooks on the Mothership knit until I learned how. It took a long time. I had to work at night behind the cooks and unravel a lot when I made mistakes."

"Why? Why did you make them?"

Kullervo's wide face went blank. Why? Why had he knitted the blue stockings? He had never thought why before. It was obvious, was it not? He *had* to! Something inside him said that Kullervo must wear bright blue stockings. Did there have to be another reason?

"Never mind, Kullervo. I know why. It was because you are one with your ancestor of the ancient days of Wainomoinen." She began to trepan his brain again with those scalpels in her eyes. "Is there anything else?"

Kullervo's inner arm felt the broken *pukko* in its secret pocket. Its hardness dug his flesh pleasantly.

"No," he said. "Should there be something else, Mistress?"

It was his first effort to be devious and subtle. And it worked. Louhi had said it and she believed it: Kullervo was

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too stupid and lackwitted to think for himself or to invent things. He was like a blank sheet of paper on which she would inscribe her evil spells.

III

"*KYLLÄ!*" the starwitch cried, clapping her claws together and exuding her grating cackle of triumph. "You are he. You are Kullervo again, as Carl Lempi was Lemminkainen, as Ilmar was Ilmarinen, as Wane Panu was Wainomoinen. The repeat cycle has gnawed away Time and here you are! *Hyyä!* I knew it when the Call came to save you from the fires of that miserable little planet."

"Call?"

"One of my friends of the Black Nebula signaling me; caught me poking about in odd corners. When I caught the glimpse of those blue stockings I knew Hiisi had put me on the right track. You were already falling into the abyss, so I stopped Time and plucked you out of the red smoke. Yes. You made those blue stockings to good purpose. They led me to you; they and the ancient oaths you swore out before you jumped."

Kullervo gasped. "But—the fire!"

Louhi cackled. "Fire and I are old friends. Except . . . Never mind! Did you ever wonder why the Vanhat chose the bleak frozen part of Terra to settle on when they left Otava?"

Kullervo's brain strained, but nothing came of it. He gave her a moronic tongue loll. Partially, he was dwelling on those last moments on Ryler 8. If the blue stockings were to save him by attracting Starwitch Louhi, then what about the *pukko*? What was the *pukko* for? A small voice whispered that what Louhi did not already know was best kept secret. Louhi said she loved him. She loved him to her own purposes and she could about-face in an instant if he failed to please her. She could kill him even more quickly than she had saved him. Keep silent! Save the *pukkol*

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"They were mean to me on Ryler 8. Worse than before." His voice was flat but emotions Louhi was conjuring up within him intimated the possibility of vindictive resentment.

"Never mind. They are all dead, every one of the *perkele* colonists who picked on you."

"Dead?"

"*Niin*. I took a moment to give the fire-demon at the heart of Ryler 8 a small nudge. After we were gone he blew his top. They are all blasted to hell and gone."

Kullervo stared.

"Well, say thanks! Smile!"

"Thanks, Mistress." Kullervo's smile was dutiful, although artificial. He had never smiled in his life. He didn't know how.

"You understand that I didn't bring you here to Pohyola out of the kindness of my great mother heart." Her face took on a ghoulish simper. "I have work for you, Kullervo."

"You need a pot-washer, Mistress?"

Louhi swore a thousand nameless oaths. The burbling cackle that followed was near to friendly, practically lascivious. "Not precisely, youth. I have my bed-needs as well as the next one, and while you are no beauty in truth, you are strong as a young bull. You suit me."

Had he known what she was talking about Kullervo would have shuddered. Yet, perhaps not, after all. Kullervo was scarcely one to be choosy, either.

"It will please me also to open up that brain of yours a little. Teach you how to think. But *my* way, understand! And when I have taught you and tired of your body, off you will go on an errand I have in mind. It may well be that no one in the universe is as suited to this errand as Kullervo the Ugly, the Unwanted and Unwantable. Kullervo, Son of Kullervo the Pilgrim of Evil."

Kullervo was fed by the rawboned hellion in charge of the kitchens. He was saunaed and beaten with birch branches until his back was red as a sunset on fire, then he was given more food and permitted to sleep behind the stove where it was nice and warm and vermin were at a minimum, thanks

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to the spell-ridden pots Marikki, the cow of the kitchen, had wheedled out of Louhi's abacus of sorcery.

Twelve hours later Louhi called him to her for his first lesson. . . .

"Sit there, lover-boy." Louhi pointed to a clutch of piled yellow silk cushions near the snapping fireplace, a great black gulp of demon's belly. "Drag them closer to me. There." Something like a sigh puffed out of her lipless gap. "You remind me a bit of my Koko, who fed my fire for me some thousands of sun-turns back. A useful wart, Koko. I must remind myself to trap me another of his ilk when I am in his old neighborhood, some megaparsecs south of Orion. They're a skittish tribe, not easy to catch. Never mind. You shall fetch logs for the fire as he did, feed the fire to warm my bones. We shall not be interrupted and I shall cram that empty head of yours as full of wisdom as suits my purposes."

Kullervo obeyed with alacrity. His belly had been filled twice, he had snored away his skin lacerations and his exhaustion as never before, and when he woke there were fresh clothes for him to put on. His blue stockings had been washed and mended. He had shooed Marikki's maid away by feigning modesty in dressing and thus contrived to switch the *pukko* from his old blouse to the new embroidered one. He sat before the starwitch, hugging his knees with animal contentment.

"Niin." She surveyed him critically but not without her own brand of satisfaction. "You are to be my alter-ego. But not quite. I must not permit you too much power or else it might go to your head. Where to start? Where indeed? Give me clue, bull-youth. What do you know besides what I have already taught you?"

"Nothing, Mistress."

"Nothing. Yet surely you picked up some knowledge of the Ussi state of your Mothership, even by accident."

"I cleaned pots and cookers. I can fetch and carry what you will."

"So can a dog. Niin. Well, tell me this—have you ever heard of a planet called Terra?"

"No, Mistress."

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"Earth?"

"There is earth at the bottom of the grow-tanks."

"Forget it. We must start then with Terra. That is where all the Ussi—all the Motherships, all the three hundred thousands of their *perkele* colonies—that is where it all started. Terra is a small green world (or at least once was), in a system fire-fed by Sol. It was on Terra that Ussi life began, first crawling up out of the slimes and taking on many tiresome shapes and forms until finally it developed a cunning predatory nature and became Man. Of course Man never did learn the older more fundamental secrets of the universe, related to what the Vanhat call gods, but with the machinery he developed over the eras he didn't do half-bad."

"Vanhat." Kullero frowned. It was like something calling him out of a dream, that name. Louhi had said it before, but this time, with his body-cells less harassed, the two syllables meant something. "Otava." The name caught in his throat.

"Sol! The memory is there, deep down in your cells. It will need dragging out, of course. Tell me what the Vanhat are? Are they men?"

"No," Kullervo blurted. "They are like men but they were born on Otava, the Great Bear. They left Otava because—because—"

The thread stuck. "Why did they leave, Mistress?"

"Never mind," Louhi said irritably. Every time the name Vanhat came up she winced. To hear about them from someone else gorged up the festering demand for vengeance that still stuck in her condor's craw. "The Ussi developed their brains and their capacities for creating machines of many kinds, but with all this something was lost. Something that seems simple yet is actually as profound as the true rhythm of the universe itself. Mostly they overpopulated themselves, out of some racial pride, into the stars as far as their machines would take them. Far indeed, yet not far enough. Their insatiable self-propagation brought them to All-Kill."

"All-Kill?"

"Niin. Their first centuries of star colonization were

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practically prudish. They tried to make friends with the aliens they encountered, even while shoving them off their own planets. There were wars. Frightful, beautiful wars! I loved them! But it was not until the Ussi decided that All-Kill was best that the fun and games really started. Wayne Panu, of Vanhat blood, started it. Ironically, since the Vanhat detest all war and rapine. That was why they concealed themselves in Underearth so long, so that the Ussi would not discover the Power they possessed and use it to sweep the universe clean of all life but theirs!

"Oh, they are clever, the Ussi! They make piteous excuses about how their children must find homes! They must eat! They must copulate! They must this and that! All-Kill took some time and guts working up to, but they made it. Under All-Kill they sent their manships to any new prospective colony which their probings recommended as suitable. These manships arbitrarily destroyed all intelligent and quasi-intelligent life on this planet. All. Before they knew what that life was all about. Before they could be irritated by a preliminary war of conquest, or whatever glib phrase their propaganda chose to call it. Before compassion set in. That was the most important thing of all. The machines of the Ussi had taught their creators the creed of justification-by-computer-decision and from then on they permitted themselves no scruples. The *machines* said this must be done! Do it! Kill them all! Breed and kill!"

"They are terrible, terrible people," Kullervo surprised himself by saying.

"Not at all," the starwitch cackled. "I admire them. They bore me because they can't see the real truths behind their ancient legends even when the truth—and the incredible Power that goes with it—exists right under their mechanical noses! The Vanhat existed among them, before Underearth, for millennia and they kept their one-track minds occupied with *machines*. Machines! When they might have done much more than they have done, and a good deal faster, by the use of cosmic power-rhythms within their own minds. Do I need machines? *Perkele!* I do what I do straight from here!" Louhi poked a finger like a black

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talon at her forehead. "I rove where and when I please. I seek out others like myself who use evil for their toy, demons from the Black Nebula and elsewhere. I happen to be a member of their sorcerous cult in very good standing, I am proud to say. I evade Time and life forever. I have my slaves to amuse me during the dull intervals. And now I have you!"

"Aye, Mistress. But what for?"

"What for? I have important work for you! Now, disgusting as I find it to speak of them—I must dwell further on my ancient enemies, the Vanhat. I won't bother you with my reasons for hating them so much. These things will come to you as I stir my spoon into that vacuum you call a mind. The memories are all there, deep in your cells. My prodding will call them up when they are needed. Enough to say that I still hate them and that somehow or other their residue has escaped my wrath. Terra itself is a blighted forsaken world, drained of all use, but somewhere . . . somehow . . ." Her gimlet eyes leaped with hell's own fire.

"I remember something now," Kullervo stated ingenuously. "On the Mothership once I heard somebody mention Terra. One of the officers heard it, too. He told the old man never to say the name again. Why?"

"Because the mere sound of it reminds the Ussi that they were not always star-creatures. Their roots were in the Terran slimes. They think they have outgrown the small dot that first brought them life, as a child outgrows his sandbox. They prefer to forget the sardine-can of a world of hundreds of Levels, into the ground and above it. Some of their scientists advised caution in the spacial outfling; the young hotheads didn't want caution, saw no reason for it. *Niin*. They are embarrassed by the name Terra because they have forsaken their original Mother for many thousands of mechanical mothers. They drained it dry, then they left it to die like a raped maiden."

A log snapped on the fire. Showers of red embers flashed up into the mouth between the fire-dogs. Kullervo thought of the flashing fleets of Motherships after one of the great galactic Conclaves, the busy-busy rush of the mechanical

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mothers off on their duties among the Ussi colonies. He had seen these things, marveling without knowing he did because it was second nature to him, like breathing. The idea of these starflung beings tied down to one small world was nothing less than incredible now. It made even Kullervo feel uncomfortable, shackled.

He thought about the times when, a timid ugly boy, he had crawled among the thrumming waste-obliterators because the sight of all that blackness outside the ports, all those flint-white stars, frightened some deep genetic memory within his being. There was comfort, solace, in huddling there among the warm machines. The sky was so open, so big, so immense, so without end. It promised, yet it was ruthless.

How would it be to live on some small green planet of pine trees and soft flowers? To feel the heart of the planet beating under you? To scent the rich warm loam, see the eager thrust of new buds coming out of it in the spring? From deep, deep within him his cells cried out for such a mother.

This was a rare new process for Kullervo Kasi.

He could yearn. He could hope.

Never before had he been permitted the luxury of wishing for something he did not have or being what he was not. He was too ugly, too brute, too nothing.

Now, staring into the fire, listening to the starwitch's contemptuous résumé of Man's plunge into the stars and forever, at the last, away from his small green mother-world, Kullervo sensed the rarest of rare dreams moving up within him.

He shivered, suddenly caught by a chill spacial wind. No. No use. It couldn't happen. Nothing good could ever happen to Kullervo. He was an inter-dimensional sport. A mistake. All life forms here must despise him; they couldn't help themselves. He must wander the starwastes forever alone, never touching beauty or joy.

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IV

WORSE STILL, he was Starwitch Louhi's toy. And there was nothing he could do about it. Nothing whatever.

Days, weeks fled by the befogged hell-island, as if in dread of the Hag's mastery of time. Kullervo was content to stuff himself full in the kitchen, marveling in the fresh farm produce and meat the slaves raised on this once-Terra land, abetted by Louhi's magic. On the Mothership it was mostly hydroponics fodder, nutritious chemically but tasteless. Here were great rounds of rye bread, meat porridges, sweet soups made of dried plums and cranberries from the misty fens. Marikki, the Castle's cow of a housekeeper and kitchen supervisor, grudged the new member of the household better rations after she found out what went on in the deeps of the night. Even the red-cowled warriors Louhi had about to impress demoniac guests and keep the slaves subservient gave Kullervo wary respectful nods when he ventured out on small prowls of curiosity. The slinking black hounds with the red eyes warned him by a show of knifish fangs and low growls when his curiosity took him into dark chambers he must not visit.

One evening, after the usual lesson, he hulked out of the kitchen down across the rear service courtyard to the slaves' barracks. Through a rip in his oiled-hide window he had noticed the slaves file silently, every evening after their long day's toil and feeding, out of the twin barracks buildings and march in unison down past the barns to a low bowl of meadowland where a single-file cowpath led toward a thicket of pines. He decided to follow them tonight, to see where they went. Such apparent freedom of movement, lockstep though it was, surprised him.

He kept himself well back out of sight, slipping from wood pile to bakehouse to pump well to stable, watching with wonder in his eyes. After the moving queue of linsey-woolsey clad servitors came four cowled guards, yawning

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and idly slapping their bare thighs with their whips. But there was no need for threat. The slaves moved docile as cattle and kept their heads bowed. Generations of servitude had taught bitter lessons.

Kullervo skulked his way off path through the waist-high barley field, watching the slaves move to the very edge of the meadow, which had a high blue picket fence around it to keep the stock from wandering into the forest. There was a wide packed-down circle here and a charred spot set ceremoniously for a fire. The slaves found seats on smoothed rocks and logs set about. In grave silence two youths stepped forward and lighted the fire.

Kullervo remained wolf-furtive among the grain stalks, even after the yawning guards took off back to the courtyard. These humble serfs would despise him for other reasons than most did; they would resent his familiarity with their evil Mistress, perhaps stone him. Concealed behind a knoll, he watched what happened next with mingled emotions. On the Motherships there had been vis-tapes and music-tapes, sometimes dancing. Kullervo had watched from hiding as he was now. Here on Louhi's startrap life was harsh. Louhi wanted it that way. It was part of her revenge against the Vanhat. She kept her slaves simple and docile, weeding out all signs of cerebral rebellion. Yet they must be permitted one small outlet for their emotions, some shred of hope where there was none, else they would turn into mindless idiots and have to be destroyed. So—this—the entertainment-religion-psychotherapy of their eons-ancient ancestors.

The Fire-sing.

There was something special and warm about this fire. Watching the merry flames sprout and dance made the fogs overhead, which hang over Pohyola like a gray dense pall forever, less oppressive, less dreary. Fire kept fear at bay, as it had kept the wolves away from the huts and campsites of the ancients. Kullervo, too, stared mesmerized into the leaping flames and, as the slaves did, he saw strange wondrous shapes in them. . . .

The long moment's silence was like a prayer period. Forbidden thoughts, genetic memories of lost dreams,

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stirred in the minds of the slaves. When emotion reached a tautness that demanded release, Kullervo saw a whitebeard in a long rope-girdled robe of skyblue take his place near the fire on a hump of ground hardened into stone from such use. His gnarled hands held a strange instrument in them, a harp; now his trembling old fingers touched the strings.

Notes like golden drops spilled across the silent meadow. Singly first, then in a cascade of melody so piercingly sweet and elfin-strange that Kullervo found his eyes blurring and the fire circle swimming before his eyes.

Like so many other things for him, this too was new. Kullervo knew nothing of tears, of tenderness, of beauty. No. He hadn't the soul for it. Must be a sudden gust of nightwind off the craggy mountain cliff to the north.

The harper played on, closing his hoar-frosted eyes. The smile on his lips and the light in the eyes of his listeners transcended time and space and their bitter lives under Louhi's whip.

After awhile a voice broke out in song; involuntarily a shy-eyed maiden stood and added ancient words to the magic of the *kantele*. She sang about a beautiful summer's night of shining stars, stars that were reflected in the depths of a clear mountain lake. When that was over the bard urged the happy mood further with a song of children playing games around a wintry hearth. There was a refrain to it and all the slaves took it up until the echoes of their happiness rang far across the barley fields even to the frowning brow of the cliffs and the high tower of the Black Castle hidden in the mist. In the forest sleepy birds took up the tune. Kullervo listened and marveled at such pleasant din.

There was more. The ancient in the blue robe now sang stories, legends. He rolled out majestic *runas* about brave heroes who surely must have existed, once. There was Lemminkainen, the Golden Apple of Ilmatar, the World Weaver. There was Ilmarinen, the red-bearded forger of the magic Sampo, the Star Mill which could refashion all one might wish out of the raw elements of creation. There was Wainomoinen, the greatest wizard of all, whose songs re-

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vealed Creation: Wainomoinen, whose copper starboat yet rides the skies. When, breathless, the old man stopped his singing, a boy stepped out and tugged his robe.

"Where are these things, Grandfather? Why can't we go there?"

The minstrel bent and took the child's shoulder firmly. "This world of which Wainomoinen sang is out there." He pointed up. "Beyond the fog. We can take our joy in remembering that once it did exist. But there is an even older world to which we once belonged. Otava. There were those of Otava called the Valmis, whose soul-fires leaped out into the stars and became part of them. These things we know and believe and—perhaps one day we shall be permitted to join them. . . ."

Squatting cross-legged for his lesson next morning, Kullervo wore a far-off look which did not miss the starwitch's shrewd eyes. She reached down and tapped him on the head with her snake-stick.

"What are you mooning about, lover-boy? Is it that I have set a force in motion by stirring up thoughts in your alien brain that I shall live to regret? If so . . ."

"I was thinking about the fire," Kullervo said truthfully. He turned quickly toward the smoldering red embers of the stony black fireplace mouth. "It wants tending."

"Tend it then! You are becoming a lazy slug, Kullervo! For that I shall double your lessons so that you may be off on my errand and earn your keep."

Kullervo fed the fire and poked it into flame. He kept his back to the witch to hide his thoughts from those gimlets in her eyes. Not that they were anything but half-formed glimmerings of self-want, a restless desire to get away from Pohyola and use some of the new wits Louhi had implanted in him.

He sat before her, fist under chin, the ugliest of thinkers. Louhi eyed him carefully for a long time.

"*Niin*," she affirmed finally. "It is time. This will be your final lesson."

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V

LOUHI DRONED her strange story of Terra and the Vanhat. Kullervo Kasi listened agape, tongue lolling, his mind bubbling like a tea kettle in his effort to engulf such a prodigious and unsavory lump.

Once upon a time, it seemed, Terra had been green and fair. That was before the Ussi, through overpopulation, turned it into a ball of eggcrate Levels where billions lived under synthetic suns, eating synthesized food from the sea, dreaming hopelessly of the time when they might find elbow-room on one of the star colonies. As the population exploded and the lists became longer (for nothing could stem the tide of procreation which the Water-Mother had set in motion in the primordial depths), the urge to move off Terra became a demand, then a battle. Most of the beauty of Terra was vanished. Animals. Birds. Fishes. Only the insects were able to outwit the insatiable overtaker of the world, Man. As it had in the humble beginning of life on Earth, the sea fed her masses. Great islands jutted out into the oceans on all coasts, islands of kelp beds and plankton, which could be synthesized into food. Other islands were mobile and roved the deeper oceans, seeking and stripping them of all flecks of food and minerals for the space-thrust.

Finally Terra was depleted, useless. Most of the colonies were so far out that to use Terra as home-base any longer was an incredible waste. The way to and fro was too far. Little by little all the immaculate antiseptic Levels with their great computers became enormous junk piles. The Levels were replaced by Motherships.

Man's origin became doubtful, after another thousand years and a hundred thousand more colonies. All but the most avid students of Ussi anthropology refused to believe the old tale of Terra. It was incredible, considering how far out Man had gone and what he had conquered. Such fairy stories were for toddlers and lackwits. Progress and the future of Man lay out there, further and further.

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Never look back.

"That's how it was," Louhi cackled, satisfied. "The Ussi pushed out into the stars and left the little world of their origin to decay and stew in its own befouled juices."

"Isn't there anybody there? Not anybody?"

Louhi scowled black.

"Who knows what there is? A few handfuls of half-animals forgotten in the mad scramble. There was talk of doing a clean job of it—searing Terra clean the way the manships seared prospective colonies clean of life under All-Kill. A few sentimental scientists stayed the hands of the careless young bucks, however." The shriveled crone hunched down in her furs so that only those malevolent eyes of hers shone out like corpse-maggots. She looked like a serpent getting ready to spring. Kullervo shivered.

"It was only lately that I learned," she mumbled. "They are as hard to stamp out as bugs under a cowcake! But I shall do it! I shall kill every one of them—and you shall be my weapon!"

"Ki! the Ussi? But there are so *many!*"

"Not the Ussi, worm! Their wicked blunderings keep me amused. In their own way they are as evil as I am. The way they strip and pervert planets to their uses titilates my old bones. They will doubtless get around to another All-Kill after a while. They're working up to it."

"Then—?"

"The Vanhat, stupid! My ancient enemies, the Vanhat!"

"I thought they were gone. Mixed up into the Ussi or—?"

"So did I, gnat's dung! But it would seem that my triumph was premature. Somewhere the Vanhat still exist! Somehow!"

"Where?" Kullervo asked innocently.

"Where but on Terra, of course! Somewhere in hiding, somewhere on that bespoiled junkheap!"

"Why there, Mistress?"

"Because of the old prophecy, idiot!"

"Which prophecy is that, Mistress?"

"The Return to Otava, of course! I *told* you—"

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"No, Mistress," Kullervo ventured meekly. "I'm sure you meant to but you didn't."

"I'm telling you now, Son of Kullervo. They are there in some fashion, waiting for the day when Otava will be green again and they can return to it. But that day won't come—ever! They will never leave Terra. Why? Because you will go there and seek them out, Kullervo. Think of how badly the Vanhat treated your ancestor—the first Kullervo. For what they did to him and would to you, also, if they could—you will kill them all, and this will put the lid down on my vengeance forever! My vengeance—and yours!"

PART TWO

THE JUNKYARD

“Thus the Hag her vengeance seeking
Sped to earth her hound, Kullervo;
To the wasted world of phantoms,
Here to taste the dregs of folly,
Here to crush the spark that lingers.”

SONG OF THE VANHAT; *Runo LX*

VI

HE FOUND HIMSELF blinking and hawking, muscles in his flanks twitching like a nervous stallion's, at the summit of a tower: a tower as unlike Pohyola's Castle as Kullervo was unlike handsome Lemminkainen, Ilmatar's Golden Apple. This tower was metallic, still gleaming mutedly under its patina of indeterminable dirt and corrosion. Truly, the Ussi had built well. The dead cannibalized machines around him suggested that this pinnacle spearing open sky had once been employed to disseminate information, perhaps throughout all the busy ant colony world of Levels and islandéd oceans.

Now—silence.

Utter, accusive silence.

Man had gone and left his Babel tower and his toys behind him. Kullervo shuffled across the littered chamber, glancing idly at the walls where they had been ripped open carelessly (neatness didn't count before that last great exodus), so that components of these machines could be transferred to the Motherships. It was this looting and

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cannibalizing of all the prideful computers and other shining artifacts that Man had spent so many thousands of years building and perfecting that had turned Terra into a monstrous pile of corroding junk. It was as if a journey-pride hysteria had overtaken the last of the Ussi and they took gleeful delight in gratuitous destruction, much like delinquent children. They were leaving. They would never come back. Bust it up! Smash everything! To hell with Terra—forever!

Kullervo stood at the shattered window ledge, staring out at the jumble of twisted writhing metals and plastics of the topmost once-gardened Level. A thousand snowy winters and boiling summers had contributed to the havoc. The open gardens, untended, were sterile patches of dust.

"It's all dead," Kullervo muttered into the hollow whine of March wind. "Dead, dead, dead. There's nobody left. Nobody at all." He shivered. The wind was gentle, but it bit deep.

Yet . . .

If there was anybody left, they wouldn't be up here. They would be down in the lower levels where it was warm. Or, having reverted, they would have sought out the patches of ground, where there were no Levels, to raise crops and perhaps livestock. Not that there were likely to be any animals left. Zoos, perhaps? Estrays? Mountain beasts which had somehow managed to evade Man's omnivorous gut?

Kullervo strained his mind to gather together all the bits of biological knowledge he had snatched from here and there (mostly Louhi's hints), and came up with two more or less concrete ideas. The sea had been the Ussi's last source of food and mineral supply. Whatever forms the human debris which had been left on the junk pile had they would have to eat. The oceans of Terra would feed them. He must hunt them on the sea.

He made a Christian cross on the dust shambling from one window to another. Sunward, he sniffed a hint of salt and iodine in the air. The ocean must be that way, his colonizing spates told him. But it was far away and there was one other possibility.

Below.

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Far below. Man had stripped his birth-world of most other life, but there were life forms which even his poison could not genocidically destroy. Not quite.

Insects.

Worms.

Food.

It took a long time; there were so many Levels. Finally, out of sheer boredom in a descent that seemed to pull him down practically to the center of the planet, Kullervo investigated some of the metal cables attached to the powerless round plas-metal elevators and found that by wrapping his arms and legs around one of the cables he could slide down them, sometimes for five or more Levels at a drop. Of course the elevators had employed some manner of pneumatic device; the cables within the buckled plastic wall were merely for use during power failures or troubleshooting; still, with the dust on them to provide friction, they served his purpose well.

The starwitch had given him no tools. Nothing but word-sorcery with which to kill her ancient enemies and his; and, incidentally, slay any monsters he might encounter on his way to them. One thing she had provided in an off-hand manner. Light. A kind of nimbus light projected out from him wherever needful. When Kullervo asked, artlessly, why her dungeon-keeps and farm hands needed ancient lanterns she became angry. Why should she waste sorcery on those clods? Kullervo might have witch's light only because it freed his mind and his hands for the task she had set him. Kullervo saw from her pinched look that a kind of penurious greed possessed Louhi of Pohyola, the same selfishness which had impelled her to keep the Sampo of endless resource all to herself even though it could provide all of everything any number could wish for.

Finally there were no more Levels. He had reached bottom. It was indeed warm down here, but the air was fetid and noisome. It smelled of graves and rot overlaid with sharply acid excrement. It was these mingled odors that told Kullervo Kasi that life did exist down here in the cavernous dark, ghoulish life that skittered the borderland between normal human existence and the worm. . . .

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Coughing and retching, Kullervo dug his stinging eyes down the long black corridors radiating out from the hub where the elevator shaft ended. Which one? Some of them looked different from the usual high square-cut Levels streetways. Newer. Caves laboriously gashed out as if gnawed by strong teeth, shored up here and there against the crumbling damp with beams wrested from weakened place in the normal walls.

One of these, Kullervo decided, without enthusiasm. He was not exactly afraid, not yet, but an instinctive horror of what creeps and crawls near and after death took hold of him and made him shiver. Maybe it was the damp earth smell and death-decay-wormfood smell that went with it, exaggerated, pervasive, overwhelming. Kullervo had never before feared death, but now—now that he had discovered a mind and a reason to live, even if it was Louhi's reason—he wanted to stay alive if only to see what came next.

Louhi's witch-light guided him down the nearest of the newly dug cave tunnels. He moved cautiously, reciting some of the starwitch's sorcery runes over and over to himself so that he wouldn't forget them when the time came to use them.

Rounding a bend where a huge boulder had detoured the cave-diggers he saw them. He loosed a growl. His great loose tongue was suddenly riveted against the roof of his mouth. He could only gape at them, boots rooted to the tunnel floor.

First he thought they must be dead. They looked dead. They were white as white, even the pupils of their great bulged out eyes. Then, because they were as startled to see him as he them, he noticed that they wore ragged loincloths and that they were more or less human. Yet not quite. Within their puffed albino hides something seemed to be moving. When Kullervo determined what that was he fought the desire to vomit and the fear he had avoided took hold of his throat.

These humans had other life inside of them.

They had made friends with the Worm before death.
The graveyard worm was within them, part of them, a symbiote.

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That was how they had managed to survive down here in the endless dark!

The albino pack, all lumpy hairless males, began to mouth half-formed words between themselves. Words that taunted Kullervo with vague familiarity. These worm-people had, then, retained the essentials of the basic world idiom still spoken on the Motherships and all the colonies. But—who were they? Why hadn't they joined that final exodus to the stars?

There was no time to prod his mind with guesses. The dirty, smelly pack of worm-hosts were beginning to move on him, stealthily, in sudden darts. Their intent was to cut him off, surround him, then pounce. They, and what lived inside of them, were hungry.

One reached down for a stone and flung it at Kullervo, with the swiftness of a skink. It struck Kullervo's shoulder. He howled like a wolf.

Pain routed him out of his horror-freeze. The magic Louhi had pumped into him began to spill out in a racketing rush of syllables.

"Liekkil Liekkil" he bellowed, meanwhile waving his arms as Louhi had taught him, in wide ovals with forefingers and smallfingers stiffly outthrust. *"Liekki ja tuho!"*

The sudden harsh sounds clapping the stale air like thunder stayed the rush. Then the grotesque creatures moved toward him again, determined now to make it quick, to take this unexpected hunk of howling food back to their families, if their own drooling appetites could be restrained.

"Liekkil" Kullervo yelled in Louhi's querulous demanding tone. *"Tuho!"* There was more and the cadence had to be exact. The thought-demand, too, had to be so strong, so concentrated, as to provide a whirlwind funnel for the evil force itself.

"Liekkil"

The fire and the smoke came just in time. Blinding sheets of crimson flame sprang up from the black cave floor, together with roiling masses of black sulphurous smoke, until they formed an impenetrable shield between Kullervo and the worm-men. He could not see the rout through the

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boiling pitch-smoke, but he could hear their high-scale squeals above the cackling of the witch-fire, hear them diminish and die into echoes as the white things fled.

VII

KULLERVO WAITED SOME TIME before waving the *liekki* to quit the cave and go back where it came from. Then, abruptly, his knees buckled and gave way. The mental strain of his initial call on the dark forces had communicated itself to his physical body. He lay exhausted against the earthen wall for an hour, oblivious to the stench and the possibility of other dangers.

Eventually, grinding his equine teeth together, he forced himself further down tunnel. Word would spread among this race of troglodyte descendants of the Ussi that a fearful creature had come among them, a creature who could cause the very ground to spew fire, which to them was of itself fearful. Worm-eaters and worm-eaten as they were, the albinos had no use for fire either to cook with or see by. Their eyes had become worms' eyes, sensing the needful rather than giving it true size and form and texture. Yet they spoke! Before they fled even further into the bowels of the planet Kullervo must catch hold of one of them, pry what he could out of him which would point Louhi's evil arrow within him on its right course.

He tramped the echoing corridor, thinking how he might inveigle one of the worm-men away from his pack. His thinking got him nowhere, except to determine that the pack he had met with must be hunters. Prowlers for food. He must seek out one of their tribal nests or cave villages where the young and the old, and the females, huddled in the dark waiting for food.

It must have been hours—at least it seemed so—before he reached the underground spring. His thirst brought him to it and while he was testing it before gorging down as much of its coolness as he could hold he noticed some-

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thing. A sort of fountain bowl had been hollowed out in a natural niche where the water splashed out to disappear in a series of fissures below. There was a tool-gnawed, tool-scraped, look to the bowl.

This was where the albinos got their water, filling their earthenware *ollas* by dipping them down into that scraped-out bowl.

He decided to hide and wait. Sooner or later somebody would come to the spring for water, hopefully alone. An earthfall slide nearby provided partial cover. Kullervo hunched himself down behind it and doused the witch's light.

The three figures who moved up to the fountain were small, emaciated and while they lingered about filling their crude jars from the brimming fountain bowl they tittered and chattered among themselves. Females. Women. No, girls. Teensters who showed no trace of the puffy worm-symbiote look the hunting males had. They were slim and pretty, with firm young breasts frankly uncovered; decidedly more human. Kullervo guessed that the younger among the troglodytes were untenanted by the Worm; that came later, a progressive phenomenon implying adulthood, with the symbiotic worms gradually taking over the humanness of the albinos until by the time they died they were virtually all worm, inside. After all, parasitism was a common characteristic of those living close to the earth, feeding on it and the humble life within it. The troglodytes had no means of combating it; they had, in fact, surrendered to it and used it as it used them.

As for these young girls, they were dainty and weirdly beautiful.

Edging up to see them better, involuntarily creating light at them, Kullervo dragged a boot across the loose gravel and made a small noise. The noise and the sudden light brought involuntary screams from the girls. All three turned great protuberant eyes on him, like startled fawns in a forest at dawn. Kullervo made more light and moved out, speaking what he intended to be reassuring words in their uncorrupted idiom.

Two of the albino girls dropped their water jars and fled,

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screaming. Kullervo leaped out in front of the third, arms stretched out to prevent her escape. She bleated, fought him with her delicate white hands when he closed in; then she fainted.

Kullervo hung over her, frowning, unsure; then his thick arms reached down and lifted her up over his shoulder, adjusting and balancing her weight as if she were one of the hundred-pound grain sacks in an agrarian colony. He carried the white girl up the corridor a way, still not quite sure what to do about her. She was so delicate. It seemed that he might break her in two if he wasn't very careful. And she was so terrified of him. He didn't like frightening her like that. The others would babble what had happened to her but it would be a while before their fire-fear permitted them to follow, if ever.

Something about her warmth against him sent the blood churning in his veins. But duty came first. If he molested her she would surely die. Perhaps *after* she told him what she knew?

He pulled up in a main corridor where defunct lumps of machinery brooded away the centuries. He lifted her slim body down. He sat by her, putting more light out so that he could see the soft rise and fall of her small breasts and the elfin triangle of paperwhite face. Her mouth was picture perfect and shell-pink, he noticed. After all, she did have red blood in her and the lips were an extension of the inner mouth.

"Beautiful," he said aloud.

She stirred and opened her large puffed-out eyes. She stared up at him. Her body gave one convulsive wrench to run but when his hairy hands poised to grab her she sank back with a forlorn sigh. Kullervo essayed a smile and, toothily ugly as the grin was, it helped to reassure her. He thought, with those grotesque adult hunters and their bulging worm-infested bellies to choose from in a year or so perhaps even Kullervo didn't look so bad. His miscast bones wore great sheaths of muscle on them; the trog hunters misshapen bodies were puffy with inner symbiote life. It must take a while for a girl like this one to get

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used to what her mate would be and what she must become.

His sudden rush of libidinal desire made him rough when he slapped her.

"Talk!" he demanded.

She began to weep. Kullervo slapped her again, not quite so hard this time. She stopped crying, stared, the grayish pupils of her enormous eyes dilating. Kullervo realized that she was having trouble adjusting to the light. He willed it dimmer and gently lifted the girl to a sitting position. Her body trembled convulsively under his calloused touch.

"Talk!" he told her. "Tell me things. What is your name?"

"LeeLee," she choked out.

"Lili?" He gave a pleased grunt at this small success. She nodded gravely. "LeeLee. What-?" She pointed at him.

"Kullervo Kasi." Kullervo grinned wide. "Now. Tell me about yourself. You live back there in the dark caves?"

She nodded again. "Everyone lives in the dark. In the ground. Up there"—she pointed—"up there is Hell."

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

"There is a terrible ball of burning fire up there."

"The sun."

"It takes away our eyes to look at it. But the fire-demons are the worst."

"Fire-demons?"

"In the old days they came out of the emptiness where the fire-ball flies. They took away everybody they found up there."

"And your people hid down here in the ground?"

"Deep down," she nodded. "They kept digging down deeper and deeper but the sky-demons found them anyway and dragged them out. My ancestors fooled them. They hid even deeper."

Kullervo shrugged. "Don't you see, Lili? There were no fire-demons from the sky. The people up there built great machines themselves so that they could fly off to the stars."

Lili looked puzzled. "That is what the pictures in the

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PS say." She clapped her hand to her mouth. "But—the PS is an evil place because the demon's voice still roars there. It is forbidden and anyway the legends say it was the sky-demons who took everybody away."

"Pictures? PS?" Was it possible that one of the dybo-spheric teacher-machines was still functioning? This was the bottommost Level. In their haste to get away on their star exodus it was possible that some of the lowest Level computers had been overlooked in the general furor of snatch-grab and destruction, just as some of the populace had been overlooked. Why? Likely there were, as always in Man's history, a few malcontent rebels who refused to swim the mainstream. Oddball religious groups perhaps, who were already anti-space, who preached the gospel of Mother Terra and Hell being Up and left their descendants the legacy of clinging to the Earth, becoming part of it; above all, avoid the great flaming eye in the sky—the eye that blinds. It made sense. And, Kullervo thought in a burst of lucidity, there were probably other isolate groups on Terra, too, fringe sects whose forbears had fought the strangling monotony of the computer-run world and hidden themselves away when the final call came.

"This PS. The roaring demon. Do you know where it is?"

Lili swallowed, daring a nod. "I know. I was there once. But—I am afraid."

"Of the demon?" Kullervo grinned and pulled Lili up on her feet. "Let's go. And don't worry. I'll protect you from the demon."

The slimed-over sign read *P.S. X995B STRAIGHT AHEAD*:

Kullervo removed the witch-light from it and drew Lili up the ramp toward the closed doors at the terminus. He knew the sympol PS. This series of Levels was the ancient city called New York. PS meant "school." A school was where children were taught things. Kullervo had attended his Mothership's school for the backward; he had seen the teacher-machines. He remembered the tri-di pictures, even had a foggy idea of how the computers were operated. He had seen the Ussi teachers twist some dials and press a

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few buttons, then move on to do the same for another group.

When he pushed open the door the roaring started. Opening it had set the ancient machines in motion, preparatory to the daily class. Somehow or other the power unit that fed this small classroom of this enormous PS still functioned. Erratically. There ought not to be any sound at all. At times the reluctant cybernotes gave out screams of anguish to go with the low-decibel roar. But for now the sealed components actually worked!

Lili mewed a protest and hung back, but Kullervo pulled her into the square chamber. She was afraid to touch the buttons on the computer-console but she pointed to where her bolder companion had done so that awesome time before. Kullervo labored over the informational instructions below the switches until he found what he was looking for.

When the room light dimmed he pulled Lili down into one of the front seats, fingers tightening over hers for encouragement.

The transparent tube above the console glowed and churned with cloudy ions. Grudgingly, a picture appeared. Stars. Space. Then—

History Lesson XLLLXb. Conquest of Deep Space.

Above the roaring and occasional rasping shriek, a voice.

"Terran Space Fleet made no less than seventy-nine hundred colonial conquests during Manship. As we have seen, Manship was initiated by Space Psych Dr. R. Roland Delph, yet it was through the leadership of the Proxima colonist, Wayne Panu, an almost perfect example of empathic-telepathy, that the program of All-Kill made its greatest strides. You are seeing one of the Mephitti-held planets being destroyed by Wayne Panu and his wifeship. This is no simulation, students! The auto-camera was attached to Panu's reader-ship, following his lead into the viscous black clouds the Mephitti used to shroud their planets and protect them from our Fleets. The hideous aroma we have simulated for you will indicate to you why our Manship pilots referred to the Mephitti as 'skunks' and why they were happy to see the last of their colonizing fleets when they

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gave up and moved into other galaxies. Yes, students! Terran Deep Space Fleet scored one of its most notable triumphs with the Mephiti."

While the taped voice droned on there were lifesize shots of handsome blond Wayne Panu being congratulated by the Fleet Commander, as well as a swift montage of how in Manship the pilot was umbilicaled to his ship and became a living part of it. An All-Kill demonstration showed Panu diving within range of a desirable planet. There was a blurred view of agrarian aliens and their cultivated fields just before the bowed surface of the prospective Terran colony was swept over with all-consuming fire.

No wonder Louhi doesn't bother the Ussi! Kullervo grimaced. Their evil matches her own and wears a cloak of sanctimonious virtue besides!

"After Dr. Delph's mysterious suicide," the voice droned on, "Manship fell off abruptly. For one thing, there was Wayne Panu's strange disappearance. When he returned to duty he was changed. Brainwashed, we believe. He led the historic Rebellion of 6841, the year Dr. Delph blew his brains out."

There were vivid scenes of pilots rebelling against the emotional pressure of having to destroy whole planets at a crack, and a silhouette simula of Dr. Delph blasting his cranium.

"Actually, while the Rebellion was successful, it had already set a pattern and cybernetic pilots replaced human pilots in All-Kill. Directing them from a distance of light-years away was not as intolerable. But Wayne Panu's disgrace was total."

The reluctant killer was shown taken while committing sabotage; later, in a ship's prison there was a rescue attempt before the court-martial. Somehow Kullervo thought that the last few furious shots must be real. There would naturally be news cameras on the ship that was taking Wayne Panu to trial and somebody had used his to good effect.

The officers who gunned down the would-be rescuers (who were erstwhile loyal Fleet crew members), showed both indignant shock and eruptive rage that couldn't be

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stayed. To hell with Panu—now! To hell with any court-martial that might go easy on him and exile him to some colonial rockpile! Kill him now! It was in their faces.

Wayne Panu's face was a study, too. It seemed to glow with a transcendental flame from out of his very cells as the compulsive hands of the officers jolted him into the air-lock and then out into the vacuum outside. Just before he vanished Panu yelled out something, his eyes wide and strange as if he were seeing right through the air-lock, beyond the stars, beyond everything man had ever touched. Now Kullervo *knew* this was the real thing.

"*Ukko!*" Panu shouted, like a prayer. "*Ottaa minä! Vastanottaa! Yksi hetki suvaita minä Vanhat Valmis!*"

For one moment only permit me to be of the Valmis.

VIII

KULLERVO COULD NOT easily forget what he had just seen. Its impact on the part of him that was Vanhat was to surge up, unwanted, when Louhi's claws held his soul the tightest. . . .

He went to the console and poked buttons and switches into a collapsed montage of what was happening on Terra. "*Meanwhile, in another part of the galaxy . . .*"

The Terran rebel groups were touched on very briefly. School children were not encouraged to go out and do likewise. Still, some of the more rabid groups were purposefully ignored. Dissident as they were, if not actually kooky, they would not serve well in the final great exodus anyway. Let them stay if they wanted to, lurking in their holes. One of the irrevocable laws among the Ussi was "Thou shalt not kill your own." The eons-ancient period of psychological reform after the Third World War had kept that tenet inviolable, the only exception being the removal of humans who were an active present menace to the race. But nothing in the law said that screwball deviationists could not be left behind. . . .

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Left behind to fend for themselves. To live or to die, it made no difference to the thousands of sleek whale-shapes and magnificent wheels sweeping out among the stars. They were the weaklings, so probably they would die. Yet, Lili's group had not. They had made friends with the lowly worm and lived! What had others done?

The history-machines could not tell him that. Nor, disappointingly, could Lili. She knew no life but the life of the worm-eaters. She had never seen the sky and most probably could not live long under the horror of the sun's flaming rays. No use trying. No use explaining anything. Let her go back to her worm-tribe where she could at least survive.

Lili shuddered when Kullervo told her he must go back to the surface. Why should a man deliberately seek Hell?

"I must find the ocean. It can't be too far away. And at least I won't have to hike up all those flights. Half, maybe."

Lili stared at him with steady eyes. "You want to get to the big water?"

"Yes!" he added on impulse, "The water that's salty. The water you can't drink."

Lili understood. "We use it sometimes for food," she corrected. "Also—when somebody gets hurt." The old stand-bys. Salt for antiseptic. Iodine for small wounds.

"Can you show me which way?"

She smiled, nodded. "It is far from here and *up* but I will try."

Her albino's face took on a frown of concentration; she seemed to sniff the air, chin upraised. Then she pointed. Kullervo grinned and nodded. He believed her air of infallibility. Human dowsers, food-finders, pointers of all varieties had developed up in the stars, through sheer necessity; down here in the bowels of the planet whole segments of Ussi had lived out their lives for thousands of years; especially since the machines died these neo-primitives had developed sensors relating to ESP as had the star-men.

Kullervo followed her lead up rumbled stairs and curving rampwalks to a thick double wall with a narrow catwalk over it. It was not difficult to determine that this was some man-

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ner of underground breakwater and that the water he heard rushing below them in the darkness was off draining tide water. The girl led him to a grotto covered with salt from a millenium of spuming ocean tides that had seeped through to wet the cave and festooned it eventually with a thick stalagmited crust of sea salt and other minerals.

Lili knelt on the algae-slicked salt and put a hand to it, then to her lips, almost as a religious gesture. Finding this place dim years ago had been important and no doubt their racial memories were of a great Water-Mother who fed and nursed the world before the Fire-Demons came down and took them. As indeed she had during all those last centuries with all the land food eaten.

"Didn't any of your people try climbing up those stairs"—Kullervo pointed to a series of steel rungs leading up the grotto wall—"to find out where this boon came from? There's food in the sea, better than what you've got down here."

"Some did. They never came back." Lili shivered. "The Fire-Demons took them."

"Or the Water-Demons." Kullervo scowled. He put his hand on the rungs preparatory to the long climb. The girl moved away, as if suddenly remembering that he was of fire and light and she must fear him.

"Lili," he called.

She stopped in the middle of the catwalk, turned. She gave him a wan smile and a wave of her flower-petal fingers.

"Goodbye," he said. "*Kiitos.*"

"Goodbye."

Kullervo watched her pale figure fly nimbly across the narrow walkway and vanish. Then, with a brief curse, he turned his attention and his muscle to the long upward climb.

IX

IT WAS A long fagging pull, but the burst out into daylight was worth every wrenching drag of his arms toward his natural environment. Kullervo sank gratefully down on the

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fog-chilled lip his last gasping effort had earned him, surrendering to gravity and cellular agony such as he had seldom known. When he could wonder where his insane climb had brought him, he pulled up and moved toward the light coming through the other windowed side of the incredible wall.

Although it was pre-dawn and dense with early spring fogs, the sunlight made him snap shut his eyes with a growl and a wince. He leaned on the sidewall and took more minutes to rest and slit open his eyes gradually.

After a while he drank in all the fog-muted scene.

A muddled horizon hinted at new sun and there was a rich chemical tang on the morning wind. There was more to the rank aroma than just sea; when he gawked downward off the window cut in the dense alloy seawall he saw why. As far as he could see through the fog to any direction were great undulating gardens of kelp. Where once upon a time every slippery frond had been nurtured and cherished, by now the whole neat-bedded cultivation had reverted to tangled jungle. Directly below the gardens were brown and dry; further out they were thinner, olive green, and the rhythmic undulations were more pronounced. Actually he could see no water at all. To the left was a long metal pier jutting out and a series of roofed buildings peaked up in the distance. Processing sheds for the sea produce.

Kullervo felt hunger gnaw his belly as his lassitude diminished. It had been a long time since his last meal. No doubt there was still animal life in the ocean as well. Ahto, the Water-Mother, was a prolific goddess. Even the Ussi, with their undersea cities and great floating islands for stripping the oceans of their edibles as well as their minerals, had not quite been able to defeat Ahto. These kelp farms, left behind, had lured the lingering fish and other sea creatures from down under the Continental Shelf and the very lowest valleys of the ocean floor where the pressures had kept Man from venturing. It was ironic that there were yet these few areas on his own planet which Man had not quite tamed before his final flight into the stars. The mobile islands and their incredible siphons had done their best to turn the great oceans of the world into the same

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sterile desert that the one-fourth land area had become, but Ahto, the Water-Mother, was a persistent and crafty deity. She had given this planet life (with Ukko's help) and she would not give up her hold on it, short of some cosmic cataclysm beyond Man's power to understand, much less control. Short of Ukko the Power, himself!

Kullervo found a line of steel rungs to take him downward to the waterless sandless beach. They were merely for use when building and repairing the wall, of course, and there was no indication of feet or machines having used the cityward section of the kelp-grown wharves in centuries. Kullervo scrambled over and among the brittle seaweed as best he could, now and then starting to drag out his *pukko* to help him hack his way to the pier further out. But, alas, his treasure was still broken and as yet useless. He had kept it well out of witch Louhi's sight on Pohyola; now, with a grimace and an animal grunt, he determined that he would repair it the very first instant means for doing so would be available.

Through the Sleeping Beauty's castle jungle, the going was easier. He found a long tools-hopper halfway down to the nearest processing shed. It had, unfortunately, had its door wrenched open ages ago and all but the big meaningless machines had been looted. Beyond it was a high gate which the sea-air had corroded shut. This proved to him that the city of Levels had been long since deserted; that whatever humans or quasi-humans he might find living off the sea, like the worm-men, kept out of the monolithic cities.

The gate resisted his hardest heaves so he went back to the tools-hopper and burrowed more carefully. Finally he managed to pry off a length of metal from one of the big power machines with which he hacked off corrosion and kelp until the gate gave in, with a strident banshee shriek.

His stomach kept up its demands and Kullervo promised it the first food he saw, come hell or high tide. The seaweed here was less dense, newer, greener, more pungent; but what set Kullervo's scalp tingling was the sight of a well-defined path in the center of it, to the point where the long tendrils of the groping vines gave out. A foot path!

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And the people who had made it still lived here among the sea-gardens, probably in those long green-slimed sheds!

Kullervo stopped short, wary, listening. Below him the morning tide chuckled and slurped among the pylons and the jungle into which they vanished. He heard something else that pricked up his ears and brought a strained gurgle from his insides.

A fish, or some manner of sea-animal, flopping!

Hunger brought him to the pier's edge. He peered down on the glaucous labyrinth of steaming half-dry pods and leaves. Something of his food-need pulled his eyes under the pilings to make his salivary glands drool. It was a leathery creel of silver fat-belly fish!

The sight all but pulled him off. Clinging bat-like, he sought a way down and there it was. A kelp vine like a rope, fastened to a projection off the pier. He went to it and down on the half-dry kelp bed in a series of clumsy darts. He crouched, grabbing impatiently for the fish, some of which still flailed to escape the wire that skewered them together, accounting for the inviting noise. He had one and was biting into it like a bear just out of hibernation when something grappled him fiercely from behind. Something with lithe brown arms and legs, all four of which were indignantly active, clinging, slashing, gouging.

The impact drove Kullervo forward with a grunt, face into fish. When he recovered from the initial shock he put his bearish body muscles and ham-like arms to work to shrug off the young fury. The knees nudging his back held when he lumbered up on his feet. The ropy vines gave him poor footing but when the slim nearly-naked youth gave a whoop and he saw the flash of a curved fish-gutting knife Kullervo swore and doubled himself over in a wild sudden wrench.

In the youth's involvement with his knife, upping it with the intention of driving it down into Kullervo's burly chest, his knees forgot to hold on tight and the boy went spinning off his piggyback perch. Before he could spring back up on his feet, Kullervo leaped and caught his wrist in a crushing hold that sprang tears to his hate-filled eyes.

"Now, boy." Kullervo twisted the arm he held behind the sweating sepia back. "Is that what you call hospitality?"

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"You took my fish!" The thin handsome features contorted with unrelenting hate.

"So," Kullervo growled. "You've enough here for ten." Now his eyes caught sight of a jute sack bulging with other foodstuffs and gear. "What's this? Leaving home, are you?"

The youth spat. Kullervo permitted him to sit, crowding him in so he couldn't cut and run, idling the knife significantly between his hands. About sixteen, the youth wore sandals and a rough one-piece garment that looked to have been woven of seaweed. His lean swim-sleeked body was brown from a lifetime in sun and sea; his brown eyes were bright and alert, his brownish hair bleached almost white where the sun hit hardest, his nose and forehead chapped raw by salty wind.

Kullervo curved a faint smile when he saw curiosity take hold. No. He wouldn't run now. He had to find out what Kullervo was all about. Kullervo picked up the fish he'd dropped, ate it while he offered a few tantalizing hints about who he was and where he had come from to keep the boy happy. Then it was his turn.

"Your tribe lives there?" He thumbed toward the sheds. The youth grimaced and nodded.

"How are you called, boy?"

"Billygo. Billygo Garf."

"Well, Billygo. Suppose you tell me about it."

"About what?" The mobile features showed craftiness.

"About your tribe. What do they do? How do they live?"

Again the grimace of distaste. "They're nowhere, stranger. Nothing but fishing and praying, praying and fishing. They're scared of their own shadows!" The eyes dripped scorn.

"Who do they pray to?"

"The wide water, of course! Who else? It gives them their food, clothes, medicine." He painted a dreary picture of a small introverted group of humans who, except for their fishing and sea-gardening activities, kept well concealed within the rotting sheds, ritualistically begging the sea to continue its bounty and preserve them from wickedness and evil. The tribal elders were tyrannical in their beliefs. No restless youth was permitted to leave the tribe, on pain of death, lest he reveal their existence. There were other

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such tribes, close-knit, furtive, hidebound—to north and to south. At least, so it was rumored vaguely. Long-ago lacks had prevented unification.

As for Billygo Garf, he was a rebel. He was determined to know what lay beyond the horizon and the Elders' threats would not stop him.

"What is it they're so afraid of?" Kullervo asked.

"Don't you know?"

Kullervo shrugged. "The Fire-Demons?" he guessed.

Billygo swaggered up on his feet, grinning scornfully. "Those old stories about our ancestors being dragged up to Hell on fiery chariots! I don't believe any of the Elders' sermons about horrible giant-things coming down and swallowing up all the people who used to live there!" He pointed at the wall.

"What did happen to them?"

"They starved to death," Billygo stated with conviction. "Or else the Islanders got 'em."

"Islanders?"

"The pirates who rove along the coasts, taking whatever they find, including women."

"Tell me about the Islanders. Do they come in boats or—?"

"Sometimes. Or we can see one of the Islands itself, drifting offshore. That's when we are out to the water itself, putting the nets out. The Elders make us pull in our nets and run to the big cellar where we hide. And pray and pray they won't find us."

"What breed are the Islanders?"

Billygo's eyes flashed. "Fighters! Rapers! They load all the food and tools and whatever on their dragon boats, take the best of the women, then mark the place so they can find it again next time their Island drifts into that part of the coast."

Kullervo nodded. "Since their Islands can't produce, only the fish they catch off it, they exist by repeated plunderings of the coast tribes. No wonder your Elders fear them!" He added thoughtfully, "Don't their victims ever think of fighting them? If they could lose their skittishness enough to

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band together they could probably clean up the oceans of these marauders before long."

Billygo's eyes flashed. "That's what I told Elder Matlock! He had me flogged and put in the Dark Cell to pray for forgiveness of the Sea Mother."

"And I suppose the Sea Mother permits these piratical milkings of the coast tribes as punishment for your sins."

"For the sins of our ancestors. They teach us that there was a long, long time when there were no fish in the sea and hardly any kelpfood. Nearly all died, but finally the Sea Mother relented and gave us back the fish."

Kullervo said. "I'd like to talk to Elder Matlock. I have to find out—"

"No!" Billygo grabbed his arm, trembling. "He'll have us speared! You'll find out nothing." He stared around him fearfully. "Why are we staying here? I have a boat hidden. I've been planning this for a long time. You can come with me; help me row! Hurry!"

Kullervo sighed and helped the youth with the last of his secret provisions cache. "Nthn. I doubt if your Elders would help me find the Vanhat even if they did know something. We will set out across the Sea Mother together, Billygo. You have your quest and I have mine."

The sixteen-year-old demonstrated his expertise in running the slimy kelp surface, pointing out to Kullervo which colored areas to avoid if he was not to drop into a hole and strangle to death among the snaky vines. Finally they reached the "seashore." An abrupt uneasy green bank dropped to a sinuous tangle of new tendrils that formed a shelf of vegetation over which an ebb tide dragged and sucked. Billygo led Kullervo to a well-camouflaged catamaran with a single rigged sail in it, mast to be firmed into place after they had gained open sea.

They were sliding the boat across the ebbled malachite masses when Kullervo heard a sudden skirled shout from up-bank.

He turned, squinting up at three thick brown figures limned on the March clouds by the early sun. Two brandished spears. The third, tall, with whipping matted white hair and

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pale caved face that showed the fanatical intolerance of a god's drumbeater with a one-track mind, held up an ornate crossbow, like a ritual symbol. He aimed his long green arrow at Billygo.

"Elder Matlock!" the boy wailed. "They've been sneaking along behind us, tailing me to find where I hid the boat I stole."

"And they can't let anyone leave the tribe. What if I talk to him?" Kullervo made ready to.

"No!" Billygo cried. "They hate strangers. The Law is to kill them first and listen to their story second! The coast tribes trust nobody! *Hurry!*"

They heaved, but already it was too late. A spear struck a kelp pod a few inches from Kullervo's boot and the Elder's first arrow whistled past Billygo's ear when he ducked in time. Kullervo growled and snatched up the spear, sending it spinning back toward Elder Matlock and his chosen killers. His aim was fast and poor, but it kept Matlock from notching another arrow at once.

Kullervo put his muscles with the boy's and, with a spurt, the catamaran went tipping and teetering across the plankton and algae into the water. They jumped in and a moment later the angry shouting of the three as they leaped down the bank was muffled by the dull drumming of the outgoing tide. Elder Matlock urged his two young sycophants into the water after the boat while he sent more arrows spinning over their heads.

Tide abetting their triumph, it seemed that they were home free. Just then a maverick wave blundered on them and crabbed the craft right into the grabbing arms of Matlock's men.

The two god's-deputies seized their side of the boat to rock the boat-thieves out of it, while on shore Elder Matlock took ceremonial aim with his crossbow. Sanctimonious satisfaction, the feeling the Sea Mother herself had intervened and stopped their flight, made him pause to yell out harshly: "You have always been a troublemaker, Billygo Garf! I should have released the evil from your poor body with the sacred green arrow long ago! Now it shall be done. The Great Sea Mother has indicated her blessing. Later I shall pray

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mightily for your immortal soul and for my own grievous fault in showing mistaken compassion for your youth. Die, evil blood! Die, stranger!"

They were within excellent range and the two acolytes were holding the catamaran firm. Death trembled on the bowstring.

Kullervo stood up with a show of fangs and a feral protest. Louhi's teachings hammered up within his brain.

"*Veta!*" he howled at the sky. "*Veta! Hierviestal Nytt!*"

In the deepest caves it had been fire. Now—water. A great thundering wall of water, curling as it came out of the east. Two hundred feet of wet churning doom where there should be nothing but the slow slopping tread of the ebb tide.

Elder Matlock shrieked out a prayer to the Sea Mother, a bleat of beeseeking wonder. Why? Why? He had given all his years to her worship and slain those who would not. *Why?*

"Shut your eyes!" Kullervo pushed Billygo down to the floor of the boat when the water-wall thundered over them.

It was the very stuff of dreams—to them. The gaping acolytes let go of the boat, moaning with fear. Then they were gone and Elder Matlock was gone; with a puff of sorcerous wind the catamaran was out past the kelp shelf into deep calm water.

When the tide-wall vanished and Kullervo hiked the youth up for a look shoreward, Billygo rattled an epithet of awe in his throat. The beach was empty.

X

WHEN THE KELP GARDENS were only a dark smudge on the western skyline they rested their oars and ate. Salted fish, this time, with unleavened cakes from Billygo's pilfered stores, and water from the tanks he had hidden in the boat.

"That tide-walloper came in just in time!" Billygo grinned between chomps. "Guess the Sea Mother wasn't as much with Elder Matlock as he figured!"

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"Or somebody was working contrary," Kullervo mused. "Never mind. Tell me some more about the floating islands."

"Can't tell you much. The old stories are that a long time ago the people who built the walled cities used them for fishing and for siphoning up stuff from way down deep. They had ways of moving them on purpose then; when one spot was cleaned out they'd go someplace else."

Kullervo nodded. The handed down legends were more shrewdly accurate than he would have guessed. Need for food had created huge undersea cities and gardens which were umbilicated to these floating islands for purposes of drawing up what the undersea cities mined or raised and for sending down necessities, in turn. Some of the islands were stationary, some roved about, as Billygo had been taught, ever seeking out new sources of dwindling ocean resource. The undersea cities, Kullervo guessed, would be dead and lost. After the ingenious devices for transporting humans to them and back had been used for that final uplifting, the umbilicals would have been cut deliberately or by time and the nibblings of the reborn sea life. What power units and tools had not been cannibalized for starship use (besides the same wanton destruction he had seen in the Levels) would have long since burst the great bubble-cities for deep sea creatures to swim through and goggle at.

As for the islands, at least some of these had withstood the ravages of time and weather, had become Sinbadian vessels for the neo-buccaneers to live on when they were not plundering the humble tribes who lived out their lives, resisting progress, among the kelp-gardens of the coastal areas.

"Are these pirates able to move their islands at will?" Kullervo found himself asking the boy.

"Of course not!" Billygo laughed. "They follow a kind of pattern, though."

Kullervo nodded, vaguely remembering something about Terra's moon causing the ocean currents to drift in calculable charted paths. Perhaps the mobile islands had been planned with these currents in mind. They would be different now, but that made little difference to the predators who made use of the islands. Over the centuries the Ussi dregs had

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adapted themselves to the environment in which each arant tribal group found itself; long-standing use of machines and computers still stirred up racial hints of how "things" were to be made use of. Those who were less adaptable, less clever, died. In their own violent way, the island buccaneers were the cleverest Kullervo had heard of so far.

Their peripatetic mood of existence suggested that it was among them that he would most likely learn more about the hidden Vanhat. . . .

His restless spirit unchained from the stultifying and narrow life of the kelp-gardens, Billygo whistled and sang like a bird for the first three days of their uncertain voyage. On the fourth day he stopped singing. His lips were too cracked, too parched, to pucker. All but a few salty dessicated fishes, hard as stone, were gone from the food stores. The water supply was so low that it was better to suffer the pangs of hunger than to gulp down this dry salted stuff. Kullervo had relied on the youth's touted knowledge of navigation to keep them within range of the coast for replenishing their supplies when the first chance to do so appeared; somehow Billygo had erred and when they rowed what they thought was back toward mist-shrouded coast—it wasn't. The nights hung heavy with brooding clouds so that there were no stars to set a course by. The sun was a sullen smear behind the wrack. Kullervo knew, when he took over the piloting, that at least they were traveling north; but his knowledge of the eastern seaboard of North America was nonexistent. He labored his wakened brain for thaumaturgic ways of divining their position and, as thirst and hunger clutched harder, wizard ways of conjuring up winds that would take them on more swiftly across the heaving glass hills the sea had become. Alas, Louhi had provided him only with means of killing, and the Vanhat within him was unable to make use of the Power when muddled by Louhi's black sorcery.

The fire and the water magic he had funneled down had been pure illusion, although they could kill those who, from terror, believed in them. The source of the tremendous White Power which the ancient Vanhat had possessed was of Ukko, a legacy from Otava. For those whose souls shone out with

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starfire Ukko fingered out thrusts of the Power to do wondrous things indeed. The Valmis toward which Wayne Panu strained at the moment of his death had become one with the stars themselves, a conscious part of the cosmic tapestry of basic life-energy. Kullervo could hardly share in this, not with his murky ancestry, not with the evil Louhi had stamped into his brain.

Depletion of body fluids brought delirium. Billygo lay gasping weakly on the bottom of the boat. Kullervo kept his knotty arms severely to his task at the stern. The ragged sail hung limp. Not a breath of wind stirred. It was unseasonably warm, or maybe it was a blood fever. Finally, Kullervo's brain burst from trying to take them away from this torture by any means whatever. His cellular body cried out for his death. Every nerve in his grotesque body screamed its separate agony. He stood up in the boat with a wild feral cry. He tottered there, rocking the craft and its outrigger with the full intention of spilling them into the sea and getting it over with.

But he didn't have the strength left. When, cursing the stars, he tried to fling himself overboard, he missed; he collapsed over the boy in a gargoylish heap.

Water.

Water was pattering down on them. Kullervo felt it caress his sored lips. He cocked open one eye and lay there watching it dimple the black ocean around them, harder, harder; each single drop was a note of subtle music. They lay in a puddle of potable rainwater that would presently fill the boat if somebody didn't start bailing it out.

Kullervo gave a weak whoop of joy and shook Billygo out of his stupor. They sat there in the boat, laughing like children, having dipped up their fill with their hands, then paddling the water over themselves to soak it into every pore.

"Hurry! Help me fill the water canteens!" Kullervo urged.

"Wish we could save more." Billygo said wistfully, when the containers were full and they must bail the sweet water into the white-capping sea. "I'm going to try my line again. I've got the strength now. Might do better this time."

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"What'll you use for bait?"

"Lop off one of my fingers if I have to!" The youth grinned.

"Here's a chunk of fish-head. Better try that. You might need all your fingers some day."

The north wind whipped up the white caps into spheroid sprays, making canyons of the gentle swells. Billygo cast his baited hook out with the grim intention of snagging a whale or something equally big, he said.

"Look!" Kullervo pointed into the storm. "There's your whale, boy!"

Billygo squinted and shaded his eyes. "Nope. That's a dolphin. Look! There's more of 'em. We see 'em sometimes off the kelp reef. But we don't kill 'em. They're good. They're the Sea Mother's own children. I wouldn't kill one, even now."

Kullervo nodded. He had heard of these mammalian creatures. Friends to man. Intelligent. Uncanny, as if indeed blessed with preternatural powers by Ahto, herself.

"We'll try to follow them," Kullervo determined. "I've heard of them bringing shipwrecked sailors to land."

The growling north wind battered the storm-blackened ocean; now they shivered convulsively from their wetting. The rain had ceased but the sky hung heavy and dark above the fragile boat. There was no telling where the gathering storm had carried them during their faint but the sail had been ripped away by Puhuri, the snarling bully out of Pohja, and, if they were to follow the sleek leaping backs of the dolphin school, they must row.

Kullervo strained his hungry muscles to keep the animals in sight, but Billygo kept grimly to his fishing, until Kullervo said, "Better forget the fish and row."

"I'm hungry!"

"You'll die of shivering if you don't keep your blood moving in your veins. Row!"

Something ominous in Kullervo's voice made him leap a look at him, then grudgingly set by his line and pick up his oar. Their progress was erratic and doubtful, but mysteriously the dolphins stayed within sight although it was all they could do to keep them there. It was as if the

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sea-beasts were urging them toward some destination; however dire it might be, it meant *life*.

"I'm f-f-freezing to death!" Billygo whimpered, when exhaustion made him drag oar for a panting rest.

"Keep rowing!" Kullervo snarled. When the boy's head slumped he gave him a nudge in the back with his oar. "Stay awake! Row!"

Billygo sidetracked his hostility into savage strokes. Hours passed. It came to be mechanical. After awhile the wind changed. The sea became glassy green-black hillocks again when the clouds dissipated to reveal the splendor of a bright copper-tinged dawn.

Billygo's falcon's eyes saw the dragon ship first.

"Look!"

"What is it?" The copper ball of sun dazzled Kullervo's eyes so that he couldn't make out whether the dark patch on the horizon was a rearing-up sea monster or what.

"It's a pirate boat!" Billygo's voice was fearful but revealed a boyish craving for adventure.

"At least we'll eat," Kullervo grunted.

"If they don't eat us," Billygo said. "I've heard some of 'em do."

Kullervo knew a retching revulsion within him, but he was not surprised. Land animal meat was virtually nonexistent on Terra now, except perhaps in the most remote areas near the poles. Man craved it, and when there was no other kind . . .

While the great scarlet dragon prow loomed nearer, indicating that their bobbing craft had been spotted, he had the sudden impulse to destroy it with Louhi's magic. Kill the ruthless rovers before they could show their cannibal instincts! Yet, a small voice deep in his brain cackled that he must not. He had a task to perform and the pirates on the dragon boat might well point him to it.

And he must not die here in the middle of the Atlantic. Louhi would not be pleased.

"Look at what's pulling their boat!" Billygo exclaimed as the long craft bulked up to hide the sun ominously.

"Dolphins! Must be a dozen or more! In harness—trained

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to pull the boat when there is no wind! Great Ahto—look at the *size* of them!”

The mutated beasts were enormous; the tall shadowy figure standing at the horrific-toothed dragon's head prow was guiding them by means of a strident variable-note whistle he held cupped between his fingers.

Other figures appeared, ugly types with wiry black beards and bared hirsute chests. They wore vivid pantaloons and the biggest of the brutes wore, as well, a scarlet silkish blouse and a bright yellow sash. Knives of every size, brief poinards, broadswords, even elaborate scimitars and snees, bristled among them. Each to his own taste, apparently. Kullervo wondered where the colorful garments had come from, and those polished boots. From looted warehouses, perhaps? No doubt the Ussi had left behind them all manner of synthetic stuffs, paints, geegaws of a thousand varieties—the sort of frippery which could not be taken along because it weighed heavy for the time-jump and fuel had to be carefully gauged with preference given to more utilitarian items.

The forthright Island pirates, bolder than the worms down in the caves or the rats in the kelp sheds, had taken whatever pleased their eyes and added swash and beauty to their grim metal islands.

He thought these thoughts while the dragon boat crew, with shouts and curses from the burly captain in scarlet silk, flung out grapple lines and pulled the catamaran close into its blood-red shadow.

XI

THEY WERE slapped around, ogled, cuffed, had their arms and thighs tested for muscle-meat; then, by orders of Captain Enos Skell, the hairy chest with the penchant for colorful silk, they were flung down into the hold. But first they were fed a kind of fish stew. Kullervo noticed that the dolphin-master, a tall old man with cheekbones like bronze

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doorknobs and faraway blue eyes, took no part in the derision and byplay. He stood aloof, his eagle-like face ever turned toward his beasts with a kind of preternatural empathy between him and them.

A full belly and exhaustion rocked Billygo into snores against the nets on which they were tossed; Kullervo sat back against the smelly twists of kelp fiber and stared up on deck through the cracks in the ill-fit hatch. He watched the shadowy figures moving across the slits, creaking the boards with their tramping boots.

Then, after a while, voices filtered down.

"Queen Fiammante will be pleased with your unexpected bits of red meat, so far from shore and all." The voice had a subservient snivel to it, as if Captain Skell's toady not only knew his place under that heavy boot but enjoyed it.

"Aye, Queen Fiammante will reward us all with a choice cut of flank steak for the very least. That is, if Her Majesty doesn't decide we need more slaves down in the Hole."

"She won't do that!" the toady whined. "After all, what was to prevent you from cooking them here and now? Us eating them up in one glorious feast and nobody the wiser?"

"Blast you, Eggpate! Blast you for the stinking gut-worm you are! You know why! Am I not Queen Fiammante's favorite of all her dragon plunder fleet?"

"Aye, Captain! That you are! You are!"

"And *why*, worm?"

"Because she—she trusts you."

A belching grunt. "So you do have a fragment of brain in that foul egg you wear on your shoulders! Oh, I can see you drooling for your share of the swiped divvy-up! So I did do what the whole crew wants—kill the two castaways and we eat them! Then what?"

"What, Captain Skell? We gets our bellies full of red meat for oncel!"

"And sure as you are a sea-goat's rear end, *somebody* would rat. Somebody always does. Queen Fiammante sees to that, with her rewards for ratting on boatmates. And who might that squealing dolphin's dung be, you ask? You—Eggpate! *You*, likely as not!"

"Nay, Captain! Nay! By my mother—"

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"You never had a mother, Eggpate. You was hatched out of a dolphin mess. With that slimy hide and no hair anyplace on your body, I'd be hard put to say what kind of a beast sired you. Now, stow the blab, and fetch me some of that stew of yours before the crew decides to put you in it!"

Kullervo stood before Queen Fiammante, in the great round throne room which had once been the Island's main meeting auditorium and mess hall, gaping at her with astonished eyes. It was not that her beauty overcame him. Beauty she may have had, once, now all she had was size. Queen Fiammante was enormous! Colossal! She sat plumped down among half a hundred pillows of every size and color. Her overstuffed body—she would have been the star attraction of any primitive circus sideshow—was vivid in spangles and jangles, silks, satins, brocades, moirés; every manner of adornment her plunderers had run onto seemed to have been appropriated to enhance her carcass. Some of the ropes of jewelry must be real, valuable, worth a Queen's ransom. Others were only junk. Queen Fiammante didn't know the difference, but then, neither did anybody else on Terra. She wore them all and made them glitter in the light of the sconced flambeaux with every color of the rainbow. When her elephantine size did not impress the beholder, her tiaras and bracelets and pendants must.

Yes. There were vestiges of beauty lingering behind those great flesh pouches. Her long black hair was stiff with oils; a dozen perfumes drifted from her and her mountain of cushions in a mingled wall of scent. Calculating black eyes surveyed Captain Enos Skell's unexpected catch from between those empurpled meat bags to top and bottom; her absurdly small rosebud mouth was painted and repainted stiff so that her pettish twist of clever cruelty hardly faded it.

Indeed, Kullervo decided, Queen Fiammante was clever. Shrewd beyond her recycling civilization. It must have been she who had organized the dragon boat fleet into what was reputedly the Atlantic's largest and finest; she made plundering high art. She was crudely flamboyant, but these

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were crude flamboyant times. She was of the earlier breed which had produced Medea and Theodora and Lucrezia Borgia. Her fat was a façade for a lamia's cunning. Even the jewels and silks she demanded and surrounded herself with were there for a purpose. To dazzle, to awe, to bring men to their knees. Earlier, perhaps, she had used her feminine wiles; now she used trappings to augment an utterly ruthless nature. She had spies on every plundering venture to inform her of laxities and disloyalties; she spied on the spies as well and ate them all when they had served her purpose. Her greed was as insatiable as her ambition.

Starwitch Louhi would have loved Queen Fiammante.

Her pose today was that of a wide-eyed child. After studying Kullervo's splayfoot grotesqueness for a long moment she clapped her jeweled hands together in pseudo-naïve glee.

"Beautiful!" she raved, her voice piercing the twitterings of her attendant courtlings. "Beautiful! I've been looking at the pictures in the books you brought last trip from the coast of Spain. I must have this creature for my court jester!"

"Jester?" Captain Skell's smile faded while his sailors, caps in hand before their Island monarch, exchanged frowns. "What is that?"

"A clown, ignorant! A court fool! I shall dress him up in silks and spangles, put a three-corner bell cap on him. Don't you see, Captain Skell? His ugliness will be accentuated by the bright colors he shall be wearing. He shall sit at my feet and make japes and funny sayings for me. Come, gargoyles! Say something funny!"

Her voice lowered on the demand; the round room was ominously still. Kullervo blinked around him. He understood her sudden plan. In ancient days it had been the custom of kings to have a funny-man attend on them. Usually he was a hunchback, a dwarf, or otherwise deformed. Some were bred deformed especially to perform this office. This added piquancy and, as certain animals turn on deviates among them and kill them, so such courtly ladies and gentlemen felt it well and proper to torment the fool and make him a butt for all their latent sadisms.

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Captain Skell gave him a jab from behind. *Do what her Majesty commands! Be funny!*

Kullervo knew he was hideous but he had never thought to make capital of his ugliness. Even with Louhi he had only acceded to her wishes, never been guileful. He knew nothing of humor. His natural animal appetites had pleased Louhi's perverse nature, who detested "normal" handsomeness, who loved the grotesque, and who wished to use him to her purposes elsewhere. As to the sudden requirement that he be a hilarious clown . . .

Still, a glance at Billygo, white-lipped and trembling nearby, set his course. Billygo had longed for adventure, but the adventure of being cooked and eaten was not exactly what he'd had in mind when he planned his elopement from the kelp gardens. If Kullervo could ingratiate himself with Queen Fiammante he might at least gain time to find out what he must know and save them both.

He tried. It was hopeless.

"Come closer, jester!" Queen Fiammante cried.

Kullervo shuffled hesitantly forward, stumbling. Queen Fiammante tittered. Now he knew. He had no gift for words. It must be done with clumsy exaggerated actions. He made as if to speak but his great purple tongue only lolled ludicrously across his wind-flayed lips.

The Queen tittered again. Her courtiers followed her cue. A ripple of amusement bounced across the torch-lit walls. Even those who couldn't see Kullervo laughed obediently.

"What is your name, ugly?"

"Kullervo Kasi, Mistress."

"Say rather Queen or My Queen!"

"Kullervo Kasi, My Beautiful Queen."

"Better. Better. Now—where do you come from?"

Kullervo scratched his tousled head doubtfully. Queen Fiammante seemed to enjoy this dumbfounded gesture, so Kullervo stuck his finger in his nose and dug there industriously. Queen Fiammante shrieked with laughter, her great body quivering under its florid wrappings. Her court joined her glee until the alloy arch-beams overhead rang with forced merriment.

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XII

So KULLERVO became Queen Fiammante's jester in a harlequin suit of elongated black and yellow diamonds and a tricorne cap with jangling bells on its points. He did his best to amuse her. He grimaced weirdly when she shot sudden questions at him; he choked and gurgled and rocked back on his heels; when she called him to her like a dog he managed always to stumble over a cushion and fall sprawling, uttered woeful dog's moans. The nose-picking bit was always good for a laugh, and the tongue-lolling, and the pretense of incalculable stupidity.

He bided his time, listening, watching, learning.

His one bid for reasonable behavior was a dolorous plea that Billygo Garf be permitted to live. Thin as Billygo was, Queen Fiammante granted the boon, waving the youth away to the Hole. The Hole was a kind of abattoir, the lowest bowels of the metal island, where some of the kelp and other sea produce processing machines had been manually reactivated. It was a dark fouled air cesspool of retching smells and forlorn hopes. The coastal slaves who inhabited it didn't live long, nor were they expected to. Vicious things went on down there, including the butchering of the red meats Queen Fiammante and her Island kingdom enjoyed—which enjoyment kept them sadistically fierce and eager for plundering the coasts whenever the opportunity presented itself. Kullervo feared for Billygo's life and sanity down there, but it was the best he could manage.

Kullervo was permitted to wander more or less at will. His jangling bells were heard everywhere on the Island, especially when the Queen, having sated her prodigious appetite, snored away on her cushions. He learned. Queen Fiammante's ambulatory domain was perhaps ten miles in length, five in width. It was badly overpopulated for its size, which accounted for the greedy way all the citizens stared at Kullervo's stocky gay-clad body as he now skipped,

now shambled, out of the "palace" and along the rusted walks. Yet they wouldn't dare. . . .

His sharpest interest lay in the dragon boats. There was no other way to quit this neo-medieval kingdom-city floating with the moon-currents on the stormy North Atlantic Ocean. It was no wonder that Queen Fiammante kept demanding more and more silks and perfumes and gauds for her palace. The rest of the island was immeasurably stark and depressing. It had been constructed to useful purpose, not to be beautiful, and the ravages of time and weather and the sea had scabbed and discolored its surfaces so that it gave the unprepossessing appearance of a gigantic diseased lump-backed monster as detestable as the perverted cannibals who inhabited it.

Yes. The dragon boats, lined up at the quay beyond the enclosed kelp beds, their great scarlet or green necks snaked up fearfully above the net-draped wharf. He must get hold of one of these, by preference Captain Skell's crimson beauty, the largest. The only one, he found out, that was dolphin-drawn. Because Torv, the rawboned Norseman, was the only Islander who knew how to tame and control the great beasts. Torv, he also learned, stuck close to his dolphin pens, rarely leaving the boat docks. Torv was not Island born. He did not mingle, nor did he eat red meat. He came from a fishing clan, born with a fierce love of the sea and all within it. He was a solemn taciturn fellow who gave Kullervo, when he tried to wheedle a helpful word or two out of him, a dour look and the quick sight of his back.

There were moments when Kullervo itched to use Louhi's dark magic on his tormentors. None, he determined, on the Island was worth saving. Yet, Billygo was down in the Hole where Kullervo was not permitted even to sniff the rank air, and the time for action must be well chosen.

"You are beginning to bore me." Queen Fiammante yawned one bleak morning when Kullervo's pratfall was not quite as convincing as usual.

Kullervo grimaced, did an awkward little dance he had worked into his routine, picked his nose, ate it, but the Queen only yawned again. Yawned and wrinkled up her

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painted face. Kullervo performed all of his specialities, but today nothing amused Queen Fiammante. Today, then, was it.

"Captain Skell came to see me last night. He complains that since he found you, he and his crew are entitled to fair rations. We are drifting far north. Hitting ice floes and scanty pickings. Captain Skell says his men are grumbling. They can't be expected to do their best on their next take if they must leave hungry for red meat."

Kullervo's heart hammered; he must think. Think!

He hung his head like a whipped beagle. "Perhaps my sister would have pleased Your Highness more. She was uglier than me, with warts on her face. Clever with words."

"Sister? What sister?"

"In the boat with us when Captain Skell—" He clapped his hand to his mouth abruptly.

Queen Fiammante's eyes pinched so that the flesh-folds hung like saddlebags. "Tell me about your sister."

"I—I wasn't supposed to. But since I no longer please you and must be eaten anyway—" He blubbered dolefully. "He said if I told he would cut me in pieces while I was still alive, and cook the pieces and eat them, making me watch until—don't let him, Beautiful Queen! I will be funny, honest!"

Queen Fiammante rose ponderously to her feet, a difficult and rare performance. Her whale-like weight rocked with anger. She pointed at two of her attendants. "*Fetch Captain Skell to me at once!*"

Kullervo collapsed in a frenzied heap, as if torn between fear of the brawny captain and fear of the Queen. While he writhed his mind clicked from slot to slot. He must draw the captain and as many of his crew as possible away from the docks. The excitement would bring others into the palace through their sadistic thirst for blood. Torv would remain with his pets, as usual. Yet there was still Billygo, down in the Hole.

The tramp of heavy boots along the palace corridor, many boots, told Kullervo that his ruse was working. Captain Skell was striding into the Queen's presence and most of his crew were with him. Being cheated of their ration of red meat

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still rankled. Perhaps the Queen had changed her mind? About time!

Kullervo groaned to a sit, giving a swift fearful look at the burly captain, with ferret-faced Eggpate hopping along behind. Yes. They were all trailing behind. All the crew, and other prick-ears as well, drawn to the palace by some swift-winged bird of gossip. Little by little, the throne room crowded up with drooling fun-seekers.

"You sent for me, Your Majesty?" Captain Skell curved a leer of triumph, seeing Kullervo huddling and quaking. That was the usual behavior before the butchers took them.

Queen Fiammante's atrophied feet would not sustain her longer; she sank back, puffing, her face hard as marble under the paint.

"Tell me about Kullervo's sister," she commanded icily.

"Sister?" Captain Skell gave her back genuine blank for angry blank.

"It's no use, Captain Skell. He told me about the girl. You killed and ate her on the way here, didn't you? And you have the nerve to begrudge me a little innocent fun with her brother before the butchers get him!"

The hairy porcine face showed baffled attempts to grasp what Queen Fiammante was talking about, and hurt when the import of her accusation percolated through. He gave Kullervo a feral snarl, putting his hand to his sword as if to cut him in two.

"He told me everything," the Queen lied. "How you decided that I would be satisfied with two as well as with three. So you killed the girl and—"

"He lied! There wasn't any sister!"

"Are you trying to tell me that Kullervo has the brains to *invent* a sister?"

Captain Skell's mouth sagged. He pulled steel and started at the crouching figure in motley with a roar. Kullervo yelped and scampered closer to the Queen.

"Never mind, ugly. I won't let him hurt you, at least not yet. Just tell me exactly what happened on the dragon boat. Tell me all about your sister with the warts."

But something seemed to have snapped in Kullervo's

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mind. He scrambled to his feet, grimacing, tongue a-loll, slobbering and spitting when he tried painfully to talk.

"It's no use. You've scared him into idiocy."

Captain Skell held himself back from Kullervo by main force; the cords in his neck stood out like brass cables.

"Your Majesty! I didn't! Ask my crew! Ask your spy!"

"Since you know that I have a spy you undoubtedly know who it is and will have threatened him witless as well."

"Then send for the other! The boy!"

Queen Fiammante scowled, then shrugged her shoulders into a minor earthquake tremor: "Very well. Fetch the boy called Billogo Garf. But mind you wash him first. Those Hole slaves offend me with their stench."

Billogo arrived still dripping and shivering. His ague was involved with fear of the butcher's cleaver and the toil and horror he had undergone these past weeks as much as it was from his briny dunking. His narrow face was gaunter still; his falcon's eyes found it hard to tolerate the pitchy flare of the torch-ring.

He flashed Kullervo a single hopeful look but the sight of the islanders *en masse*, clinging halfway up the metal walls, was too much for him. He closed his eyes and bit the blood out of his lips to keep from screaming.

Queen Fiammante's voice blared out the story Kullervo had contrived in strident staccato phrases. "Well?" she demanded. "Well, Billogo? Unclamp your jaws and tell me all about the girl. If you tell the truth you will remain among the living, if not—!"

Billogo strained down his Adam's apple and gaped full at Kullervo in helpless bewilderment. Kullervo straightened to full height, dropping the jester pose as much as his silken motley and bellcap would permit. Then, showing his big teeth in a wild grimace, he put his hand to his waist as if to draw out a nonexistent blade. Then, between exaggerated nose-picks, he kept pointing at Captain Skell and the sword dangling a few feet from the shivering youth.

Kullervo's performance, as never before, was diversive as well as suggestive. He pranced up and down, jangling his bells, howling between tuneless chanting.

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Billygo stared, blinked, then gave a fast nod. He understood one thing well, if not the byplay. Kullervo was no fool! If he had told the Queen some exotic story about a mythical sister it was for good reason. Hope pushed blood into his wan cheeks.

"Yes!" Billygo blurted out. "They did it! They killed her!"

Captain Skell had had all he could take by now. He whipped to Billygo and brought a backhand across his face so hard the youth went crashing back into the crew. Snarling, the plunder crew flung him back for more. They'd had enough, too. Somebody was playing some kind of cute game with them and somebody was going to get pounded into a pulp. Devious behavior patterns, except for Queen Fiammante and her hand-picked spies, were not in the nature of the marauding Islanders. Life and death hung on the blunt end of a smashing hammer or the honed edge of a broadsword. It was in Captain Skell's bloodshot eyes that he was going to kill Billygo, messily, here and now.

Billygo's young life had woven a pattern of defiance and brash nerve. It sprang back in a glandular flow of adrenalin now. When Captain Skell bulled down on him, death written all over his grizzly face, Billygo seemed to cringe, to submit. But it was his muscles balling up for action. First—the sword. The captain wouldn't use it. He would smash this lying lout with his bare hands and take pleasure in the deed.

Instead, Billygo's lithe body moved forward like a streak and the captain's blade was fast in his hand. He swished the air between them, in a wide circle to give the rest of the crew something to worry about. Desperation hung on his twisted smile. Billygo knew they couldn't win. Practically all of the Island was in the throne room by now. In a moment they would be engulfed, torn to pieces, eaten on the spot. But before that some few of these greedy-eyed wretches would die.

Meanwhile, Kullervo. All eyes were incredibly on Billygo. That was what Kullervo had hoped for and planned for. He tossed off his bell cap and leaped to one side of the cushion throne. With pretended prances and behind these

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pirouettes a fierce surge of triumph, he raised up both hands. Little fingers, forefingers, were extended, and while his hands and his turning body made an all-inclusive embrace of the assemblage his tuneless mindless doggerel took on sorcerous purpose.

He shouted the words Louhi had ruttet into his brain as if to send them through the firmament by sheer sound waves.

*"Liekki! Liekki! Liekki! Hieroviasti ja nytt! Liekki ja savul
LIEKKII! SAVUI!"*

His hands weaved impatient serpents on the air.

The ancient runic demon-call beckoned across the sulphurous darks of cosmic space.

They came, the twin demons of smoke and fire. Smoke to confuse. Fire to kill. Blood-crimson waterfalls of flame sprang down from the whitening beams far overhead. Smokes of many dark colors rolled out from every arc of the circular room. The Islanders hung frozen for a few seconds, then a low wail of primal terror rippled out of the smoke and fire.

Kullervo didn't wait. He grabbed Billygo's arm and propelled him toward the exit. His last sight of Queen Fiammante was a great pink marshmellow rising up out of the flaming cushions as the spectral fires stripped off her taffetas and chiffons; her eyes glaring out of that painted pouched face in petulant unbelief that this was happening to her—then she toppled back, a blackening mountain of sizzling suet.

Kullervo grabbed up the first weapon he saw, a spiked chain-mace. He barreled it from side to side to clear a path for them out of the palace. Billygo followed after with his sword, as white with fear as the Islanders, but grateful for life and dumb with awe that the fire wasn't even scorching *them*. Not while Kullervo's hand held his arm. He whined his dread all the way through the pandemonium and when they were actually stepping out from the boiling smoke and raging flames he threatened to flop on his face out of sheer wonder.

Kullervo took time to give him a savage cosh on the side of the face. "Hurry! We've got to get to the docks! Don't

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think about the fire—it can't hurt you as long as I am touching you!"

They ran down the scarred metal walks. Behind them all was chaos in the palace. Kullervo had not sent the demons back. They were still there, balling it up. The palace was an inferno of writhing, dying bodies and broken-off screams. Kullervo's weeks as Queen Fiammante's jester had taught him cold furious hate, had taught him also that whatever Terra's future might hold—these must not be of it. These were the evil seeds. The meek ones of the coasts, hidebound as they were, might yet inherit the Earth.

XIII

BILLYGO PULLED UP where a railed causeway led across the variegate greens and browns of the kelp beds to the boat docks. He was momentarily frozen by the spectacle of the round domed palace going up to Hell in a great tongue of scarlet fire, like some latter-day Sodom. What manner of heat could melt down an alloy that had withstood ten thousand electric storms or more was something his simple brain could but fumble on. The Wall. The Levels. The Metal Islands. These were things that had always been and always would be. How could an ugly creature like Kullervo, still in his absurd silk fool's motley, possibly call upon forces which . . . ?

"Come!" Kullervo barked roughly. "There are others on the Island. We'll soon have a wild scramble for the boats, when the rats realize that the whole Island is going to sink!"

Billygo gasped and loped numbly behind the diamond-patterned back across the causeway, which became an undulating makeshift of dregs and debris before they reached the dock.

At the top of the brief stairway to the wide dock proper two brawny guards barred their way.

"Where do you think you're going?" They had been drowsing from their night's duty and were more dopey and

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grouchy than usual because the day guards hadn't showed yet.

"Queen's business," Kullervo said.

"You on Queen's business, *clown*?" They snorted their derision, pulled out knives for some bit of fun with this impudent court's butt before sending him yelping on his way.

"*Look!*" Kullervo pointed at the flaming palace, which, from sleepiness and the very impossibility of such a thing happening at all, had escaped their notice.

They gaped, jaws dropping. Kullervo gestured to Billygo and they were up on the dock in a rush. Kullervo knocked the front guard into the kelp, then stopped Billygo from running Number Two through with his blade out of his desire to test such a new sharp toy and unleash some of his pent-up hate.

"Where is Torv?" he demanded.

The guard, white-lipped with fear, pointed. Kullervo pulled Billygo away and gave the guard a nudge down into the slimy kelp to join his mate.

Torv stood before them and the sizable dolphin pool, legs apart, his lanky stance and roughhewn features showing no sign of surrender. Fear, yes. He had seen the flaming palace. Torv, by his treatment of his pets, if not the humans he found himself among, showed himself to be a man of compassion and courage. He hadn't battled the Island pirates when they overtook him and his fishing boat because he had good sense. He showed wisdom, too, when he let them know about his clan's unusual talent of training dolphins. It gave them a reason not to kill him. He lived in hope. This might be his day of salvation from Island bondage, yet he was not about to exchange one bondage for another.

A captive still, he was allowed no weapon; he stood before Kullervo and Billygo now, his bony hands knotted into useful fists, ready to fight them to the death.

"You know us, Torv," Kullervo said mildly. "We were caught adrift as you were. I know you, fisherman. You're from one of the Norse clans of the fjords. Let us be friends. We need each other."

Torv scratched his graying beard. "You are responsible for that?" He pointed at the pillar of fire.

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Kullervo nodded.

"By what Finmark wizardry—?"

"Never mind just now. They—the Queen—Captain Skell and his crew—all of them—all were evil. If one must fight evil with evil, is that so bad?"

"Can I trust you?" Torn asked warily.

"Dare you not?" Kullervo wisped a glum smile. "If I can do that I can do other things. I can kill you where you stand by moving my hand so—" He made an abortive hand gesture, cutting it off abruptly. "But I don't wish your death, Torv. I know you were taken as we were, that your skill with these beasts behind you in the pool saved you from the butcher or the Hole. I know that your dolphins are the only living things on this Island that you love and—"

"How about the other captives? Down in the Hole?"

Kullervo shrugged; his eyes flashed an angry weariness about it. "I was not fashioned to be a do-gooder. I do not wish them to die, nor again am I about to waste our lives in trying to decide which of them are worth saving and which—"

"Look! It's them!" Billygo shouted his pleasure at the ragged line of runners emerging from the steel stairway which dropped down to the former storage warehouse for under-seas resource, where the slaves lived and toiled. Somehow they had escaped, their masters fled or cut down; their first concerted impulse was to gain the dragon boats and the liberty of the open sea.

Torv sighed and smiled. "They will take the boats—*unless* . . . See! A gang from the Queen's court guards is cutting them off! They have no weapons but sticks and shards of broken machinery!" His creased blue-eyed look at Kullervo was steady but asked nothing.

Kullervo raised up his hands in the direction of the melee beyond the kelp beds. Flame and smoke pushed the Queen's men back, permitting the ragged slaves to pelt forward onto the causeway of rusted rails, panicked by the flames and their fevered burst toward unexpected freedom.

"Let's go before they forget who's friend and who's not," Kullervo grunted. "Ready your animals."

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Torv leaped to obey, smiling.

At their master's shrill whistled command the mutant sea mammals moved in sleek unison. Their powerful flipper-muscles dragged the scarlet dragon boat, screaming as it raked dock and plowed away. Behind them the shouts of slaves as they poured into the other dozen boats dimmed when their lightly loaded longboat cut salt water away from the flaming Island. The rearing scarlet prow of staring eyes and painted teeth wheeled northward; behind them those Islanders who were left on the dock moaned and wailed, strange suckings and rumblings beneath their feet foreboding the watery doom of this man-made Atlantis.

"We could have taken others," Billygo said thoughtfully.

"Yes, we could have," Kullervo glowered.

From the prow Torv motioned the youth to hold his tongue. That which Kullervo had done was marvelous indeed; one man, with wizard's power or whatever, cannot do all the good that needs doing in the universe. And Kullervo had said it—he was no do-gooder. He was born for evil and if he destroyed evil along the way, it was purely accidental. . . .

"Questions, Northman," Kullervo began, while they ate and drank from the longboat hutches.

"Yes, wizard?"

"First, where are we? You have been with the Islanders a long time. You have come to know the drift of the currents. There were charts, too, were there not?"

"Aye. We had charts and pictures but—" He squinted at the sun and made canny visual calculations. "If it be clear tonight I will set our course as well as with any chart."

"From the stars," Billygo put in brightly. "I know the stars. Many nights I crawled out of my bed up on the shed roof and watched them till morning. There's the North Star. That's the one seamen use most. I know lots of stars and star pictures," he bragged on. "Like the Great Bear."

Kullervo felt a pang like a knife. He turned wryly to the youth. "What about the Great Bear? Had you thought of traveling there, boy?"

Billygo hooted at the mere idea of flying off the planet

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he was born on. But then his eyes stormed up. The ugly man was making fun of him. He lowered his eyes, crest-fallen.

"Never mind," Kullervo said. "Find me some other clothes than these *perkele* silk clown's rags. Presently I shall tell you fantastic tales of visits to many stars. You will not believe them, but it will idle the time away while Torv guides us to the wild fjords where his clan has its fishing villages."

Later, he questioned Torv closely about the Vanhat. No, Torv had never heard of such a people. Yet there were other tribes along the northern coasts. Perhaps someone among them could tell him something. Grateful to be freed from his bondage, grateful to be able to point the longboat in the direction of his homeland, Torv needed no threat or wizard's dagger over his head to compel him to aid this strange ugly tramontane insofar as he could on his mysterious quest.

Although spring's hint was on Etelatar's breath, aiding the sea beasts in the south wind that bellied out the crudely painted sail which Torv raised, the icy waters and the distant gray mountains of glacial berg to the west indicated all too well that their course was due north, toward a ragged cliffline of savage breakers and a stalwart folk who, like their ancestors, wrested out a cruel life for themselves from the pounding seas.

If Torv wondered, and he did, why Kullervo followed his hungry hint that they go north to his village rather than set a more comfortable course southward, he kept his peace. No use to stir up questions and start second thoughts going. As for Kullervo, something very remotely like yearning drew him north—something drifting smokily up out of the DNA molecules of his cells. The part of him that was Vanhat.

XIV

THE MIDNIGHT SUN quivered on the horizon during the last hours and Torv, eyes glued on the fogs that shrouded the great sawteeth fjords, as if sleep were something he had utterly forgotten, shouted his joy.

"There it is! My village is just around that head of land!"

The dolphins spoke back to his uncanny dolphin-voice whistle, straining ahead in great thrusting leaps, as if they remembered, too.

"It has been a long time," Kullervo said. "You spoke of tribal wars when food was scarce in the long winter night. Who knows what has happened? Those who knew you may be dead!"

"They will remember," Torv said thickly. He cracked a smile. "They will be curious about you. And the boy." He turned to Billygo. "Maybe you will stay with us? The work is hard, but we have our fun, too. Our girls have flaxen braids and bright blue eyes. New blood in a tribe is a good thing. You would be made welcome."

Billygo shrugged, although talk of the pretty girls brought a responsive gleam to his alert gray eyes.

Nothing was said about Kullervo being welcomed into the tribe with open arms. Nor did he expect it. As always, Kullervo's presence among these humans was merely tolerated, and not always that. Clan Chief Kar, a cousin of Torv (as was half the village) was a lean hawk-beaked septuagenarian, given to stroking his snowy beard pontifically and rendering his opinions in long bardish utterances. The newly-bucolic village leisure life had brought man back to the arts of noble conversation, if couched in primitive terms, and to individual respect. If a man did a bad thing to you, you either discussed it with him in the Chief's presence or you killed him outright. Or he killed you. There was no "civilized" craftiness and double-dealing.

Billygo was the center of attention among the virile young-

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sters. The boys listened wide-eyed to his tales of far lands, liberally sprinkled with bragging lies; the rosy-cheeked girls gave him secret looks and wondered which of them would be the lucky one.

Kullervo sought shadows and listened. . . .

He heard many things. How the village was run on the communal pattern of the old northland farmsteads, not because they remembered but because the pattern was repeated through common sense need. Each household shared in the fishing catch, and in the hunting and farm produce as well. Each man and woman and child worked. There were deer in the eastern mountains, which were now covered with new forests. There were no horses, unfortunately, the entire species having failed to rally after the Ussi had done with them. But the rare elk-herds that drifted down from the Arctic Circle during the black winters were coaxed by ones and twos into warm sheds and the promise of grain, so that now the Nord clans had hat-racked mounts to ride. The smaller mammals and rodents had managed to survive, too, although game was still scarce and the sea continued to provide the tribes with by far the bulk of their food.

These were primitive times again; up here the earth was budding and green again. Avoided as he was, Kullervo walked among the pine trees that rimmed the circular compound of the village, sniffed the windflowers, his senses choked by the vernal season that wasn't just a new spring but the slow rebirth of a world as well.

Chief Kar rose to greet him as he entered the council hut. His eyes were polite but only that. He knew how this ugly wizard standing before him had caused smoke and flame by uttering demons' words; he knew also that Kullervo had freed his cousin Torv and the engaging youth and permitted them to voyage back here when he might have done otherwise. He must be grateful, but a wizard was to fear as well. Nor could any man look directly at this misshapen stranger from faraway places (could it *really* be from the stars . . . ?) with openhearted liking. It was impossible. He did not know why it was impossible to like Kullervo, but even

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the smallest child or inbred lackwit shunned him. . . .

"It is time for me to leave," Kullervo told him.

Chief Kar tried not to nod too quickly. "Billygo will stay with us?"

"That's up to him. I'm not his master."

Chief Kar's old eyes glowed relief and a genuine attempt at friendliness. "I think the boy will stay." He added, "Is there anything we can do for you? You will need provisions, of course. And a mount to carry you over the mountains, since Torv tells me you seek information from other clans. As to this information—you mentioned a tribe called *Van-hat*?"

"A very old tribe."

Kar shook his head. "I have asked. None among us here have heard of them. Perhaps further north?"

Kullervo nodded. "Yes, I think further north. Perhaps east, over the snowy ranges." He decided to nudge the old man's thoughts a little. "There are old stories, are there not? Of Finmark wizards who could call up storms or—?"

"Or bring down Hell's fire!" Chief Kar shuddered, staring at Kullervo's blunt hairy fingers. "Only it was the Old Ones in the *south* who possessed such powers! Evil powers! So that finally it was decreed that they should vanish off the face of the Earth and all their cities and fields be wasted and blighted forever!"

"That is your legend?"

"That is our legend. Only it is no mere childish story! It happened, did it not? There have been drifting boats. And the terrible Islanders who eat human flesh. They have told us these things." He sought Kullervo's eyes fearfully. "It did happen that way?"

Kullervo nodded briefly. "Something like that." He turned to go. "Thank you, Chief Kar. I will accept your offer of an elk and a foodpack of provisions." He hesitated. "There is one more small favor I would ask."

"Ask."

"This knife of mine." Kullervo drew out the broken *pukko*. "Is there someone in the village who has the skill to repair this knife for me?"

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"It is a pitiful thing! Let me give you a new one in its stead!"

"No. This one. I prize it highly, so be careful."

"Give it to me, Kullervo Kasi. I will have our finest smith rebuild it as good as new."

Chief Kar was as good as his word; he tempered the tribal ill-will toward their rare guest by supplying him with the best elk-mount in the village, saddlebagged with dried meats and fish and means for catching himself fresh game. He further drew Kullervo a rough map of the Nord coast, marking the villages where sister clans were to be found. Eastward, over the long humpback range into what was once Sweden and, further north, Suomi, the occasional hunting ventures apart from the coast had been few. Besides the difficulties involved in attempting to scale the always snowy summits, there was a vague disinclination among the Nord clans to even try to find a passage, as if something in their bones told them that evil lurked behind those skyflung hills.

Taking his lonely leave, with not even Billygo to wish him well on his journey, Kullervo found some small comfort in the appearance of his bright blue stockings jutting down on either side of the elk-saddle and the feel of his repaired *pukko* in its secret sheath next to his hairy chest.

There was a giddiness to the season, like the misplacement of a man's body rhythms in the deeps of space. To look up above the fringes of conifer and see the sun always staring down like a watchful eye was to lose all sense of time-placement. When to eat. When to sleep. When to consort with one's inward dreams. . . .

Kullervo's coastal trek was long and arduous and his visits with the other tribes gained him nothing by way of information. He was made welcome, treated with curiosity and suspicion as any wandering tramontane—any stranger-from-over-the-mountain—but, after the initial flush of interest ebbed, distaste pushed to the fore again. Besides, this was a busy time. Summer was all too short and many things had to be done to prepare for the long icy dark. And when they were not busy the clan folk were caught up by the seasonal giddiness and the need for pairing,

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for mating, for indulging their bleak lives a little with fermented juices and hoopla.

Kullervo did not fit in.

He asked his questions. He was invited to break bread. His mount was cared for while he slept. Then he was invited by silences to leave. . . .

The snow became dirty patches on the rising ground as he pulled his mount to the right, out of the sheltering forest. There were precious few green tufts among the rocks here for grazing and the gangling elk shrugged his horny spikes in dismay. It was a lonesome three days, crossing that stony waste, with no sorrowful crow or curlew to send its plaint drifting down the wind. But where the mountain range lifted toward glacier there was new forest and small game. Summer-graying rabbits. Woodchucks and squirrels. Coveys of partridge. Kullervo ate well now and the elk thrust his palmate antlers up among the new branches to siphon off the tender shoots with that curious proboscis of upper lip, snuffing content.

Kullervo kept his journey northward along the wooded ridge, seeking a pass through the snowy mountains. Nothing. The pine and tamarack thickened, game was plentiful, and now and then his beast stopped short at the distant horn-bellow of another elk. Eventually it was as if the animal were following his own bent with amorous inclinations. After all, this was the season for mating; it was just such friskiness that made the small animals easy prey.

Chief Kar's map cut off abruptly at the ruined remnants of an ancient town called Bodo. He would travel north half a nightless span longer, then cut due east across a territory called, in Kar's scrawl, Tornetrask, into old Lapland. Northward the summits reared to a height of near eight thousand feet; surely there must be a pass before then, among the endless blue lakes and tarns. Mostly it was that nagging inner impulse rather than the rag of deerhide map that pushed him on.

It was as if his animal knew the way better than he. It would raise its great muzzle to the wind and sniff, listen, snuffle the snow-patched ground, then on through the forest. Spring rains drenched them both, but now the elk

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plowed ahead in earnest. He had some plan of his own. Kullervo guessed what it was and tethered him well when it came time for sleep. A meal of yesterday's catch, with bark tea to wash it down, and Kullervo curled up under the thickest branches of a tall pine for an exhausted sleep.

His beast had worn him out. Kullervo's dreams were of huge threshing wings and bellowing demons; when he woke and went to untie the elk, his mount was gone. The rawhide thongs had been gnawed through by some Tapiolan accomplice. The rest of his journey must proceed on foot, no happy prospect. Kullervo cursed his elk, the cow that had freed him, and the fierce desire that had brought them both to it.

It was a long day's hike before the passage he was hunting for showed and now there was a slippery glacial crust to slough across. Kullervo dragged himself up to a bluish hump of razorback in hopes that this was at last it. His eyes were half-blind from snow-dazzle, last night's freshet having given way to bold blue. While he tottered on the hump he heard from below him the mocking bugle of his lost mount.

"Perkele!" he swore savagely.

Sightless from the coruscated diamonds bouncing off the highland snows, he began to run toward the sound. A brown shape, or two brown shapes, moved among the greenery. Kullervo missed the copse in his bumping sliding yelling scramble.

He didn't see the sheer drop.

He tumbled, snarling defiant hate at an inimical universe.



PART THREE

THE SILVER EGGS

"Long the silver eggs lay sleeping;
Now would Louhi's vengeance smash them.
None shall save Otava's children,
No strong hand shall fling them starward
Hence to call back ancient glories . . ."

SONG OF THE VANHAT: *Runo LXX*

XV

KULLERVO CAME TO consciousness with a wrench. Some demon with savage black wings was battering him, its claws raking his arm that mercifully protected his face from them and that monstrous curved beak. He tried to shout it away, beat it off. It was no good. He was too weak from his fall. His mind was too rocky, his muscles too battered for efficient resistance.

He watched, with a grimace of pain, how the black-penned creature—an eagle?—gave off lashing him with its wings to swoop up and hover above him, shrieking wild imprecations. He lifted a feeble hand, roved a goggle uphill, noting how a series of snowdrifts had broken up his fall into a series of ten-foot tumbles, and that he lay at the rim of a wide blue lake. When the giant bird stopped circling and hovering to plummet onto his chest, folding its mighty wings and grumbling there like an incubus. Kullervo wrenched his arms up with a groan of agony. *They go for the eyes first*, he remembered.

He put all of his strength of will and need to survive into

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a spastic series of muscular actions that dragged him to a sit and caused the bird to quit his chest if not to give up its feast. His fingers dragged over blood-clotted fabric and face wonderingly. He ought to be dead and the way he ached in every cell of him made him wish he was. Well, this raven demon with the topaz eyes would finish him off.

"Perhaps your life is of some value," Kullervo told it in a harsh groan. "Mine is not."

The bird answered him with a piercing shriek like a demand that he get up and stop this nonsense. When Kullervo only snapped shut his eyes, ignoring life, the eagle moved onto his chest again, claws digging in while it hopped from one foot to the other. It uttered another of those blood-freezing demands.

Kullervo groaned.

"Get it over, damn you!"

The talons dug deeper insistently. Again the scream.

Irritable anger thrusting through Kullervo's veins made him wrench his muscles to a shaking stand. The eagle moved off, head cocked, waiting.

"What do you want, damn you? Permission?"

The sky-monarch was really a magnificent specimen, like a messenger from Nordic Valhalla. Its head was pure white, its downy ruff pure gleaming silver as if it wore Ukko's collar. When Kullervo only stood there, swaying, panting, gaping, it upped again, flapping a windy wash of air on Kullervo with its mighty pens.

"Mita?"

Kullervo began to churn up strange eldritch ideas. Then, when the eagle lifted like an elevator and dove away across the wide lake, he showed his equine teeth in a grin of self-reprimand. Why would any beast or bird want to help him? No human, nor alien, in this universe wanted to!

But, strangely, the eagle with the silver collar came back presently. This time he held something between his talons, something furry and brown-gray and still kicking. The bird swooped and deposited it, chuckling in its craw, at Kullervo's feet.

It was a rabbit.

Life. Warm blood. Food.

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The meal and the curious phenomenon involved gave Kullervo the strength to crawl about and find the saddle-packs he'd had slung over his shoulder when he fell. He surveyed the shining lake and the leaping circle-causing flecks of food within its depths with new eyes. The eagle came and went, making its own circles on the bright bowl of sky that gave the lake its rich sapphire color, but it was ready to move when Kullervo was. Ready and anxious.

"*Kotka!*" Kullervo shouted up to the eagle. "You started this. Now, take me where I must go!"

The wide wings dipped and took off along the rim of the long lake. Days came and went while Kullervo followed the thing in the sky, but when he at last saw woodsmoke dabbling the far horizon like a misplaced brushstroke across the bright slate-blue, he knew within the deepest reaches of his being that he had found what he was seeking. *Kotka*, the eagle, had brought him to the lost valley of the Vanhat.

XVI

WHEN HE REACHED the downtrail leading into the village at the heart of the small valley he stopped short with a gasp of familiarity. It was like some dim dream born with him out of his unknown mother's womb. Before him wound the trail, between trees and around low hillocks; it followed an ancient creek that bubbled over its white rock-bed, whispering tales of ancient ways to the branches nodding over it in the wind. A tern cried softly as it skimmed the lake near the long low log-huts. Almost Kullervo forgot who he was and what. Almost he forgot Starwitch Louhi and his invidious mission.

Somehow, some part of him belonged in this place, yearned for it. Nothing he had ever seen could stir him as deeply as the sight of this green valley did now. Man had despoiled his world, sucked it dry and then left it, but this valley was like something remote from all time and space. Immortal. Enchanted. Destroyed, burned out, it resurrected itself

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from its own ashes like the fabled phoenix. Perhaps Earth itself might do that but for Kullervo the lost dream was right here. It touched him to tears, tears which he brushed roughly away with a sardonic knife-thrust of knowledge that his personal dream was an illusion.

Kullervo was of nothing at all in this universe. His dream was borrowed. . . .

Still, he looked down hungrily and long, a bedraggled figure on the hill's brow in his torn blue stockings, his wide ugly face stubbled heavily with yellow beard. He squinted up for a last look at his winged guide, but the eagle had vanished. By the quiet look of the log huts he could see this was sleep-time. A wolfish howl told him that this valley tribe, like the Nords, had found themselves pets and helpmeets among the residual reborn denizens of the new forests.

When the wolf-dogs scented the stranger's approach into the packed earth village common they were out of their lean-to nests behind the huts in avid force. Kullervo tried to find shelter, fast, from the fanged gray streaks, but all doors were tight shut and the beasts made a ring around him, snapping, snarling, reverting.

Kullervo gave the lead leaper a backhand whack on the nose with his pack. It retreated, yelping. But others came on. He whirled the saddlepack around him in great swaths, edging toward the nearest door for sanctuary. But, scenting strangeness such as they had never scented before, these lately-wolves decided among themselves that this tramontane was fair game. His alienness brought out all their thinly veneered instincts to kill. There must have been fifteen of the sleek-backed brutes and they were quick to cut off his progress toward the hut door, circling closer for the final rush.

Surely, Kullervo, thought, their wild triumphant cacophony would wake somebody up! Then he thought the villagers must have been reveling long around their midsummer fires and, paired off, what went on outside their beds didn't interest them right now. A deer had wandered into the village, doubtless. Let the dogs have him.

Between swirling blows at the boldest of them, Kullervo

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yelled out for help. Nothing. The eversun blinking mockingly above the trees but the nightless night lay turgid and heavy upon the village. Even the greathouse and granary, to the center of the common, was mute, although a faint wisp of smoke idled out of the rock chimney to its rear.

The slinking snarling circle tightened up. Kullervo's arm muscles were flagging. He could not hold them back long. The pack knew. Now their leader gave them a yelping signal and they leaped to close in the circle.

The sledge barreled around the greathouse in a scream of iron-rimmed runners on the half-dirt, half-ice. There was something furtive about its rush; as if the great elks pulling it had been harnessed in stealth and those in it wanted to shrug free of the village and be high up in the hills before the sleeping hut-clutch was aware of their leaving.

The ornamented vehicle drove heavily down on Kullervo and the dogs. Kullervo caught a glimpse of a white-toothed virile grin on the darkly handsome face of the man snapping the reins against the elks' rumps. The man's free arm was curved around a girl's waist, a very lovely, very young girl with long silver-blond hair. The girl was struggling to free herself, smashing at the wide bared chest of the man with her fists. She was bleating softly, as if hoping her abductor would relent of his own accord rather than that he be stayed by those she might scream to her aid.

The handsome white-toothed man holding her to him as he pounded the beasts forward in Roman chariot fashion, had no such intention. The grin dropped, however, when he had to pull up reins sharply to avoid Kullervo and the snarling killer-dogs.

"Get out of my way, oaf!" he yelled.

"Help me!" Kullervo yelled back, while the dogs nimbled out of the sledge's path to resume their mauling. "Help!"

The dark-eyebrowed face scowled. His show of vacillation gave the girl an edge and she almost twisted free. It was this which decided him.

"Out of my way! I'm in a hurry!"

"But they'll kill me!"

"So, stranger? Nobody asked you to our village!"

But the wolf-dogs were so intent on their prospective

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feast that they kept darting in front of the sledge and the driver had to pull the elks well right to avoid them and Kullervo, who made grabs at the ornamented side of the high-bed vehicle to keep his rear from getting raked and torn.

"Help him, Heikki!" the girl panted, staring widely.

"Why?" the youth grumbled. He gave the harnessed beasts a popping slap of reins and a shrill whistle.

Kullervo moaned as the sledge slipped away. Then, with a convulsive leap away from death, he caught hold of the thick wooden dowel-piece where the rear of the vehicle-bed was fastened to the runner. One hand. He held on, letting himself be dragged along. The dogs' fangs tore at his legs but then, under Heikki's wild barreling pace as they left the village, they dropped back. Kullervo gritted and held on, biting down his agony as his thick body bumped and scraped the flinty ground.

When Heikki loosed rein for a look back Kullervo was able by sheer will to pull himself forward enough to grab the dowel with both hands, then, agonizingly, pull his boots onto the runner.

"Let go now!" Heikki yelled, swearing bloody oaths.

But the girl reached out a slim arm and helped him pull up the painted ash-wood side of the chariot-like body until he hung crouched from the top, one elbow over, still riding the runner. The elks' hooves pounded the sledge onto the rutted road leading up into the mountains. Heikki continued to swear but the girl did what she could about helping Kullervo elbow himself into the body of the sledge, whether out of compassion or as a device against Heikki it was hard to determine.

The added weight, when Kullervo made his clumsy dive into the chariot, besides the sharp rise in the twisting road, slowed the sledge to a near-stop. Sparks shot out where the metal runners struck unlevelled rock. Kullervo's lumpy body bashing his legs and the girl's renewed efforts to break free and make a leap out of the sledge became too much.

"*Satana perkele!*" Heikki yelled in black fury, snapping the reins against the harnessed animals. "Who are you?"

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What Hiisi's offspring are you that spoils our elopement?"

The lissome beauty answered him with a jolt in the stomach by her freed elbow. The perilous rocking of the chariot-bed at a rough unbanked turn with all the activity going on in it forced Heikki to turn his full attention to keep the sledge from toppling over the edge; the girl took full advantage. She leaped and started to run.

It took Heikki but a moment to pull the straining animals up and tie the reins to the carven upswing boat's-prow pommel and jump after the fleeing girl. Kullervo watched with grim amusement as the tall youth with the athletic body leaped through wild blackberry and huckleberry bushes among the tree trunks until he had the girl by the waist again. He noticed now that she was wearing nothing but a sheer nightdress, as if Heikki had pulled her straight out of her bed. Her pleadings as Heikki hauled her back to the troika were wasted breath.

"Don't worry, Marjatta; we shall continue our marriage elopement just as soon as I have taught this dog-meat some proper manners! Interrupting a man and his take-mate on their wedding rape!"

Her blue eyes flashed angry fire. "Wedding! This is pure rape—dragging me out of my bed in the middle of the night: without even letting me dress!"

"Ah, but these things must be done fast! And I, Heikki Kinnonehalvari, am no conventional rapist, as you well know!"

"I know, all right," Marjatta's voice was a forlorn sob. "You have used the traditional bride-take in the manner of a churl and a boor, Heikki. And you say you will teach this one manners! It is *you* who needs—"

"I have not noticed the other maidens objecting to my methods." Heikki grinned. "I could name you at least three—"

"Name me a dozen, what do I care!" Marjatta blazed, rather too brightly. Kullervo guessed. "Why did you not rape one of them?"

"Perhaps because they were too willing." Heikki planted a forced kiss on her red mouth. "Perhaps because in spite of what you are, I love you, Marjatta."

"You call this love? I call it something else! You are Chief

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Toipo's son and your doting mother has fed you with a silver spoon all of your wild days! You want me only because I am forbidden and because I obey the edict of the Council and refuse marriage with you!"

She pulled away from him with a dry sob, endeavoring to hide her heaving bosoms, but Heikki's roughness with her had broken the yoke's drawstring. Heikki tried to comfort her but she turned her back to him, cheeks flaming.

Heikki bent the full weight of his anger on Kullervo. "You, ugly one from over the mountain. From the look of you you were misbegotten by some creature of Iko-Turso for the purpose of feeding dogs! If only they had torn you apart one minute sooner!" He pulled his *pukko* from its sheath in his wide gold-embroidered belt. "Never mind. My *pukko* shall be their most effective tooth!"

Marjatta's slim form flinging between them stayed his uplifted hand. Kullervo had no need to draw his own secret weapon and for this he was grateful. It must be saved for some moment of dire need. It had ridden the stars for incalculable years to some important purpose. This was not it.

"Wait, Heikki!" Marjatta cried. "Do not enrage the Chief further by more rash acts! Your father is an honest man; he will not go against the Council, even to save his own son. *Look!*"

Three more chariots, larger than Heikki's, were moving rapidly out of the village. Others of the tribe, mostly whooping boys, trailed after at an excited pelting run.

Heikki swore, but now his urges were ebbing fast. Not so much from the sight of his father and the Council whipping down on them, but by Marjatta's adamant refusal to fall in with his artful plan. The Council had refused his *pléa* that he be permitted to take Marjatta to wife; yet, faced with a *fait accompli* his hope was they would change their hide-bound old-fogy minds. Marjatta's stubbornness—not to mention Kullervo's untoward appearance—had squelched his brash hope.

Little was said when the troikas overtook them. Chief Toipo took a moment to fling a homespun lap-rug over Marjatta's bare shoulders, with never a look at his wayward

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son; the entourage returned to the village in a whirlwind of excitement and mingled emotions, dark glances, secret smiles and nods.

XVII

THE ANCIENT CRONE who tended to Kullervo's dog-bites and lacerations of belly and legs did so with distaste, taking care to be rough about the way she slapped her smelly herbal unguents on him. They had all been brought to the great-house and, as with the Nord clans, there was to be no delay about Heikki's trial. Justice was raw and swift in these primitive villages, hot on heels of the crime. Going against a solemnly rendered decision of the Chief and his Council was serious indeed. For serious crimes such as this one there were but two possible verdicts: death, or banishment from the tribe. Banishment to the wilds was in some ways the worse of the two. One winter alone meant starvation.

Orva, the walnut-faced hag with the tribal equivalent of a medical shingle, muttered her spells and slapped Kullervo indifferently with her goods, glancing often toward the firelit end of the long pine-log room where the Council was making ready for Heikki's trial.

This valley was beautiful, aye. A lovely specter of Terra's earliest eras. Yet those living in it were but one brief stride past savagery. Life was hot and heavy and quickly over for many blunt reasons. Compassion was a bud, slow to flower.

Kullervo downed the steaming bowlful of gruel Orva thrust into his hands, then followed her across the adzed logs to where the bowed firelight played across many faces, some dark and determined, some hiding smiles behind their beards. There were few women present and those demure and meek in headscarves behind their men, as if to scuttle like mice when ordered. Each man, Kullervo decided, ruled his household with an iron fist. This northernmost tribe was less civilized in many ways even than the Nords, perhaps because of isolation and the bitter colds of winter.

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Marjatta stood flanked by two appointed women attendants, her girlish figure muffled by the rough-woven blanket. Her long plaits of strangely silver hair were almost hidden but her face shone out with an elfin radiance that made the other apple-cheeked women look like stolid blocks of wood by comparison. No wonder Heikki wanted her! So, from the covert drools, did all the young bucks in the tribe, married or no.

At the Chief's signal, Heikki was brought into his accusers' presence. His manner was one of wide-shouldered swagger and swash and that white grin stayed put almost to the last. His well-polished high boots glittered under a patina of recent dust and his blouse, lovingly embroidered by his mother, was open down to his wide gold-filigree belt; minus *pukko* now, massive bronzed pectorals showing, chin outthrust, red lips and arched brows curving defiance.

Chief Toipo rose solemnly. The flames from the fire played on an honest thoughtful face, craggy from many hard years and hard decisions, yet with much of Heikki's handsomeness. Tempered, though; cautious where his son had learned nothing of caution. Heikki's adoring mother stood behind her husband's robed seat of honor, weeping silent tears.

Toipo's long face wore the grimmest of looks when his penetrating blue eyes lowered to face Heikki's. He wore a well-shaped beard with a reddish tinge and for a moment his lips moved but nothing came out. It was as if he were reprimanding himself for all the things he had not done, unspoken words of wisdom, deeds too, which might somehow have forestalled this agonizing moment.

"Heikki son of Toipo, you are accused here of taking the maiden Marjatta against the will of the Council. How say you?"

Kullervo noticed that the charge read "against the will of the Council," not "against her will." Apparently her desires, or any woman's, cut little ice in this wholly masculine-ruled society.

"I did not take her. I tried." Heikki shrugged. "If it had not been for that beast-face there—" He turned to Kullervo with a choked-off snarl.

"Yes. You did not take her. But you tried. You snatched

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the girl from her bed while all slept. That you did not succeed in your rape must be because Hopea-Lapuo, our God-in-the-Earth who rules us all, employed this tramontane wretch to prevent your sacriligious act!"

Heikki faced his father hotly, then pulled his look to others, mainly to the Council members to his right. He fingered out isolate faces with scornful eyes, accusing eyes. They could not have Marjatta so no man could have her!

"Besides being under the taking age," Chief Toipo continued more gently, "Marjatta is untribe. Nobody knows who her father was. Since her mother died giving her birth, the Council has provided for her and made her their ward. The Council decreed, as she grew toward puberty, that none must wed Marjatta. She is untribe. Who knows what her children would be?"

"Especially the Chief's son must not marry an—an orphan!" Heikki flung out bitterly.

"Our taboos are for good reason. You have seen the crippled and deformed when the matings are too close to house."

"All the more reason to mate with untribes!"

"We have our methods for seeking new blood. The women-taking expeditions to the south. Had you seen fit to wait a little longer you would have had your choice of the next take, as my son." He lifted a knotted hand that quivered from intense emotion, as did his voice. "*But not Marjatta! Hopea-Lapuo forbids it!*"

This was something new. Women were to be taken by force, if necessary. Even the carrying of a bride across the threshold harked back to such abduction by force. All perfectly legitimate here, and doubtless the girls entering puberty found it thrilling to be chosen, to be desired so much that men fought and schemed to kidnap them. But an ominous harshness to Topio's voice when he said their tribal Earth-god had forbid Marjatta's taking rang with supernatural fervor. The valley Chief believed this statement as he believed in the omnipotence of Hopea-Lapuo himself!

Hopea-Lapuo.

Kullervo's brain latched onto the hyphenate with a rushing thrill. The Earth-God. *Hopea*. The Vanhat word for

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silver! Lapuo. It tantalized but meant nothing, right off. A corruption of another Vanhat word? He badgered his mind but nothing showed. Yet—*hopea*. The metal from which the Vanhat wizard, Wainomoinen, fashioned magic things. The barrier against offworld evil. Here was a beginning. And if Hopea-Lapuo had indeed forbidden Marjatta's marriage to any man of this primitive valley tribe . . .

The trial wrenched Kullervo back from his thoughts.

"Have you anything to say that might bear on a just decision of the Council?" Chief Toipo's stormy eyes were glazed; dwelling on the Earth-god's evidenced desires, it behooved him to steel his heart all the more against its natural instincts. He must lean apart from his own seed, whatever his hurt, or his wife's.

Heikki's shrug was almost insolent. He had nothing to lose since he had no defense to offer. Not against the Council, less Hopea-Lapuo himself!

"Look at Marjatta! Look at her and tell me, Council, that all of you still young enough to call yourself men do not want such a creature! I was honest about it, Father. I begged you to let me take her within the law. I begged you! It was only when I was forbidden to even look on her—when you kept her hidden even during the feasts . . ." He wrenched a desperate look at the girl, then down at the floor.

"You have always been a wild one, son," Toipo told him. "Wild and perverse. What you were told not to do you did out of pure defiance. I see now that your desire for Marjatta was more than boyish rebellion. I am glad that you took her out of love, not out of spite. Still," he sighed weightily, "we cannot judge your motive but only your act. What say you, Council? What is your verdict?"

Kullervo read it in their eyes before their spokesman stepped forth and framed the word.

Death.

All men knew how carefully the Council had guarded Marjatta throughout her orphan's life, even from each other. All men knew that Hopea-Lapuo had spoken to the Chief and to others who possessed the strange power to hear the Earth-god's decrees. Chief's son or no, Heikki had

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transgressed. He must die. Permissivism to youth was intolerable in this bleak wilderness. Malefactors were sometimes forgiven and perhaps Heikki might have been had not Hopea-Lapuo himself been involved. Justice flamed unshaded. There were no jails.

Hands took hold of Heikki.

"Wait!"

Marjatta's soft cry rang out in the silence after verdict.

Toipo held up a hand. "What 'is it, Marjatta?" It seemed to Kullervo that a spark of hope leaped in his eyes.

"Women are not permitted to speak," one of the Councilmen objected. They are owned creatures, like elks. They are to produce children, to make the fires and cook, and to feel the birch across their backs when they shirk."

"Speak, child," Toipo told her.

"Don't kill him! He did me no harm!"

"He went against the law. That is the harm he did."

"There is another way." Her voice was a willow trembling to an impending storm.

"Exile?"

"No-o. It has been whispered that Hopea-Lapuo has need for a new *hottaja*. Is it not time?"

Chief Toipo pulled in a long breath of the close perspiration fouled air. "Aye. The girl is right! It is against Hopea-Lapuo that my son has sinned most. Let him be named *hottaja*. Let him be taken forth across the black field of Mustamaa to the end of the world for Hopea-Lapuo's occult uses!"

XVIII

NOR WAS KULLERVO out of the soup. Some of Heikki's guilt had mysteriously rubbed off on him; besides, he was a stranger-from-over-the-mountain and suspect by definition. He was hustled into a dark windowless lean-to shed off the greathouse to await his disposition by Chief Toipo and the Council when they returned from the ritual of the *hottaja*.

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Which, he determined from the considerable preparations for the trip, would involve a full day's march by foot across perilous terrain. All in the village must bear witness to the oblation that Hopea-Lapuo had demanded, after which the pious revelry would be loud and long and not without considerable satisfaction among the young bucks Heikki had outdone in feats of strength and in girl-taking.

While he groped the thick log walls hopelessly, and discovered with equal hopelessness that the heavy oaken door was barred from outside by a huge cross-log through iron hasps, Kullervo grumbled to himself thus: "If I am Hopea-Lapuo's tool, having arrived in the valley in the nick of time to save Marjatta from rape, why then am I not treated as a god's messenger instead of left here to rot? I should be garlanded with spring flowers and labeled glorious and fed dainty tidbits!"

His sardonic musings gained him nothing. Religion was to believe, not to make sense.

What to do?

Think! Use the wits Starwitch Louhi had stirred up—like poking that snake-stick of hers into a hornet's nest! "Why," he groused, "did she not give me the power to walk through log walls while she was about it?" Louhi herself possessed awesome powers of transmigration and all manner of kinetic hanky-panky. No doubt these things took a lifetime, or several, in the learning. Louhi had showed caution in giving Kullervo only destructive powers toward humans whose *belief* was involved. These log walls would not believe his flame and smoke; ergo, the spells would not scorch so much as a worm-eaten knot.

His groping hands found nothing with which to batter uselessly on the door. But there was his *pukko*. He was such a sorry figure in his dog-ripped Nordic garments that they hadn't even thought to search him for weapons. With a grunt, Kullervo had it out and began gnawing industriously at mid-door where the heavy bar crossed it.

Outside a doleful wind moaned through the cracks. Kullervo's rat-teeth noises added a chattering counterpoint to the otherwise mordant silence, while his mind fevered over what he had learned in Louhi's behalf.

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Hopea-Lapuo. The Earth-God. His name involved silver, a wizard's metal in any language or tribe. Earth suggested the ancient home of the Vanhat. Underearth, where they had hidden so that the Ussi would never cajole their incredible secrets of the Power. Not because they wanted to keep these powers all for themselves but because they knew to what terrible uses they would be put. They might as well give Ukko's Power to Louhi herself!

Mustamaa. The Black Land. It suggested a dire scorched land, volcanic no doubt, where nothing could live. Where even the snow from the heavens would not fall, or vanished when it touched such a horrid heath.

Last; *hoitaja*. The word, in the ancient tongue, meant one-who-cares-for. A tender. A nurse. A feeder. Remembering the breathless catch with which the villagers uttered the word, with Heikki named, Kullervo shivered at thoughts of ghouls and vampires and all things dark and sinister. Things that fed . . . Heikki's body and blood, perhaps his very soul, was to be fed to some nameless horror at the end of the world so that the Earth-God might be appeased and grant the valley tribe good hunting, good crops, strong sons.

Every now and then Kullervo stopped and inserted his fingers into the narrow crack his *pukko* was gouging out. It was slow work. Infinitely slow. When he was able to see more watery light, he groaned. Whittling through that cross-bar would take forever.

He put by his *pukko* and fist-butted the door in a cursing rage.

When he stopped telling the universe what he thought of it, he slumped down to rest his prickling arms and legs. He scowled into the dark. Something was different. What? Yes. That lamenting wind had stopped its keening.

Now he knew. It was not the wind! It was old Orva, the crone with the herbs magic. Ancient as she was, she would not be able to keep up with the procession to *Mustamaa*, so she had been left behind to guard Kullervo. Not that he would need guarding in his dark hole but it gave Orva the pretense of being a necessary factor in this clan. Her magic with woods herbs was all that had saved

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her these many years; there were few other oldsters in this bright green valley. When they lost their manual skills and their teeth they were parceled out to die in the woods like the Eskimo aged long ago. Bears would devour them and thus provide food and continuance to the tribe.

"Orval!" Kullervo yelled. "Let me out!"

"Ei," she cackled. "Ei, ei. You shall stay where you are until the Chief comes back. Then the Council will examine you. Then you will be killed. We don't like strangers here in the valley. Neither does Hopea-Lapuo like them."

Neither does Hopea-Lapuo.

"You've got to let me out! It's important!"

"Niin. And why have I got to let you out?"

"Listen, Old One; have I done any wrong?"

"You have come to the valley. You should not have come."

"Listen, hag! If you let me out I will leave the valley and never come back. Besides," as inspiration struck, "I will give you a fine present."

Silence. Then, "Present? Where does a bundle of rags have presents?"

"Hear me, Old One! I am no wizard or wrongdoer. I have come as a trader from far in the south where they have many beautiful and wonderful things. Useful things. Magic things for healing. I have my trading packs hidden on the mountain road, as do all prudent trading travelers, so that no one may steal them before I have discussed terms with the Chief. I have gifts for him, too. You will be doing yourself a favor by helping me to fetch my trading packs so that I can have Chief Toipo's gifts all ready for him when he returns."

"And my gift?"

"You shall have your pick of many beautiful things! Hurry! Open the door! We will fetch them together and you shall have your choice, even before the Chief!"

The next moment lasted an era. Finally. Finally the great wooden barrier grated back. Kullervo smashed through before the crone could second-think. The sense of urgency was hot-breathed upon him. He put his *pukko's* edge to the hag's scrawny throat.

"Now, hag!"

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"What—what do you want? To kill me?" The rheumy eyes bulged with fear.

"No. I must have a pack of food. Snowshoes. Where are they? Quick!"

Her mucous eyes glared reproachfully; a spit drool ran down the sunken mouth. Kullervo's ugly face fiercely close to hers, his fist grabbing her shapeless front, shook her so that it was a moment before she could move. Then she pointed a crooked finger. Kullervo hauled her bodily to the larder door and kicked it open. Before leaving he cut down two great haunches of deer meat from where they hung. These were to distract the wolf-dogs.

From the greathouse's rear door, Orva called curses down on his head. "My present!" she raged. "Where is my beautiful present?"

"You have it, hag. *Your life!*"

The snowshoes were necessary where the tracks of the faithful moved up into glacial snows. The tidy green valley was completely ringed by mountains like blue glass; the only northern egress from it was the narrowest of cliff trails skittering along a gorge that was a mere oubliette in the dolomitic rock. If he missed a step down he would tumble into a chasm from which there was no possible return.

On this tortuous cliffway only one man could proceed at a time and no wonder it took youthful agility and extrasensory steps to maneuver its serpentine dangers. Kullervo was grateful that the summer eversun was clouded, so that his eyes were not dazzled by the white snows, yet that the processional track was cleanly marked for his awkward foot-webs.

He was startled by a sudden atonal chanting of many voices. The villagers were returning! He would meet them on the narrow trail! All his chicanery with Orva was futile!

There was ritualistic triumph in those shouted phrases. Hopea-Lapuo had been placated once again. The sonorous syllables of the tribe's *credo* echoed and reechoed across the heights, threatening to bring down the meltless ice on their heads. Kullervo turned his face from this pagan *gloria in excelsis* for a way out. There was nothing,

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nothing but to hang by his fingers from the cliff's edge furthest from the trail until the cortege had passed.

He leaped and dropped just in time. Hanging over certain death, he tried to concentrate on the words the chanters were exulting in.

*"O Spirit of Hopeal
O Ghost of Lapuo!
Once again we have fulfilled the ancient pledge!
Once again we have given you a hoitaja!
To your mystic needs we have provided
you a nurseling!
Take him, O Earth-God!
Use him to thy frightful need!
But spare us now from thy wrath and
grant us good fortune!"*

Kullervo bit his mouth not to groan his torment. His arms were being pulled inexorably out of their sockets and there was nothing he could do about it. When it seemed that his fingers must let go out of bloodless numbness the self-approving voices began to diminish and he clawed his wracked body back onto the trail. It was a while before his rebelling body would function again. He dug in his pack for hardtack cakes and dried meat, washing them down with gulps of sour beer from a deer's hide bag.

The cliffhanger pathway ended at a plateau, a bleak black flatland of skirling winds that sang harsh warnings. This was Mustamaa. This was the black terrain of rock where no snow fell, where no bird sang, where no single blade of grass would grow. This was Mustamaa and beyond Mustamaa was the end of the world.

Kullervo stared across it and shivered.

The ceremonial Circle had been marked out in blunt black stones. Here, Kullervo guessed, was the jumping-off place. This was as far as any man in the village dared go. Only the appointed *hoitaja* went further.

At the faintly smoldering fire that marked the center of the *Hottaja* Circle Kullervo found splotches of drying blood. Whatever else the Ceremony of the *Hottaja* involved, it

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involved force and the weakening of the scapegoat's will. Certainly it did in Heikki's case. Heikki was of heroic breed. He was not a man to give in, even to the Earth-God, without a fight. Still, in the end, even a valiant hero must submit when his tribe, his father, his god—when all stand against him.

Drops of blood marked a sanguinary spoor path for Kullervo to snuffle after as he traversed the Mustamaa on his vengeful mission.

XIX

HE STOOD confronting a barrier of ice: a glacier straight out of Terra's most ancient dawn days. The glass wall reared up into a dour purple sky, deeper gloomed by the frowning shadow in which Kullervo stood, uncertain. What now, old witch?

The wind, although he was somewhat sheltered here, cut through his bones like a thousand dirks. He glowered down at the black volcanic rock at his feet. Heikki had come here, reached this point. The vagrant blood drops said it. Then—?

He snuffed the ground like the beast he resembled. *Left!* said the spoor. *Go left!* One single drop of blood told him to go around a projection of mingled rock and ice and find what he sought there. Kullervo took a moment to clap his half-numb arms around his body several times to make the blood move in his veins, then he loped around the death's-head knoll like a timber wolf.

He pulled up, shouted.

"Mita—?"

Huddled against the ice wall, as if to press a way right into it, was a small figure in a parka. Too small to be Heikki and there was something about the cut of the furs and the decorative white tails on the hood . . .

"Marjatta!" Kullervo shouted.

The figure gave off sobbing and bolted up. "You! But how—?"

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"Never mind. What are you doing here, child?"

"You thought I hated Heikki, stranger? You thought that?" Her eyes were wide eddies of defiance. "I love him! It was only what he did that I hated! He was forbidden to make love to me, by the Council, by Hopea-Lapuo. I knew he must not do it!"

"Yet in your tribe taking a woman by force is normal procedure."

"Others, yes. But I am different. Something inside of me says no. But I love Heikki, and if he dies I must die! Help me to die with him! Help me!" She slid back to a crumpled heap, forcing her body against the glassy wall.

Kullervo stared in frowning thought. "Heikki is—inside the glacier?"

Marjatta pressed her mittened hands across the opaque surface, straining to see within it. "I was supposed to be sleeping, but I followed after the rest of them. I knew that even Heikki would make me go back so—after they did the things they did to make him stagger across Mustamaa—I followed. I couldn't get too close to Heikki. He would force me back if he knew. Then he reached the ice and he touched it with his bare hand. *Here.*" She removed her mitten and pressed the flat of her palm against the ice. Nothing happened. "Now he is gone from me forever and I am not even permitted to die with his arms around me. It isn't fair!"

"Then why did you ask the Chief to make him a *hoitaja*?"

"I—I—" Marjatta's large eyes were storms. "I thought it was a way to keep him alive, at least a little longer. But now I know it was because something told me to ask it."

"Something?"

"*Hopea-Lapuo.*"

Kullervo grunted and shrugged. He examined the ice. It showed no sign of tampering. No hint that the glacier had not remained intact, as is, for a billion years. "How did it open?"

"I don't know. When Heikki touched it there was a bright light. It hurt my eyes. When I could see anything at all Heikki was gone." Her grief overwhelmed her again.

"Get hold of yourself, girl," Kullervo commanded gruffly.

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"If Heikki is in there we will find him." He tried his own bared hand. Had it not been for the intuitive thrust of awareness that he was near the end of his witch's quest, he would have felt foolish to stand there holding his hand against what was palpably a solid mass of ages-ancient ice.

Yet nothing happened. Nothing at all.

"There must be a way in," he muttered.

Marjatta lifted herself out of her misery, staring full at him with fearful curiosity. "Who are you, tramontane?"

"Kullervo Kasi."

"I remember something. A song about—" She broke off with a gasp.

"About a pilgrim of evil? My ancestor!"

"Chief Toipo said you were sent by Hopea-Lapuo."

Kullervo grinned a wolf's grin. "I was sent, all right. But not by Hopea-Lapuo. No."

The girl sensed the unstoppable drive that pushed this ugly stranger-from-over-the-mountain on toward some goal which she had no mind to conceive of, except that—from the sparks in his eyes as he pounded on the glacier—his goal was for the moment her own.

"What must we do?" Wonder overcame her fear.

"Shut up! I must think!"

The secret of the lost Vanhat lay within this mountain of ice. It must! All of the DNA molecules within his grotesque alien body that were Vanhat cried out that he had found them! His Vanhat genes were pulled to this glass mountain as to some cosmic lodestone! But how to wrestle his way in—?

His efforts with both bare hands pulled hide loose from his palms from the intense cold on heat. Cursing, he bent down to rustle bear-fat out of his pack to assuage the fiery burning. Wordlessly, Marjatta held out her hands for the same treatment.

"Now—stand back!"

He called on the fire, Louhi's demon-fire, to melt a hole in the glacier. Nothing happened. Not that he really expected anything to. Louhi's fire spell had no power over the inanimate, the unthinking. Only over the living. If the Van-

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hat lived within this glass mountain they would be vulnerable. It was for the very purpose of destroying them that these special spells had been created. Whether these Vanhat even knew of her existence or not (although surely the undying legends would have told them of the ancient wizard-wars) their genetic thread must respond. Was it not for this reason that the weakened shreds of Otava's magnificent race skulked here inside this glacier until the return-prophecy might be fulfilled?

XX

WHAT TO DO, witch? Kullervo turned his face to the sullen sky overhead, as if to seek the answer from Pohyola itself. He forgot all about the girl still regarding him with fearful eyes, yet hopeful too.

It was as though his ancestor, the old evil Kullervo, who had kicked his cradle to pieces and killed Ilmarinen's household with demon-bears, whispered in his ear. Or—was it someone else? Louhi? Kullervo Kasi staggered back under the sudden weight of a truth. *It was Ukko. Ukko himself was preventing him from what he must do.*

He turned his face toward the sky and cursed. He cursed Ukko of the Power. He cursed all of the gods. Ilmarinen on her rainbow, spinning out the destinies of stars. Ahto, the bringer of life. Tapio of the Forests. Panu of the Sun. Kalervo, Kullervo's father. He cursed them all. And while he cursed a strange thing occurred within the heavens. The turgid cloud masses began to move, to metamorphose, to take on ominous god-shapes. Thunder rumbled, like the faint tremble of stars crashing together in some far galaxy, then louder—louder—louder. The sky took on a spacial blackness like nothing at all; then the nothing cracked open and one single bolt of lightning hurled down, shaking the planet, sending Kullervo to his knees. The god's fury took Kullervo for target.

Involuntarily his hand groped out his *pukko*. The light-

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ning spear missed his head and touched the *pukko's* tip. It shimmered against the metal, creating a nimbus of spectral light around it and Kullervo. Kullervo gave a great scream of fright and ran forward to escape this small symbol of the Power. He ran right into the glacial wall, hand and *pukko* outstretched.

The instant his *pukko*, with the lightning still on it, touched the ice what had happened to Heikki happened again.

All of Mustamaa trembled when the glacier opened.

"Hurry!" Kullervo yelled at Marjatta. "Before it closes!" He grabbed hold of the girl and dragged her, terrified, through the yawning round black hole.

A long downward tunnel led them forward while behind them the ice reformed with a curious sonic *pop*, like a Mothership cutting through time. Marjatta began to whimper and tremble against him from cold and terror. Kullervo, bursting with triumph at having used Ukko himself to his evil end, moved rapidly down the smooth glass-like surface toward a faint blue light beckoning him to the corridor's eventual end.

Along with increased shifts of blue-white light came a pervasive warmth out of the silent, opaque, crystalline walls. Perhaps it was this warmth that made Marjatta forget to be so frightened and to remember Heikki.

"What—what made it open?"

Kullervo held up the *pukko* he still carried in his fist, at the ready. "This. It has magic in it. It is very, very old. I think it told the machine something."

"What machine? I don't understand."

"The machine that controls the molecular barrier. The machine was expecting Heikki since it had told Chief Toipo that it needed a new *hoitaja*. His hand on the door was sufficient to tell the machine that he was here, to let him enter. We were not expected—until—" He scowled thoughtfully. He knew that the girl did not understand much of what he was saying. Nor did Kullervo really understand. He was merely interpolating, from what he knew of Ussi technology. Something that sent out those godly demands telepathically whenever it needed a new *hoitaja*.

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They unhooded their parkas and moved on.

The atmosphere, when they entered a large chamber at the tunnel's end, had an acetic bite to it. The subtle scent of cybernetic mechanisms which had brooded stealthily here through many centuries, moving only to the need. The need was *now*. Marjatta gasped at the walls of strange ceramic, coded into many colors. They were strange to Kullervo, yet familiar too. This whole vast chamber was, in effect, one enormous computerized machine, incredibly sophisticated, immobile and placid, yet charged with powerful energies that could make it speak, react, understand, analyze, employ, command, do. It seemed to Kullervo that it went even beyond the many magnificent specimens of Ussin technology, for the Power itself radiated within it. The Power that creates or kills whole universes.

"There must be a central keyboard, a heart." Kullervo mumbled, pulling Marjatta forward along the walls, which provided them with light in response to their footfalls along the immaculate reflective floor.

He must find out who had built this fantastic machine and covered it over with Arctic ice. He guessed, but he must *know*. He must know and then he must learn all of its secrets. Curiosity and elation burned high within him. He was nearly there. Nearly there . . .

Marjatta saw what she herself was seeking first.

"Heikki!" she cried and ran ahead.

Kullervo glowered down the center ramp along which the girl sped, toward a central hub of what he knew now were corridor-spokes between the machine's walls of a great aureole. He leaped after. Yes. It was Heikki. He was doing something very strange. He was bending over the supine body of an old, old man in tribal rags. Heikki, like some human vulture, had his strong hands at the ancient's bare middle and was busily occupied in tearing out the man's vitals.

Kullervo reached him in three leaping strides and spun him around. "What the hell are you doing?"

Heikki stared at him with lackluster eyes, like one rousing from a sleep. There was no anger, even when Kullervo slapped him hard across the face. Only a kind of dull-eyed

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uneasiness in having his task interrupted. Marjatta tried to embrace him but Heikki pushed her irritably aside.

Kullervo shoved Heikki back and turned to the gaunt old man lying on the floor. He was still alive, but just barely. His sunken eyes rolled, his lips twitched, then his whole body gave one convulsive wrench; then the thin lips pulled back from toothless gums in a ghoulish grin of rictus.

Kullervo bent to find out what Heikki had been doing. Actually he had been trying to remove a network of web-thin wires attached to the ancient's chest, along with a transparent control box of some kind fastened to the oldster's mid-body by suction so effective that when Kullervo removed it some of the shrunken hide came off, too. Kullervo blinked down at the spiderweb thing in his hand, wondering how long the dead man had worn this badge of the *hoitaja*. How long had he lived here, tending the machine, performing the tasks which could not be inbuilt in—in—?

"Yes," the machine said, into Kullervo's mind, yet out of the vein-like wisps and the control. "*I am Hopea-Lapuo.*"

Kullervo stared at the half-moon console in front of him, where lights began to blink in response to his thought-question.

"A machine! The Earth-God of the valley tribe is a computer!"

"More than that," Hopea-Lapuo told him. "All of the Vanhat skills were painstakingly built into me. I am a machine, yes, but much of their lifeblood has been sung into my arteries as well. I can feel. I can sense."

"Yet you needed a helper. A *hoitaja* to keep all of your complex components activated. You were programmed to assume the aspect of a god. The Valley tribe must worship Hopea-Lapuo and respond to his demand for a new *hoitaja* when the time came for the old one to die." Kullervo grimaced down at the dead man. "It must have been one hell of a life, alone here with no hope of release from these"—he held up the wires—"except death."

"It has its benefits," Hopea-Lapuo said. "I possess many divertive dreams within my walls, dreams as sensually real as life itself. Nor is the primitive life here in this wilderness

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any picnic, as you have discovered. Life is short out there—and not particularly sweet.”

Kullervo shrugged and glanced at Heikki. Marjatta was clinging to him now, begging for recognition. “Suppose you release Heikki from your invisible hold on him.”

“Very well, Kullervo Kasi.”

Emotion twisted the handsome lover’s face; life struggled into his eyes. “Marjatta!” he cried harshly. He took no time to think about it before crushing her with his well-sheathed arms. The girl sobbed against him.

Kullervo smiled somberly and turned his attention back to Hopea-Lapuo and his curious aura of possessing a personality, colossal, god-like, yet oddly man-to-man. Or perhaps Hopea-Lapuo only *seemed* that way to Kullervo because he would obtain the best reactions by shrinking himself down to single-mind stature . . .

Kullervo’s all-consuming musts drove him forward. “Where are they?” he demanded.

“The Vanhat, you mean.”

“Who else?”

“You have come to save them, Kullervo Kasi! You have come to help fulfill the prophecy of the Great Return!”

Kullervo shrugged. He made it seem like an assent, using all of his Louhian craftiness.

“Good! I have waited so long and Otava is ready! The prophecy needs only the Hand that will guide the Vanhat seedlings through the star-labyrinths to the world which first gave them life!” There was a seeming sigh in the manner in which Hopea-Lapuo spoke, as if a long weary wait were near its end, as if its incredible bulk wearied of such a vigil.

“Where are these seed—?”

Kullervo’s harsh final demand was interrupted by Heikki’s sudden realization that he and Marjatta were still alive and his blunt-minded requirement to know where they were and just what this was all about. “Ho!” He swung Kullervo around. “So I am never to be rid of the sight of your swamp-troll’s face? Who are you, tramontane? What is this Hiisi’s place?”

Kullervo’s irritable monosyllables gave him some information to chew on, and Marjatta babbled out some more.

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His primitive mind was only slightly placated. Heikki swore at his own awe of this strange glassy walled place, restraining himself from bashing at Kullervo with his giant's muscles because this ugly toad seemed to know something he didn't. Presumably he could show them a way out. He and Marjatta could never return to the valley, of course, yet they would find some other sheltered place in which to live out their lives. At least they would be together. Marjatta would never leave him again. It shone bright in her eyes.

"You wish to know about the Vanhat seedlings," Hopea-Lapuo told Kullervo, after Marjatta pulled Heikki and his brawny muscles away from predictable danger.

"Yes." Kullervo frowned at the idea that Hopea-Lapuo could read his mind. Almost he flung away the webbed thing in his hand that permitted contact between them. Yet the machine had not read Louhi's part in Kullervo's Earth-trek, had in fact made the naïve statement that Kullervo had come here to *help*. No. The machine could not read his thoughts. Not all of them. Just the surface questions as they popped up. He must be careful, though. Very careful. . . .

"First I should like to tell you how all this came about."

Kullervo scowled. "Make it quick!"

"Very well. But Ukko's Hand must know these things. . . . After Ilar, son of Ilmarinen the Wondersmith, destroyed the perverted Star Mill and Wayne Panu led the rebellion against the Ussi pattern of All-Kill—"

"I know. I know. Wainomoinen brought Panu to ancient Terra to fetch back the sun Louhi had stolen and hidden in Vipunen the Titan's carcass. The Vanhat hid in Under-earth for more than two thousand years after all that. So?"

"The Ussi still had evil in their hearts. The Vanhat hoped to join them but All-Kill kept them in hiding, still. They must keep the Power from the Ussi at all costs. And they must avoid Starwitch Louhi's machinations until the day of fulfillment of the prophecy arrived—the Day and the Hand!"

Kullervo gave an animal growl of impatience. "I know all these things! How the planet Otava in the Great Bear was seared lifeless by some blundering comet and the Vanhat who were not Valmis came here to Terra. How in the fullness of time Otava would grow green and lush again

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and they could then return. But why didn't they just stay hidden in Underearth? Why all this?"

"Before the Ussi made their great Motherships' exodus into the stars—centuries before—they were so badly in need of living space that even Underearth was no longer safe from them. It became necessary for the Vanhat to disappear completely. . . ."

"How—?"

"By dying."

"*Dying!* You mean the Vanhat are dead, after all?"

"Yes. They are dead in the sense that those who remain are yet unborn."

"What do you mean—unborn?"

"You will see for yourself, Kullervo Kasi. But first let me speak to Marjatta and Heikki. Reassure them. You must have guessed that Marjatta is of Vanhat blood, being so different from the rest of the valley tribe. Somehow, up here at the top of the world, it happened."

"What happened?"

"One of the Vanhat escaped from the illusion surrounding Underearth for love of an Ussi. Rather than risk revealing the existence of the Vanhat he took his beloved and lived with her in some secret place until they both died. There was one child, one thin thread of Vanhat ancestry, always hidden from the rest of the world—and the end result was—Marjatta."

"That was why you wanted to keep her inviolate?"

"Yes. There was always the fear that her seed might possess too much of the Power. Marjatta belongs with the Vanhat. She must go back to Otava with them."

"And Heikki?"

"Let me speak with them both; let me know their hearts. Then I will know what to do."

Breaking the contact between Hopea-Lapuo and himself by handing Marjatta the webbed control, Kullervo kept his ugly face stolid as stone. But his alien evil leaped to the fore. *Louhi, my starwitch paramour! We are about to taste our vengeance to the full! The Vanhat seedlings shall be flung, not back to Otava, but to extinction!*

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XXI

KULLERVO held the contact tight in his fist, its filaments leaking between his fingers like translucent spider's legs. Marjatta and Heikki followed him to the wall that opened on an elevator which was to take them further down, in a full mile under the blue glacier. They held tight to each other's hands; even Heikki was awed into silence by what Hopea-Lapuo had told them. He thought their eyes shone brighter, like candleflames. Heikki's wide shoulders had always found the valley too small for them; perhaps the stars were his answer, too.

The down-drop was immeasurable and silent, but then Kullervo was used to mechanical marvels on the Motherships. Still the great round gulf of crystalline rock which they stepped out into made even him gasp and gape. A titanic cavern, doubtless volcanic in its origin, had been reinforced and enlarged by need in the same ceramic alloy of which the great computer's housing had been sleekly fashioned; only down here the walls shone like jagged crystal. A light-factor had been added, besides some manner of rock-mineral which produced its own pure air. As above, where Hopea-Lapuo's bulky body sprawled, this silent peopleless city was self-contained, self-fulfilling. It needed only Hopea-Lapuo and his *hoitaja* to keep itself shining and ready while it waited for the day.

At the end of a narrow bridgeway leading still further down a platter reared up like a sheared off stalagmite. On this smooth dustless plate rested the ship!

The rainbow ship! Lovingly created by dead hands and dead minds' to send their seed back to Otava. In their last years the Vanhat mechs and Power-singers had made this silvery leviathan, impregnating it with rainbow flecks of the Otavan Power-source which had first brought them to Terra so many thousands of years ago. It poised below them, not large when compared to the great Mothership wheels,

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but supremely beautiful. Its poniard tip seemed to quiver in impatience to thrust itself right through the concealing shell above it, to be on its way, to fulfill the peripatetic Vanhat song.

"Where are the seedlings?" Kullervo asked Hopea-Lapuo. It was strange, but the Vanhat had created Hopea-Lapuo with such skill and song-magic that his presence was right there beside Kullervo now.

"Inside the ship. Would you like to see them?"

Kullervo licked his lips as he loped down the causeway to the invitingly open hatch. He swung his grotesque body up the ladder, his heart thundering in his chest. Heikki and Marjatta followed him up, but he was hardly aware of it. He was here! He had reached the pinnacle point of his wretched life. Never in those despised and browbeat days had he dreamed that one day he would wield such power as he held in his hands right now. If his tormentors could see what he was about to do! Even his poor demented mother, who tried to kill her fatherless baby by putting him in the refuse-hopper with the rest of the garbage. He—Kullervo the unwanted and unwanted—was on the point of destroying a whole budding world. Of squelching the words and music of a cosmic epic!

Staring greedily, he savored this moment.

He saw them. He held his breath as he moved down the ship's neat belly and looked at them. They were nothing but round silver containers like gleaming Easter eggs, all set in cushioned nests like egg crates. Clutch after clutch. Row after row. Tier after tier.

"How many are there?" he demanded. He wanted it to be many! He yearned to kill many. His vindictive anger against this universe and its contempt for him knew no bounds. Kill!

"Thirty thousand and twenty-six to be exact. A fine new start for the Vanhat race when they reach home."

Home. Home. *Death!* And then—no more Vanhat! Never! Their gentle sanctimonious impulses would die with them. Louhi of Pohyola would cackle her glee to the furthest stars. Otava might be green and lush—but it would wait forever.

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"Of course they need to be released and then permeated with the spermal solutions to become fecund."

"How can this be done?"

"The spermal solutions are in those sealed vats above the nests. When they have arrived on Otava this can be done by merely pushing buttons on the control panel in the main cabin."

"But how can they live? Who will feed them?"

"All this is automatic, too. Or practically. We are lucky to have found Marjatta and Heikki. They will help. They shall be the new Adam and Eve, father and mother to the new Vanhat race. Otava is vernal and warm, bounding with food. Even children will have no trouble bringing themselves to maturity. There will be those who will help. The Valmis will answer the call of the songs their cells have been taught; they need only a reminding by the teaching audios sealed within the ship."

"Sounds like Paradise," Kullervo grunted.

"Yes, it does. The prophecy of peace and lasting joy fulfilled."

"Until the Ussi find them!"

"The Ussi cannot find them. Long, long ago, before the Valmis left, they placed a glamour around the planet Otava, a diffuse illusionary magic which has the power to divert any and all ships away from it without knowing that they are being diverted. That small patch of space is forever inviolable—even from Starwitch Louhi herself!"

Kullervo restrained a dark smile. Hopea-Lapuo went on, ingenuously. "Of course it needed one more thing, a Hand that holds Ukko's Power within it to guide the ship on its way to Otava. There are a thousand unforeseeable perils along the way. Enemy ships. Asteroid storms. And I cannot go along to help. My computers are rooted forever into this rocky Earth."

"A Hand?"

"You. Kullervo Kasi. You are the Hand."

Kullervo reared back his head and laughed. It was the first time in his life that anything with the range of his eyes or his half-alien mind had encountered anything worth laughing at. He raised his hairy fists over his head, thumped

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his feet on the ceramic floor of the hold and roared with laughter. When the bull's roaring was spent, Louhi's counterpart cackle of fantastic glee took over. He! Kullervo, the despised. Kullervo, whose ancestor of the blue stockings had been treated with every brand of contempt, had endured every indignity imaginable, from these very Vanhat who claimed such self-righteous honesty and godhead—he was to save them from extinction! He was to do this magnificent deed!

Then anger took over and he stopped laughing. He backed out from sight of the silver eggs, shining like so many bright eyes; he left the ship. Heikki and Marjatta watched him move stolidly across the causeway to the elevator. They stood near the ship, troubled, uncertain what they must do. They dared nothing. What portion of this they understood gave them no clue as to what was expected of them, if anything. In essence, they were simply valley people, standing in the presence of a miracle—a miracle about to be shattered forever.

"Where are you going, Kullervo Kasi?" Hopea-Lapuo asked.

"I am no star-pilot." He grinned somberly, readying his thoughts for the killing stroke. It was true that the spells Starwitch Louhi had implanted in him had no power to destroy inanimate objects such as ships and computers, but the Vanhat themselves had provided their own nemesis by singing *part of themselves* into Hopea-Lapuo and into the starship. As for the eggs, the seedlings of themselves, these were believing beings whose cellular material well understood the evil power of Pohyola's witch. Dormant and vulnerable. Very, very vulnerable . . .

"You don't need to be an astro-navigator," Hopea-Lapuo told him. "The ship knows its own way. It is by Ukko's Power talisman that you shall avoid unknown perils and bring the children of Otava back home. Ukko's Power talisman—and something else, deep within your cells."

Marjatta left Heikki's side and moved to the far end of the walkway. She looked up at Kullervo talking, as it were, to himself. Her eyes gleamed bright, like those silver eggs in the ship's hold. She said nothing, only looked up at him.

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Kullervo wrenched his eyes angrily away. He remembered how the girl's small firm hand had reached down to help him against the wolves, how she had stood between him and Heikki's knife. Well, Marjatta was one of the hated Vanhat, too. Let her die with the rest!

Louhi's fires burned bright, scalding his throat, boiling his blood.

Now! At once! No more thinking! *Do it now!*

Not looking at Marjatta, he began to form up the sorcerous words of destruction in his mind.

"Who knows by what strange plan such a seed of utter alienness was allowed to leak into our dimension?" Hopea-Lapuo said. "Perhaps for this very moment!"

Kullervo swore.

"Why do you keep saying these things? Why do you have such faith in me?"

"You are of the old Kullervo, I know. He was born of evil, shunned and despised, loveless. You have been treated badly all of your life, as was your ancestor. Yet—"

"Yet what?" Kullervo demanded with high scorn.

"You are not pure evil, not like Starwitch Louhi. There have been others—men with ugly bodies and beautiful souls—who have given themselves freely toward a noble purpose."

"I am—alien. No one has treated me well." Kullervo's fingers closed around the contact box as if to crush it and stop Hopea-Lapuo from saying these things. "I must have my vengeance—for myself, if not for Louhi!"

"No."

"What are you saying?" Kullervo raged, and started to fling the contact box down into the chasm.

"No, Kullervo. Kullervo Kasi. *Kullervo the Hand!*"

Kullervo howled like a wolf. He ran back and forth along the rim of the drop like an animal in a cage.

"No! No! No!" Inhuman sounds came out of his throat, as if the dimensional alien within him struggled for its voice.

"Yes, Kullervo Kasi. You are the one. That is why Ukko permitted you to enter the glacier. Your *pukko* is of the Power, only one of Vanhat genes may possess it. Such is

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its magic that it evaded even Louhi when she taught you how to destroy the Vanhat children."

Kullervo gaped. "You knew these things all the time!" he blurted.

"Yes. I knew. But there was no need to mention it because I knew also that you will do what you must do. You will guide the Vanhat seed to Otava and fulfill the prophecy."

"How can you know that when—?"

"When you think you will not do it? Even at this moment? Because, Kullervo Kasi, I see far deeper into your soul than you do. I was given this power by the songs of a billion dead Vanhat voices. Now you will go, and in the ship's going, Hopea-Lapuo shall die, for his work is ended."

This time Kullervo could and did hurl the contact box into the chasm. Hopea-Lapuo's presence vanished. The sudden silence, after that hushed hint of soft sound resting on his brain, was intolerable.

Kullervo tried to call out to Louhi to help him but her name stuck in his throat. In the end he lagged his clumsy feet across the causeway to where Marjatta stood, silent, waiting, motionless. She smiled.

"You will come with us?"

Kullervo stared at her sullenly. Heikki moved up behind the girl, put his arm around her, grinning whitely at Kullervo. "Sure. You will come with us. We will get used to your ugly face in time."

"It will be like heaven," Marjatta said. "You will help us rear our enormous family. You will tell them all the strange stories of things you have seen in the stars. They will love you."

Kullervo pulled away. *Love me?* Louhi had said it and her voice had spoken the truth: *You are made of matter and energy that offends the very star-fire of our universe. You are a mistake. They must hate you whether they will or no.*

As for his stories of the Ussi and of witch Louhi, better that Otava never hear of such evil. If evil must come to them let it come gradually and not be taught them in tales.

Kullervo pulled out his *pukko*, his treasure, his only friend.

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When he handed it to Marjatta she took hold of his hairy fingers for just a moment, as if to pull him with them into the ship. He shook his head and turned away.

"You are of Vanhat blood. Ukko's Power talisman will be as effective in your hands as in mine. Goodbye."

He didn't look at her again. He closed his ears to a kind of cry she gave. He walked swiftly across the ramp and into the elevator. Hopea-Lapuo opened the ice for him. The breath of Arctic wind, though it be summer, was sharp and freezing cold across the Mustamaa.

The glacial shell was riven by white flame when the ship cut through the muddy purple sky on its way to Otava. Kullervo squinted up, a silent monolith against the wide black nothing. He knew that the hole it created would presently sweep cold and dampness into Hopea-Lapuo's veins and that, as the computer-god had said, he would die.

How could Kullervo go with them to Otava? They were beautiful; he ugly. They sought good; he was of evil itself. It would torment them, on their bright Eden, not to be able to tolerate his presence among them.

He was Kullervo the Hand. He had served. It was enough.

An aurora cut the sky in flowery cascades over the snowy mountains far to the west. The monolith moved and presently the stars looked down and saw a small misshapen dot shamble slowly across the wide wind-driven vastness toward the distant hills.

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