

The Time Twister
By Emil Petaja

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CHAPTER ONE

Art Mackey's cliffhanger tape was a long time reaching Steve. Lord knows where and how Art had ever mailed it, up in that godforsaken wilderness!

Steve's injuries had shunted him from hospital to hospital, even over to the Berkeley research complex for tests, right back where he started from, his home base for years of philosophical-anthropology studies. It was the chunk of shrapnel in his frontal cerebrum. That happy little souvenir of South Asia. Part of it had wormed back in. By the time they had found it, half his cranium had been replaced in silver, with weird new bionics crystal cells, lab-grown just for him, hemstitched in for good measure. A *cause célèbre* in brain-surgery annals, but all Dr. Stephen H. McCord wanted now was out.

He glanced out of his window over the Presidio and the Golden Gate, whistled, and went back to his packing. Gad, what a mess he had accumulated in his eight months of hospital hopping! He wasn't sure what came next, but for the moment—just for the moment—all he asked was *out*. Out! Anywhere! He gulped back the frightening prospect of having to think out each day's problems after all the spoon-feeding, and with that new silver-plated brain of his!

Grabbing up his shaving gear in the bathroom, he glanced at his face in the mirror. He winced at how lean it was, and sallow, in spite of his stints with the sun-lamp. Street clothes sagged on his thin, bony frame. Something of the amiable earnestness that had once crinkled his green-brown eyes so handily was missing; the dark pleasant hairline had receded an inch. There were new, craggy lines. Not quite bitter but not quite eager for life, either. His easily smiling mouth had thinned, picked up a cynical tic. When his excited hands dropped a hairbrush on the floor, he looked down at them. They shook, damn them! The medics said the trembling would go after awhile. It was a neural reaction to morbid dwelling on his body, the fear his brain wouldn't ever be as whip-sharp as it had been before.

"You'll be as good as new, Doctor McCord," they said. "Better. That silver plate and the crystal cells will outlast the rest of you."

"Protect me from werewolves, too."

"Luckily, none of the motor areas is affected," they said.

"Jolly."

Steve picked up the brush and ran it along the shaggy sides of his black Irish hair. Carefully. All the hirsute growth on top was phoney. What was it the TV comedians called them? Rugs? "Hey, that's a new crew-cut rug, isn't it?" They'd done a lot of transplanting and, at Steve's age, all those wiry blue-black curls would grow back in no time. They said.

"Package for Doctor Stephen H. McCord!" Bill Brandt, Ward C's newscaster and dispenser of good-natured scuttlebutt, burst in, grinning and waving a square flat object. "Glad I caught you, Doc! Hey, you look terrific in herringbone tweed!"

"Thanks. What you got?"

"Dunno. Looks like an underfed pizza. Do they grow pizza up in Montana?"

"Montana!"

Steve accepted the beat-up package, squinting at the smeared return. "Care of Postmaster, Missoula, Montana." He frowned.

"Who's Art Mackey?" Bill wondered cheerfully. They'd gotten to be friends and most of the Army and U. S. Marine patients liked it when he bent an ear their way.

"Art? An old buddy. I first met Art Mackey at U. C. He was their star halfback. Big blonde Finn. I told you about him. Been wondering if he'd ever get around to writing."

"Oh, yeah. I remember Art Mackey. Big name around the Berkeley campus a few years back. Funny, you two getting to be such good friends. Him, football. You, egghead science and all."

Steve smiled. "So I like football. I looked up Art when I was writing my thesis on *A Study of the Ural-Altaic Language Group*. I was boning up on Finnish, trying to plow through the *Kalevala* legends in the original. Art Mackey was the only Finn I could find who spoke *Suomi*."

"How about that!"

"Art's family lived in Montana. His father kept him brushing up until he died."

"I used to go with a Finn girl. 'Mackey' doesn't sound Finnish. Mostly their names run to ten syllables and sound like cracking nuts with your teeth."

"It was probably 'Makki' to start with. I ran into that name on my trip to Lapland the summer before Uncle Sam pointed the finger at me. One of the few pleasures of that Asian mess was running into Art again, our long talks about Finland, all that."

"Hey! It was Art who saved your life, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I had no medical degree, but I'd had premed training before I switched to anthropology research. It was Art Mackey, all right. I was doing ambulance duty. Got too near the action. A blockbuster splattered my jeep all to hell and gone. Art yanked me out from under, toted me to safety."

"You owe Finn Mackey your life. No wonder you want to hear what he's up to!"

Steve thumbnailed open the frayed edge of the square, flat box. "It's a tape, all right. I gave Art a Sony recorder before he left. He promised *not* to write, but I thought he might manage to talk me a tape. It's been two months since he left."

"For where?"

"Hellmouth."

"Hellmouth!"

"You won't find it on any map. It's only a wide spot in the road and no road. 'Way hell and gone up in the hills. Logging town of some kind. One of those little sawmills like up in Humboldt County."

"Why'd Art pick a dead end like Hellmouth?"

"He went to find a girl."

"Figures. Beautiful blonde Finn, I suppose?"

"Ilma's beautiful all right. She was down here in San Francisco for a couple years. She was a ballet dancer. Art used to read me parts of her letters. Then, after she went back to Montana to take care of her father, nothing."

"A mystery, eh?"

Steve nodded, frowning. "Her father and her older brother, Yalmar, lived on this farm just outside Hell-mouth. When Ilma was thirteen, her father'd sent her to her spinster aunt in Astoria to get a good education. When the aunt died, Ilma joined a small ballet company and ended up with the San Francisco Ballet for one season. She was good. Very good. But—"

"Yes?" Bill egged.

"Things kept happening to her. Accidents. Like the cliff suddenly dropping out from under her when she was walking alone on Land's End. Like the funny storm that came up one Sunday morning when she was sailing outside the Gate with friends. I guess you might say, besides her father's being old and sick, Ilma was running back to the haven of her childhood home."

"Back to the old farm where nothing ever happens."

"You might say that. But why didn't she write to Art after she got back home? They were only waiting for him to get out of the Army before they got married. Why didn't she write? All those months?" Steve weighed the spool of tightly wound Mylar tape in his hand thoughtfully.

"Well, you know those hick towns." The curious intern's face brightened, eyes glinting with all the avidity of a voyeur's. "Suppose I take a run down to the outpatient clinic and borrow a tape player? We'll give old Art a fast listen, eh!"

Steve shrugged, then shook his head. "Sorry. I want to get the hell out of here. I've got things to do."

"Oh?" Bill Brandt didn't believe him and showed it. "Okay, stingy-guts. But let me know how they make out? Promise?"

Steve promised.

It was midmorning. Ten-thirty-five by his Omega. A hell of a time to go anywhere, especially when Steve didn't have much of anyplace to go. He had no family; any friends he'd made in his bookish life had drained off to the work of the world, one way or another. Three years do that. It was October. One of those brass-bright, Bay Area days; the hills of Marin lay like smokey cutouts against the skyline. From the cab window he watched the Marina freeway spin by, gave Fort Mason a wince, the shiny boats of St. Francis Yacht Harbor an envious look.

Where? Now he had it! Art's tape was burning a hole in his tweed pocket, but where to play it? What else? "Take me to Tony's Restaurant in North Beach. You know where that is?"

The driver knew. Steve had met Ilma at Tony's. That last evening was clear and sharp in his war-ravaged brain now, as the Yellow Cab swung down Bay and took the sharp right turn uphill two blocks to the modest bistro. Tony's had never made any of the best restaurant lists and for this his regulars were selfishly grateful; the food was sublime, the drinks, liberal and perfect, the panoramic view of the fishing fleet, Alcatraz and Angel Island, *magnifico*.

It was young Tony's (in his fifties but young because his father, old Tony, was now in his eighties and sunned himself in the square fronting St. Peter and Paul's between bocce ball games with old cronies) Steve and Art had picked for their last dinner before Art left for overseas, Steve soon to follow.

Two years plus the tides down there had swept under the Golden Gate Bridge. Paying off the cab and swinging down the stairs where a moustachioed retainer was swabbing out the entrance, Steve felt a little

like he was coming home—and that Tony's was all the "home" he had to come back to.

"Not open yet," the moustached one grumbled.

"I know, but I'm a friend of Tony's. Is he around?"

"In the kitchen."

Tony Baccigaluppi sidled his rotund torso between the tables stacked with chairs for the morning mop-up, peering fiercely across the gloomy, oregano-fragrant restaurant. On the point of booting the intruder out so that he could get back to his lunch preparations, he gave a little yelp of welcome when he saw who it was.

"Doctor Stephano! How good for you to come see Tony!" He skittered across the damp tile floor with practiced ballet expertise. "I heard about the operation. How are you, Doc? And how is the big footballer, Arturo?" He swiped his meaty hands down the big butcher's apron and pumped Steve's hand vigorously.

"I'm fine, Tony. The family?"

Tony went into a grimacing dissertation on teenagers while he pulled Steve to his favorite alcove and the best view. Still chattering, he bustled away for the family coffee pot and two sturdy Italian mugs.

"Now. Tell me what they did to you." He clucked and went ahead talking. "I remember how I used to hear the two of you arguing—that was while you were still in college and Arturo was a big name in football and you were studying medicine—"

"I didn't quite have the stomach for it, I guess. Anyway, I like research in anthropology better. Glad I switched."

"—and you told Arturo that, if you had to be in one of their blasted wars at all, it would be to do what you could to patch people up and not—" Tony broke off with a toothy laugh. "Forget all that! You're back now."

But where's your buddy? Where's Arturo, the Flying Finn? Wasn't that what they called him?"

"That was Nurmi," Steve smiled. "Art Mackey's gone up to Montana to find— Tony, do you remember the last night we were here? Art and I sat right here waiting for Ilma. She had a late rehearsal at the Opera House, and when she finally came down those stairs, she was—"

"Radiant! Like something out of a dream!" Tony's eyes lighted up and he kissed his fingers at the brief elbow-stairs entrance, making the fat swabber blink. "She was still in her costume. Green, pale green. She moved in out of the fog like a dryad. And when she tossed back her great velvet cloak. All that hair down to her shoulders. Like spun gold! Do I remember!"

Steve, too, stared and saw Ilma there, hurrying down out of the drifting evening fog, stopping to search the bustling, smokey room with those large silver-blue eyes. Seeing Art. Smiling. How the whole world seemed to tilt. How Steve couldn't take his eyes away from this dazzling forest creature. Ilma Halvor was something out of a rare, half-remembered dream of old, old times.

"...and when she danced The Bird Girl in the new Green Mansions ballet, everybody said she would go straight to the top. There was something supernatural about Ilma, they said, and I believe them. Then—all of a sudden—she left the ballet! Disappeared! Why?" Tony's opera loving soul was wounded by such dereliction to duty and that he knew Ilma and her lover, Art the footballer, made him scowl and cluck while he swigged his mud-thick espresso.

"She went back to Hellmouth. Her father needed her. Izza Halvor is very old. *Very* old. Sick. There's a brother, too, Art told me. Yalmar. Yalmar's—strange. A little off in the head. Wanders the hills a lot. Fiercely devoted to Ilma, but not much help with an old, sick father."

"So Ilma went back to the sticks. Such a waste!" Tony sighed.

"She might come back to the theater," Steve said. "Art's up there now." He frowned out at the brass bright day.

"Something's wrong, Stephano."

Steve shrugged. "I don't know that there is. But Art hadn't heard from her, not a word in over a month."

"These hick towns," Tony pointed out. "How do they get their mail in this Hellmouth? By pack mule?"

Steve grinned uneasily. "As a matter of fact, I just got a message from Art."

"What does he say?"

"Haven't played it yet."

"Played it?"

"It's a tape." Steve dug it out and unwrapped it. "I brought along my Sony transistor player. Mind?" He removed the tape player from its leather case and threaded up Art's tape. The battered plastic spool wobbled a little as the tape end caught in the rewind spool and snapped to.

Tony's wide face hung over the table avidly. Steve resisted his impulse to invite solitude until he knew just what Art had to say, but it was Tony's wife yelling from the kitchen that it was almost eleven and

nothing was ready that popped an Italian oath from him and his reluctant removal to his pre-lunch duties.

Steve waited until the kitchen batwings slapped Tony's broad rear, sighed relief as he took a sip of strong coffee, and flipped the threaded tape to "forward."

CHAPTER TWO

"Hi, Doc. How are you making it?"

The mechanical voice that was somehow Art Mackey's deep baritone an octave or two higher seemed strained. Or was it the minuscule speaker? Or Steve's imagination? Art was always the easygoing, like everybody sort who took things as they came. Yet the self-conscious banalities he put in for openers twanged with unnecessary touches that didn't quite match the outgoing Finn Mackey personality.

"I hope that silver plate and the crystal cells aren't giving you too much trouble."

Little by little the banalities brushed away like crumbs. Then it was as if Art were sitting across from Steve, where Tony had sat a couple minutes before. Art blurted out his doings, his thoughts, in a completely honest, ingenuous manner that irritated those social groups who prefer conversational sparring and the artfully phoney commercial facades.

"Not hearing from Ilma had me scared, Doc! You know how much those letters meant to me! I know Old Izza, her father. A wonderfully whacky old guy with a beard like a red fire, full to the brim with old stories of water nymphs and wood trolls. He half believes them all, Steve. I think that is what gave Ilma her dryad—half-shy, half-animal—aura. That and living 'way up here in this godforsaken wilderness. Then there's Yalmar."

"What about Yalmar?" Steve murmured at the pause.

"Yalmar's as ugly as Ilma is beautiful, Steve. His back is twisted and he's got those long apish arms and bandy legs. Guess that's why he prefers roaming the hills with his rifle to mingling with the villagers of Hellmouth. Yalmar's absolutely awed by Ilma. Treats her like a goddess. He's quite a bit older, around thirty now, I guess. He wouldn't even talk to Izza when the subject of her leaving to go to school came up. He left the farm and hiked 'way up in the mountains and stayed there for weeks. Anyway, Yalmar's odd. That's why Ilma came back to Hellmouth. That and what hap-pened. Those peculiar accidents."

Another pause and a sucking noise that followed a tapping: Art relighting his pipe.

"Get on with it, you big Finlander!"

"Let me tell you a little about this valley. It's wild up here. Wild and beautiful. And completely isolated. What happened in the 1880s was that a Swede named Lars Swenson imported a whole boatload of Finns from Oulu to help him build the town. Timber was needed for the mines—gold mines around Helena. Silver, too. And copper, lots of copper. Swenson's idea was to build his sawmill way up here in the wilderness where the timber was thickest. True, the country was hard to get up into, but so was the rest of this Blackfoot Indian area in those days. Fish and game were plentiful and the Finns that Swenson brought in were inured to hardships and long cold winters, being from the northern wilds, insular, and indifferent to the whimsies of civilization. Furthermore, they were hard workers, fiercely honest, and they know lumber. That's always been one of Finland's key industries.

"Hey! I'm sounding off like a history book! But you could write a book about how Swenson brought his little band of immigrant Finns up here, built up the town and his sawmill 'way hell and gone in what the Black-feet and the Shoshones call 'devil country.' He put in a narrow gauge spur line along the river to the falls that plunges down into Swan Lake. The Finns were contented. They liked the isolation. Sometimes young bucks would up and hike out and never come back, but the old ones stayed.

"Even after Anaconda Copper bought out all the other small mills and set up their big Bonner unit, obviously a lot more efficient than these little one-saw outfits up in the sticks, the Hellmouth Finns stuck. The older ones, that is. My father was one of the young ones who left when the mill shut down. Swenson's dream had fizzled after only twenty years. Sure, the copper mines and the new building going on in the sheltered Bitter-root valleys and around Missoula still needed lumber, but Anaconda owned all the mines now and they could provide it faster and cheaper than 'Swenson's Folly.' ... embittered, Lars Swenson went back to Oslo to die, broke.

"But the Finns stayed!

"There was a terrible forest fire that swept through the Hellmouth Valley in 1906. One of the worst Mon-tana has ever seen and that's saying a lot. Dad said the sky was full of fire and the storm winds rolled black smoke a hundred miles across country. Kids hid; they thought it was the end of the world. My father and mother left when the mill shut down. He took a millwright job with the A.C.M. down in Bonner, then went down to South America on a mining deal. My mother died when I was born. Dad used to tell me

about Hellmouth as it was when he was a kid. He loved it. It was a dream of his to go back some day. Down there where it was always warm and balmy, my father would suck his pipe and talk endlessly about Hellmouth, about how hard the winters were, but how he wanted to go back. About Old Izza Halvor and his fat wife. About the little General Merchandise Store with the post-office boxes lined up in the corner where Jack Temikka, the skinflint proprietor the villagers called 'Squire Temmy' behind his back, had his bookkeeper's cage and the big iron safe with his name on it in fancy curlicues. He told me about Mamie Puski's Boarding-house for single men and widowers, about the town pump where he toted potable water home across his back with a yoke and two galvanized buckets. About the 'water things' the villagers who lived along Hellmouth River had—the hand crank winches—for drawing up wash water and to water their truck gardens in the back yards.

"You know, Doc, Dad got so wrapped up talking about Hellmouth—the Hellmouth he knew when he was a kid—that I could visualize every rock in the road. The little schoolhouse across the field. The old covered bridge across the bend in the river, and Izza Halvor's tar-paper farmhouse. Everything. He used to tell me that, if he never made it back to Hellmouth, I was to go in his place. He never mentioned the big fire. I don't believe he wanted to think what it might have done to his beloved town. No. Forest fire has a way of skipping across ridges, treetopping where the lodgepole pines are highest. That's what happened up there in Dad's wonderful valley. It had to be like that. Hellmouth was a dream that couldn't ever die. There was something inevitable about it—everlasting. Like the rawboned, horn-handed Finns who built it. They could not die! They were like the hills and the blue lakes and the tumbling mountain trout streams. Nothing could kill them. Not the forty-below blizzards that raged down out of the Canadian Rockies. Not fire, nor flood, nor the Anaconda Copper Mining Company and progress!"

Steve gazed off across the Bay where a Matson liner was steaming majestically out between the pylons of the Golden Gate Bridge, the pilot boat making a V in the gold-tipped caps as it purred back to its dock. Art had stopped his prologal recitation on a highly dramatic, highly uncharacteristic note. His father, sweltering down in tropical Bolivia, had infused his son with a kind of supernatural longing for what he had known and loved when he was young. A reliving of his Hellmouth boyhood through his son. Nothing so strange about that. Yet—Steve's studies of the Finns and their mores and moods suggested more. Finns were different, in a way, from everybody else. As if, Steve sometimes thought, they had originated racially on another planet. In the Middle Ages, wizards were always said to come from the dark, cold north—and that north was Finland. A Finnish sailor was a Jonah because he could sing up a storm or extract a tot of rum from the ship's mast any time he wanted to by sticking his sharp *pukko* in it.

Art Mackey was being all of that now. Steve sensed it and the hair on the back of his neck prickled while he waited. Also, it was as if Art was afraid to go on, as if all of this prelude was an evasion.

"What happened?" Steve whispered tautly. "What did you *find* up there?"

"I hiked up the back way into Hellmouth Valley, Doc. Missoula would have been closer, but—I really don't know why I drove the secondhand jeep I bought up through the Flathead and around the long way, but I played it cosy. I talked to nobody. Don't ask me why, only—*something told me to play it that way*. Something is telling me not to talk this tape right now and if I were across the bridge on the Hellmouth side, and not perched up here in the open loft door of Izza Halvor's barn, I wouldn't be able to. The talk would not register on the tape. Don't ask me why, Doc."

The chill in Steve's spine deepened.

"I hiked in the last forty miles. Took two days. This country is really rough. I puffed up the last hunk of trail, which was all grown together with weeds and snowmelts, and there was that big sentinel lodgepole pine Dad always told me about. Still there. By that big lightning-split boulder that marks the summit and the road that winds down into Hellmouth. It was dusky. Around seven thirty. I reached the rock, dropped my pack, and leaned back for a rest. At first, I didn't even look down that winding road into town. As if—like Dad—I was scared about what that 1906 fire had done to Hellmouth.

"Then I squinted down and there it was.

"It was lamplighting time. Down there the triple row of neat gray frame houses curving along the river bank were blooming up with yellow light in their windows, one by one. I could just make out the town pump on its plank platform, with the battered tin dipper set on the top of it for a fast drink. The barroom across from Squire Temmy's General Merchandise Store showed light when a couple of booted figures tramped up on its sheltered porch and then went in. Rillo's Bar was in case you preferred beer.

"Resting, beat from my long hike, I let my eyes follow the gently nodding cottonwoods lining the river-bank up the mill road. Yes, Swenson's sawmill was still there. The three screen-topped smokestacks loomed above the amorphous lumps of buildings that constituted the sawmill proper, the planer, and even a

small box factory. The mill lay against a pale wall of rock rising a sheer three hundred feet, with the towering ridge above it still showing evidences of that long-ago holocaust. Steam rose whitely out of a minor pipe stack; but it was the great trapezoidal sawdust burner that dominated the mill. Its big bullet shaped end glowed red from the droning work going on in the mill, even at that hour.

"You know, Doc, somehow I wasn't so surprised. This was just how Dad said Hellmouth was. Why should it be any different? I rested up, munching down a dry sandwich of cold meat and stale French bread; then I picked up my packsack and hiked down to the pump and had a long cool drink of fresh mountain water. Then I went over to Mamie Puski's Boardinghouse and got me a room for the night. She seemed happy to see me, as if we were old friends. She showed me to a little empty room under the eaves and wished me goodnight. In Finnish. Boy, did I sleep! Not only from the two-day hike in country that would defy a Rocky Mountain sheep, but out of a sublime kind of gratitude for everything. It was like—you know—like coming home."

Steve scowled down at the dwindling tape. Damn Art! He had wasted most of his time getting into that bucolic Shangri-La. What about Ilma? Where was she? What about her ancient tale-teller father and that kooky brother, Yalmar?

The tape wound on aggravatingly while Art repacked his pipe and took his time about lighting it. Steve could just see him, his booted legs dangling down from that hay-pitching door of the Halvor barn, taking his time about striking a match and drawing the smoke in to his critical satisfaction. Steve swore down at the fast-dwindling tag end of tape.

"What about Ilma?" he yelled out loud.

"Doc, it's funny..."

"Funny!"

"Everything's just the way Dad said it was—sixty years ago! Doc, I know these people live long and healthy lives but—you know, the next morning I walked across the field to the little schoolhouse to have a talk with Toini Teckilla, the schoolteacher, also librarian. Also the one person who relates this dreamy little mountain village with the Great Outside. When I asked questions about the mill and how come Hellmouth showed no change, I got nowhere. Mamie Puski. The storekeeper. Two old codgers whittling on the bench in front of Rillo's Bar. Nowhere. They smiled, friendly as hell. I was a Finn like them, not a *toistalainen*. Surely I didn't need explanations for such obvious things as this! Of course, the able-bodied men were all at the mill, working! Why wouldn't they be?

"So I went to see Toini Teckilla, the old-maid schoolteacher. She only gave me a few minutes away from her class, and she seemed more annoyed than anything else by the kind of questions I asked her about Hellmouth. As if I were putting her on or something. Making a joke. My talk about San Francisco and the Army and having flown in from Spokane didn't register.

She pursed her lips tight, finally, and wouldn't talk at all.

"Until I asked about Ilma and the Halvors. Then she ushered me outside between the gigglers at the old-fashioned double desks and pointed toward the old covered bridge across the river, where it makes a sharp turn. 'They're on their farm, as they always are! You know the Halvors! They don't mix. They aren't really part of the town, you know!'

"I knew, Doc. Even when Ilma was a child, old Izza and the rest stuck to their farm across the river and seldom went into town at all. Ilma said Izza made some-thing of a story about trolls and evil spirits living under the bridge on the cattail islands. Ilma tried school for a year or so, but it didn't work out somehow. She was so painfully shy from living alone with her father and her hunchbacked brother, Yalmar; and then Yalmar, being so possessive and protective of Ilma's every step, he'd lurk around the schoolhouse and peek in the windows, scaring the kids and getting called names. So when her mother was drowned in the river one swollen spring, Ilma was sent to her aunt and—

"Hey! I haven't got much tape left, have I? Damn! Well, like I said, Miss Teckilla shooed me out and pointed toward the bridge. Just before she slammed the schoolhouse door, she called out, 'Send Yalmar over to me! We need him!'

"But when I got to the farm, I found it deserted. At least it looks that way. No stock in the barn. The grain fields are overgrown with weeds, haven't been plowed in years. Even the serviceberry bushes around the back door are brambled up so that they cover the kitchen window completely, and the porch boards shifted and split when I moved up to pry open the sagging door. I was scared now, Doc. Plenty! How could Ilma possibly be living here in this mess? Yalmar spent most of his time camping and hunting up in the hills like a timber wolf; Old Izza might be dead. After all, he'd be well over ninety.

"I jumped for the door and wrenched it open. Inside it was all musty and bad-smelling, as if—"

The brown tape gave a little jump as the end of it left the spool, then caught in the tape head.

"Damn you, Art Mackey!"

Steve knocked over his chair when he got up, jamming the tape player back in its leather case. Tony came running out of the kitchen, onion knife brandished.

"What is it, Stephano? What happened to your friend?"

Steve grabbed up his gear and started for the door. "Something lethal, I hope. Or it will when I get hold of him!"

"Why—where you going all of a sudden, Doctor?"

"Montana!"

CHAPTER THREE

It was like reading the next to last installment of a thriller in a dentist's waiting room—in a ten year old magazine. Steve scowled as the San Francisco Airport limousine cut across the freeway fill east of Brisbane. No, it was more than that. Arthur Mackey was his friend. His best friend. And Ilma was—well, she was Art's girl. If that wasn't quite the way Steve wanted it... One meeting with Ilma was all it took.

"You'll have to change planes to Missoula," the girl at the desk told him, consulting her master charts.

"I know. Spokane's best."

"Most direct, yes, sir. But not *best*." She smiled with that irritating superiority mingled with dazzling cheerfulness which characterizes airline people brainwashed to smile in the face of all manner of impossible demands. "Let me see. Yes. We can get you on a flight to Seattle at 2 P.M. That's less than an hour. You're lucky, Mr. McCord."

"But I don't want to go to Seattle."

"Then," she continued cheerfully, "we will put you on Intermountain straight to Missoula. It's fan jet, but then we can't have everything. Only an hour and a half wait."

"What's the movie?" Steve grinned.

She smiled back, poising her ballpoint over the ticketer. "Will that be satisfactory, Mr. McCord? Or would you rather have the six hour stopover in Spokane?"

"Seattle," Steve winced. "Please?"

Impulse tripping like this was hardly part of Doctor Stephen McCord's makeup, but this was different. Urgent. Seething under Art's revelatory outburst were dimensions untapped. It wasn't like Art Mackey to let loose his inner feelings and latent quirks in such a hemorrhage of rhetoric. It wasn't *Finn*. Steve had got quite wound up in his research on the little known of beginnings of this oddly distinct branch of the human race and he had learned quite a lot about them. From his books. From one trip to Helsinki and then above the Arctic Circle to study the Finnish Lapps. Migratory. Elusive. Seemingly simple, yet incredibly complex when you dipped down beneath the surface, when you gained some slight mastery of the difficult (unlike any other on the planet) language.

While the fury of the jets carried him north, Steve mused about the Hellmouth Finns and what Art had spilled out on that tape—as if talking to himself, as if it probably wouldn't ever get heard anyway—with a gnawing sense of portent that couldn't delay his trip, not even by six hours.

No, the Finns were not by nature blabbermouths. You had to pry and coax and wheedle to get any distance behind their polite facades. Steve's friendship with Art Mackey was something of a rarity and his honest desire to master the preposterous language, to learn about them, had nurtured it.

Swenson, the canny Swede who had dreamed up Hellmouth, had picked well. Finns were ideal to his purpose. They knew logging and lumber. They reveled in hard work. They loved the things of nature. Oddly aloof, they scorned the artifacts of civilization. Even their architecture was designed to grow out of nature, not to distort or outrage it. Jean Sibelius, the great Finnish symphonist, said, "Others give you musical cocktails. I offer you a clear, cold glass of water."

Steve thought about the Hellmouth town pump and how that dipper drink Art had taken must have tasted. Symbolic. Like a Sibelius symphony. All that Art had absorbed of his father's yearning for the past, not only for his childhood but for a racial childhood as well, was there in that thirst-quenching drink, to feed his soul.

He thought about Old Izza Halvor and his forest magic tales. Well, the old man came by his bardic dreams naturally. Finnish mythos had its basis in the phenomena of nature: the earth, the storm. Ukko, god of the thunder; Ahti, the water goddess, from whose bosom all life had sprung. The bards of ancient Finland *knew* that the forces of nature lived, that even the metals within the earth had a sentience of their own. Yes, these things lived, in a manner mankind cannot fathom. The mountains are wise old companions

to man. To live among them, to sing the songs the wind and the storm sings, these things are good. All else is cynical artifice and corruption. Who was to say that the tales Old Izza spun to little Ilma on that lonely farm in the wilderness did not have a measure of reality which men of science could not permit themselves to dwell on? These thoughts made computer builders and star measurers uncomfortable so they rejected them.

Perhaps something deep inside Steve McCord's Irish genes empathized with such hints of far-out knowledge and that was why he had deserted formal medical research to probe into man's earliest beginnings. After all, compared to the long ache of time it took man to crawl out of the slimes and the caves, the later knowledge was only a pin scratch. Perhaps at least some of the answers lay in going back. 'Way back.

An October drizzle swept the aircraft when the Inter mountain fan jet cleared the surrounding forests and hamlets and bumped gently down onto the tarmac. Steve had been to Missoula before, once, briefly. A town of some 40,000, it lay at the hub of several provident valleys and was rich and important in disproportion to its population. Mountains hemmed it in. Behind lay the Mission Range, its line of white tops remotely hung in blue-gray mists. In front of Steve, as he paused at the bottom of passenger stairs to pull on his trench coat, the muted evening sun winked lazily on the wooded fringe of Mount Sentinel with the big University of Montana "M" on it. To the south, Mount Jumbo, bare of trees but furred over with brown weeds, lay like a sleeping mammoth left over from the preglacial times when dinosaurs roamed the tropical swamps of Montana and Wyoming.

Before claiming his bag (only one and ill packed—he hadn't taken the time to buy anything), Steve found a telephone booth and called the bus depot. No. There was no bus north and west out of Missoula tonight. Tomorrow morning early? Let me see...

"Yes, 5 A.M. That early enough for you? You wanted the Blackfoot bus that hits Clinton, eh? Up in the tall timber? There's only one run per and that's it."

"Fine."

"What's the destination? I mean, I have to put something on the ticket. If it's a dude ranch or a tourist lodge, I'll have to give you the next regular station stop."

"Hellmouth," Steve said.

"Hell—Hellmouth. That's a new one on me." The man's voice was brisk, indifferent, with just a touch of superiority. The day girl had gone off duty at six and this was to let the caller know he was a short run driver, pinch hitting.

"Look it up," Steve said with growing irritation. He could use a martini and a shower and dinner, in any order.

"I am, pal. I am doing that. And it's not easy. Nope. No Hellmouth. Could I interest you in Bearmouth? We got a nice Bearmouth."

"Sorry. Hell, not Bear."

The voice hummed and knocked the telephone around while the driver made puzzled efforts to locate more information on Hellmouth. Paper rattled like dry thunder.

"I'm looking on some detail maps. Yeah. Hey! Odd!"

"You've found Hellmouth?"

"I found *something*. Hellmouth River. But there's no road up there. That's really wild country up there, pal. Let's see. Our spur bus goes through the Swan River country to Greeley. No. Yes! Greeley. After that up—up—up, and a road like ten corkscrews. It doesn't quite hit the summit. No road, pal. And like I keep saying, no town."

"There must be!"

"Well—if you want to come down here and—wait a minute! Jake Callendar just walked in the back. He's an old-timer. I'll ask Jake." He half-muffled the phone, but the yell blasted through between his fingers. "Hey, Jake! Ever hear about a town called Hellmouth? Fellow wants to go to Hellmouth. What shall I tell him?"

Jake chuckled the obvious, with such a lead. From between the driver's fingers, Steve heard disconnected rags of their conversation. "Hellmouth! Lordie! That town hasn't existed since—since the big fire of nineteen **forty** six. Lordie! I remember once Charlie Russell asked me to hike him up there. That Hellmouth River country is pretty spectacular and he wanted to paint a picture of it. He wanted to get in the remnants of the town. But there weren't no remnants. The fire must've cleaned it all out, slick as a whistle. No sawmill. No houses. No nothing. On top of that, we got lost and hell—who's this jerk wants to go up to Hellmouth? Tell the sucker to go to—"

As the voice came closer, the driver clapped his hand full over the receiver.

"Sorry, pal. No Hellmouth."

"Just fix me up with a ticket to the nearest point."

"You mean the regular station stop *after*—"

"I don't care what you do. Just give me a ticket on that five-o'clock bus."

"Okay, pal. But you better come prepared for a long hard walk after the bus dumps you. I'm curious. What 'n hell you going to do up there? Nobody up there. Nearest ranch is fifty tough miles away, if not more."

"None of your damn business," Steve told him. "*Pal.*"

His cab driver suggested the Florence Hotel as the biggest and best in Missoula. Steve showered, then went down to the hotel restaurant and ordered a steak. It was the biggest porterhouse he had ever seen but, following two martinis during the wait for it, he left nothing but bone. On the way back to the elevator, he stopped at the news counter; on impulse he picked up an offset press local printing of a booklet called *Ghost Towns of Montana* designed for summer tourists to "the Big Sky Country."

Hellmouth rated a scanty page.

Undressed and in bed, Steve propped the pillows behind him and ran his heavy-lidded eyes over what the regional hack had written about Hellmouth, or dreamed up for lack of research material in the local library:

Most Montana ghost towns sprang up because gold was discovered nearby, or silver, or sapphires. Not Hellmouth. This village was unique also in that it was settled by a single immigrant band of Finns transported practically intact from a similar town in the northern mountains of Finland, who, beset by economic hardships, were forced to transplant or scatter. A Swedish lumberman named Lars Swenson was able to buy lumber rights cheap in this wild thick-timber area of Montana Territory because nobody else wanted any part of it. Even the Blackfoot Indians shunned the valley. It was they who gave the river the name 'Hellmouth.' The narrow valley, enclosed on all sides by glacial ranges, was the site of many bloody tribal battles before the white man ever saw it. It was 'devil country,' said the Blackfeet, and they avoided it as Satan's true home.

Lars Swenson drooled over the rich timber it had to offer. His hope was that, after a while, homesteaders would drift in; Hellmouth would prosper and refute the old legends. As for farming, most of the land was too rocky, the winters bitter, and nobody but the desperate Finns would have any part of it.

There were a few attempts to sink mining shafts hopefully in here and there, but nothing came of it. So it was left to Lars Swenson's sawmill to make this isolated dead end pay off. It did, after a fashion, for about twenty years. The Finns worked hard, building their own homes, coaxing fresh vegetables and grain for their animals out of the hard ground, giving old Lars the best that was in them and asking little for it but to hunt and fish and mind their own business.

The lumber was there. Plenty of it. But getting it out was expensive. And when the Anaconda Com-pany put their modern facilities elsewhere, they quite naturally chose their own interests to build up their growing Montana empire; Swenson found his dream faltering. His machines were antique, his methods, hand-tool and awkward. Anaconda offered to buy his Hellmouth mill outright, but Swenson was too stubborn to give in.

Then the Great Fire of 1906, when the summer sky stayed blood red for seven weeks. Blasting out of Idaho, the ravening flame took with it an untold fortune in timber and the Good Lord knows how many isolated homesteading farms. While many of the Hellmouthites, especially the younger ones who had taken the trouble to learn to speak and write English, left 'Swenson's Folly' before the fire, an unknown number of old-timers remained. Communications broke down during the holocaust and, without the modern fire jumpers and lookout advance warnings we have today, Hellmouth was doomed. No one knows how many perished, how many others fled in time and made it to safety, to drift off to Oregon or northern California to the sanctuary of other such Finnish lumber towns.

Nowadays nobody goes to Hellmouth. The old wagon road to the summit is overgrown with huckleberry bushes and mullein, inaccessible entirely from November until the April thaw. Below the summit, where a single lodgepole pine stands vigil, you see nothing but ravaged earth dotted with hopeful new growth and a wild white-water river tumbling down out of the Blackfoot Indian's spring called the 'mouth to Hell'; listening for life you hear only the forlorn cry of a crane as it swoops down over the cattail islands that choke up the wide place between its steep banks—where the town of Hellmouth once was.

There's nothing left now—no trace of tool-cut timber, no mill, nothing. Maybe the old Indian legends

were right. Hellmouth is a valley of mysterious evil, a place to be shunned. Nothing can survive in such a haunted gouge out of the earth. Stay away from Hellmouth or die!

CHAPTER FOUR

Five A.M. Dreary predawn. The rear of the bus depot was a narrow alleyway and the Blackfoot bus coughed irritably as it edged down the wet guttered dark tunnel into one of two empty slots. The driver was cranky from his long night's pull out of Spokane and Coeur d'Alene; he slammed the door open just long enough to bawl out an enigmatic message to the night man and permit Steve to climb aboard, bumping his suitcase ahead.

Steve had the chilly feeling he was getting the gimlet eye from the sleepy passengers and bystanders. Nobody said anything, but their glances reminded him that he was an *Auslander* and a greenhorn. Not one of the regulars. His corduroy jacket was shabby enough, Lord knew, and the checkered wool Pendleton shirt under it suitable, as were the dark ski pants and his Army shoes. Maybe it was the suitcase. Right away it labeled him "Dude." Steve regretted not having taken time to buy a packsack for the impending hike to the summit, but he hadn't and it was too late to do anything about it now.

While he was hefting his suitcase up on the rack over his seat, the door slammed and the bus jolted back. Steve managed to wedge the bag up, but he took a side fall in doing so. His grabbing hand slammed into the shoulder of a sleeping ancient with a face like a grizzly. The grizzly snorted, grabbing Steve's hand in a fearful grip.

"Where you fink you're going, feller?"

Steve tried on a grin. "Hellmouth."

"Hellmouth!" The grizzly's jaw gaped, his eyes widened, he flung Steve's arm off him as if exorcising a demon.

Crawling into his seat Steve felt rather like Jonathon Harker on his way to Borgo Pass and Dracula.

But as the less than magnificent local droned past a succession of hamlets, then through Bonner and the huge Anaconda Company sawmill with its modern dry kilns and trim buildings, sharp around a cliff into the Blackfoot country, Steve found his interest taken up by the modestly spectacular scenery. While the finger-smearred condensation on the window vanished under a bright new sun twinkling over purple ridges to the right, he took occasion to admire the wide river which the meandering road followed. Steve remembered how Art had bragged about the fishing "up the Blackfoot." Beyond the willows and scrub pines, struggling through the steep banks, the Blackfoot flowed swift and clear. Swollen and treacherous in the spring, novice rod-casters had to step warily from slick rock to rock, lest they be swept away in the raging current. Even now after a dry, fire fearful summer, the surging, circular upthrusts of splashing water only a few feet out from the bank indicated turbulent depth.

Across the river, noble stands of fir and tamarack lay like some magnificent cloak of dappled malachite green and flaming yellow under the sheen of the rich October dawn. Still, there was a hint of winter in the smoke-hazed air. Before long, all this rich autumn color would be flung over with a heavy white pall by the snarling blizzards that turned this canyon region into a savage, impassable land of howling devils. Blackfoot blizzards were a fearful byword to the lowland dwellers.

And what of Hellmouth, higher, wilder—the very place where these terrible storms originated?

There was one rest stop. A village called Potomac. Steve stepped out, stretched, yawned. He had coffee with the other passengers, none of whom seemed inclined to talk at this early hour?

Steve sipped and looked out of the cafe window. The narrow mouth of the canyon, shadowed except where the sun cut a perfect line across the hills to either side, had widened here to fields and farmland. Beyond a wooded gully was a wide stubbled acreage of harvested alfalfa hay; the shocks lay in pell-mell lines on it where the combine had dropped them. Farther still, against the smoky mountain, was a farmhouse and a big barn with a weathervane of a prancing horse on it. All of this bucolic glory lay comfortably under a deep Prussian blue sky.

Thinking of Washington Irving's tales and others, Steve felt a twinge of envy for those who had grown up close to nature, like the people in that farmhouse. Steve's upbringing in the Peninsula area of San Francisco Bay had been involved with ticky-tacky tracts of houses and computer living. The depersonalization, the pushing of buttons instead of plucking a ripe Macintosh apple from a tree and biting into it so that the juice ran down your chin, this was to regret. Yet it was wistfully nice to know that there still *were* places like this on the war harried planet.

He walked outside, avoiding the bus as long as he could. He picked up a weed and chewed on it. Deep

inside of him the primeval longing for nature stirred, then leaped. It was like the first awesome burgeoning of thought and wonder the world's primitives must have experienced. And it was still there. Life was short and precarious then, but never a plastic bore.

He sniffed the piney air gratefully. He longed to breathe in all the smells and absorb all the stimuli around him, to become once more a true part of nature. Not an artificial thing pushing buttons in a milieu that was ninety-nine percent synthetic. He must go back. Be a primary part of Earth. All intellectual claptrap must be swept aside in favor of pure, honest instinct. The sublime knowledge of his oneness with the earth and the elements, with the stars, too. The fulfillment of these primal longings must be manifest spiritually, psychically, as well as sensually. Surely there was more to existence than computer numbers and a frenetic scramble to pile up *things*. Of what value were they? He must never be a cog again. Back there in the city even the pursuit of pleasure was a mad mechanical rush, promoted by contrivers with something to gain from it. Fun was business. Everything was business. Speed was the keynote. You must never be in one place very long. You must be a blur. Fast. Fast. Everything had to be done fast so that you could rush off to some other inane doing, *ad infinitum*.

Here, with the warm sun and the soft morning breeze on his face, touching the chokecherry bushes and the needletips of the pines, life was what it ought to be. Comfortable. Peaceful. Real. And more. Here in this dreaming valley the living planet whispered her secrets to those who had not allowed themselves to become numbers. Steve thought of what William James had said about Earth: "We may be in the Universe as dogs and cats are in our libraries, seeing the books and hearing the conversations, but having no inkling of the meaning of it all."

True? And if *we* didn't know, who did know the meaning?

Somebody. Somewhere.

"The friendly, flowing savage," Walt Whitman had said, "is he waiting for civilization or is he *beyond* it?"

And Edward Carpenter: "The development of hu-man society has never passed beyond a certain definite final stage in the process we call Civilization; at that stage it has been arrested." And, "Instinct is the genius in Paradise, before the hemming walls of self-knowledge." Man had bitten the apple—and lost.

All this while whiffing the sweet wine of clean mountain air: this and the intangible awareness of nearness to a vast cosmic truth. Then the driver, having completed his mandatory flirtation with the bucktooth waitress, gave the bus horn a sharp blast. Steve's tantalizing Truth bounced back abruptly into the ageless, lurking hills.

CHAPTER FIVE

The blank faced driver refrained from comment as he palm butted the mechanical device that opened the bus door for Steve to trundle himself and his luggage out. Steve caught a flicker of derision above the wide, callous mouth when the eyes swept over him, from the battered deep-sea fishing hat down to his Army boots, lingering and down grinning openly at the brown leather suitcase. Steve gave him a nod and a "Thanks" for dropping him off in the middle of nowhere. The driver started to say something, changed his mind, nodded, and slammed the door.

The bus roared off, leaving him standing at the junction of a weed grown area where trees had once been cut down and stumped to provide a steep upgrade road. Now there was no road at all.

It was very still. Not a bee droned. Not a rodent stirred in the tangled brush, curious that one of the fast-rushing vehicles here in this wilderness had at last stopped to deposit something strange smelling. If only a bird would fling across the steel-blue sky.

Steve chuckled, feeling such a fool. What in the name of Ukko was he doing up here in this tortuous loneliness, hundreds of miles from any place worth mentioning? Was he crazy or something? Had the brain injury really done that to him? The Ghost Towns book had assured him flatfooted that Hellmouth didn't exist any longer, in spite of what Art Mackey had said on the tape! Maybe—maybe it was some grotesque joke!

He sighed, shrugged, picked up the brown suitcase, and began the hard uphill trudge. In an hour he was sweating, groaning, cussing out Art Mackey and his whole misbegotten race. The going was incredibly tough and Steve was anything but used to it after eight months in hospitals, waited on hand and foot.

He would never make it. Never.

Resting and swigging from a canteen (at least he had had the good sense to buy one of those cheap leather covered plastic brandy canteens, filling it at the hotel bathroom tap), he remembered suddenly that there was only one bus per day on the spur line road. That meant a full day's wait. And the prospect of anybody else's venturing up this far, a rancher or a hunter who might give him a lift to anywhere else, was remote.

He groaned to his feet, already swelling up, and sloughed up the road that was only a memory of a road, barely followable. The sun beat down. He put one leg stubbornly ahead of the other and moved. It became mechanical. Something to do because there was nothing else to do.

He thought of crazy things. Like the electric shaver in his suitcase. Electric! And Art said the villagers in Hellmouth still went to the town pump for water, using kerosene lamps to light their shake-roofed houses.

"It was for the trip, damn it," Steve groaned out loud. "I don't intend to stay in Hellmouth very long.

Just long enough to drag Art out of his father's childhood dream town. And Ilma, if she's there." He snorted, "Ilma prob'ly had the good sense to fetch her father and Yalmar back down to Missoula or maybe back to San Francisco with her. That's why Art couldn't locate her. She didn't stay. Why should she? He said the farm looked deserted. She didn't stay because there was nobody there! Of course! And Art's up there—stuck in the middle of some insane dream his father implanted in him."

Steve gulped. If Art Mackey was off his rocker— what then? Could be. Could be. Art was big and brawny. Ten ax handles across the shoulders. Six foot three in his socks. A widish, easily smiling face. Impossibly blue eyes. Hair like gold tinted snow. Long on looks and muscles.

Short on brains.

Yeah. Damn short on brains. And gullible. Vulnerable to the kind of idiot legends Old Izza spouted and Steve was crazy enough to have taken a large interest in because—

Why?

"Because I was a damn fool! That's why! But no more! No more of *that* brand of baloney! Just let me get back to San Francisco. A dry martini at the Top of the Mark. A broiled lobster with drawn butter at Tarantino's. A platter of chicken cacciatore at Tony's. To hell with Wordsworth! To hell with Thoreau and his Walden Pond!"

When he slipped on some dry needles and slid ten feet down a lichened rock, he lay there with his suitcase clutched under him, a treasured thing, damning himself for his nonsensical driveling about Nature with a capital N and all the rest of it, back in Potomac. All very well to reverence Nature in the abstract or on a Sunday jaunt in Muir Woods, but when the indifferent, lethal forces of Nature had hold of you, when the sun burned you and the storm tore your body to shreds...

"I've got to get hold of myself!" he growled.

He snapped to eventually, dragged himself up around the flat outcrop, and sloughed on. Hours went. All too briefly the sun crossed the blue patch between the lofty ranges. It struck him with a chill that night was coming on and he was nowhere near the summit.

He tried to hurry but couldn't. Not uphill. Always uphill. When his palms, both of them, were raw from the suitcase handle, he tried hauling it under his arm. It was too big. It kept slipping. He tore a fingernail half off once, on one of the brass strap fittings. His leg muscles ached with a continuous, tearing throb. His stomach muscles made his lower front feel as if he had been flayed.

He was through cussing Art out, and himself, by now. He had pushed himself until there was no strength left for abstraction or for emotion. He was beat.

When the trees and brush around him started to spin, he knew he must rest or faint. He fell to his knees, then dragged himself off the onetime road under the trees where endless seasons of falling pine needles made cushions over the rocky soil. He was parched, but he didn't even have the strength to drag out the canteen. He lay there, face down, groaning.

After a while he sat up, swabbed his face with a soggy handkerchief, and drank from the plastic canteen. He drank it all. To hell with prudence and scouthood.

Then, with a little shiver, he lay back down and slept.

He woke to elemental fear. It was night and, if there was going to be a moon, it hadn't arrived yet. Lifting his head by sheer force of will (he wanted to stay shrunk down against the earth so that it wouldn't know he was there), he saw nothing but black amorphous shadows. Trees. Rocks. The tips of the high range to his left held hints of pale blue light on them. Moonlight or—? The silence was overpowering. Steve wanted to jump to his feet and yell out, to relieve what was crawl-ing along his nerves.

Something was there. Crouching in the trees. No. Not crouching. It was too big to crouch. The thing he sensed was enormous. It filled the sky. That was why he couldn't see it. *It was too big.* An ant, crawling along your arm at a picnic, can't envision the whole of you, only part. This *something* burning his nerve endings with white-hot fear was like that, and it was invisible. Or kept itself so deliberately.

The jabbing pain of the silver plate in his skull, brought on no doubt from his neural flagellation, forced him to dismiss the terror syndrome slightly. He thought crazily, Silver is an ancient weapon against werewolves and demons. Maybe the plate in my head will keep IT out of my mind at least!

It was only when the unseen monster shifted to an-other star system in an eye flicker that Steve was able to move again.

"Nightmare," he chided himself. "The residue of a nightmare brought on from being all alone up here, from all the wild stories I've been absorbing about Hellmouth, and from my low physical state."

He lifted a prickling arm and shook it. Then the other. Gradually, making a series of loud noises to exorcise all dream demons, he got up. His legs were wobbly, but the long sleep had helped a lot. His watch surprised him. Three hours, no more.

He winced down at his suitcase; then, on impulse, he opened the straps and took out the contents, balled them up in a long sleeve khaki shirt, and made a peasant bundle out of it. He weighted down the suitcase with several heavy rocks and re strapped it. He would leave it here within sight of the so called road. Pick it up on the way back.

Heaving the improvised tote bag over his shoulder, he resumed his uphill hike. It might seem to be more sensible to wait for dawn, but the night air was frosty and he was in no mood for more nightmares.

It was a good two hours of methodical sloughing ahead before he came in sight of the sentinel pine Art had told him about. For fear of stumbling over fallen brush and because any added exertion just tired him more, he had kept his eyes glued to the ground in front of him; when he glanced up at the sudden wan burst of moonlight over the distant ridge, he saw it. The lodge pole pine was beautiful, even in silhouette. Bare bark to half its magnificently straight height, it leaped into the open sky like a proud god artifact, its lacy branches tangled with skeins of moonglow that turned the dark needles to silver. Somehow, by some eldritch magic, it had escaped the Great Fire. Even the mammoth dolomite rock the stealthy glacial flow had planted near it, shattered in twain by lightning, hadn't deterred its skyward plunge.

Steve blinked up at it, panting, for a good five minutes before he picked up his bundle and climbed the last few yards to the summit.

At first, he didn't look down. He didn't want to see the empty space, the charred bones of what had once been Hellmouth. He just leaned back against the primeval rock and closed his eyes. It was as if he was straining something deep inside of him to make Hellmouth what Art Mackey had said it was on the tape. Snug and whole.

An odd thing happened. Although his eyes were shut tight, he sensed that enormous invisible shadow across the sky again. It drew closer, then closer, then swept down on him and *through him*—as if between the molecules of the organic matter that was Dr. Stephen H. McCord!

He shrugged and snapped his eyes open.

He blinked around him.

Now the night was filled with small sounds. The spectral silence (as if something had a tight inward hold on the hills) was gone. A low breeze rustled the trees. A pine squirrel scabbled across the rocks, scraping the tight bark on the sentinel tree in clamboring to its nest. Down on the river a bird called. It was as if the cobweb Presence that had touched the inner recesses of his mind had changed Steve. Heightened his sensory powers. The night murmured to him on all sides. He thought he could even hear the insects in the ground droning and chirping. Nature, he thought, was permitting him inhuman access to her secrets. Even the great gulf of stars over his head seemed closer. *Accessible*.

He shivered on the edge of eternity for a breathless shred of human time, while the sensation of truly being a part of it all, and understanding how and why, held him breathless. Time had become an empty, incapacitated idea. There was no such thing, of course. Everything existed all at once, if you could only *know*.

His mind reached out greedily for this knowledge— and came back empty. He knew in that instant that something greater than all the combined knowledge on the planet had to permit him it as a gift. Temporarily.

Now the whole thing was gone and the world was normal again. And cold. He shivered, lifting his icy hands from their post on the split rock.

He looked down.

The neat double row of frame houses at the terminus of the meandering roadway gleamed with friendly light. The dominating big-nose sawmill burner glowed above the dark buildings like a Cyclops' eye. Bathed in white moonlight, Hellmouth lay spread out comfortably along the steep bank of the river with an inevitability that made Steve grin. Why should he be surprised that it was there? Of course, it was there! It *had* to be!

Steve shouldered his shirt bundle and moved rapidly down the road and onto the packed-earth streets. There was no wonder about it in his mind. Gratitude, yes. He was tired. He needed more sleep. Thirsty, too. His throat was dry.

He saw the town pump on its neat plank platform. Heading for it, where it dominated the town square like a Trevi fountain or an equestrian statue of some local war hero, Steve thought about that *Ghost Towns* book and smiled. The writer hadn't been up here at all. Neither had Jake, the garrulous bus-station habitue. Such people were like that. Whatever subject came up, they had been there years ago. Their egos fed on this kind of spurious regional knowledge.

The pump handle bit coldly into the cuts in his palms. The tin dipper clattered against his teeth. What could be more real? These old Finns had kept to themselves so long they had forgotten that a world existed beyond the peaks that hemmed in their small wilderness valley. They liked it that way. They clung to old ways. What had been good enough for their fathers and fathers' fathers was plenty good for them. The rough, un-painted houses. The board sidewalks. This old pump.

All this was nothing so outrageous, was it? The Mennonites of Pennsylvania kept to the old ways. So did the islanders off the coast of Wales. So London teemed a short distance away. So what?

He gulped down all the cold spring water he could hold, then replaced the dipper carefully across the nipped pump spout. He moved down the boardwalk by small windows from which lamplight flickered, thinking vaguely about food and bed. Was there a restaurant or coffee house of any kind in Hellmouth? He thought not. How about Rillo's Bar? Perhaps Rillo could give him a sandwich along with a mug of homemade brew.

Squire Temmy's General Merchandise Store stood out like a sore thumb in the center of the village. It was the only brick building in Hellmouth and right now it was locked up like a fortress. Steve had always heard that Finns never locked their doors and he believed it, but evidently Squire Temmy was the exception. According to what Art had said, he was avid for money and, being the only purveyor of groceries and dry goods in Hellmouth, he was in a good spot to do business. Perhaps *having* is what makes locksmiths rich. The Hellmouth Finns generally had little—only contentment and peace of mind.

Or so it seemed.

Steve stepped up the weathered but oddly new' covered porch of the barroom. There was no sign over it. He twisted the white glass knob and pushed the door open. The room was lighted by two kerosene lamps, with wide tin reflectors, drawn up to the ceiling. Behind the short bar a fat, bearded tender stopped wiping mugs to nod him welcome. There were two customers, one big and hairy, the other small and bald. They sat at one of three homemade tables along the far wall; they wore homespun wool shirts and heavy pants, dyed dark blue.

Their trousers were tucked into the tops of high logging boots.

The two turned from their companionable conversation over foaming mugs to see which of their mill mates it was. The bleached-bearded faces showed polite curiosity as the smiles diminished.

Steve walked to the bar. "Can I get something to eat?"

The big man behind the bar laughed and wagged his shaggy head.

Steve grinned and tried out his Finnish. The blue eyes crinkled and gave a wink in the direction of the occupied table. "*Jo.*" He nodded. "*Leipa ja juusto. Ei enempi.*"

Steve said bread and cheese would be fine. The barman lifted a great round rye bread from behind the counter and hacked off a slab with a *pukko* he whisked out of his belt. The cheese was sharp and rich, the bread, fresh and savorful. It was plain that this was part of Rillo's own supper, shared with customers on re-quest. Rillo remarked that Widow Mamie Puski had baked the bread in her boardinghouse kitchen, that Mamie did all the baking for those unwilling or unable to. Steve said it was delightful and that Widow Puski's boarders were lucky men. Rillo nodded.

Wolfing down the impromptu sandwich, Steve watched Rillo dip out two more beers for the table customers from a heavy vat behind the bar, then another, which he set down gravely in front of Steve. The rippling conversation behind him had lowered since the two lumberjacks found out that the *tuntematon* spoke *Suomi*—after a fashion.

The dark, sweetish beer revived Steve into questions. But first the bartender, and the pricked-up ears behind, must know who he was and from what strange area of this wide mysterious country, *Amerika*, he came.

"Potomac?" Rillo suggested.

"Missoula."

"Missoula!" Rillo clucked awe and nodded to his friends at the table. "*Missoula!*"

The three pairs of blue-gray eyes stared at him solemnly. Since coming from Missoula was tantamount to coming from Mars, Steve decided to skip all mention of San Francisco. Hellmouth's isolation had been total. In the days when Swenson had built the village, it was a rough three day wagon trek down to Potomac; to all intents and purposes it still was, said those round eyes. Time had stopped dead in

Hellmouth. Swenson's colony had avoided all taint of progress; not only was their wilderness village a visual representation of mountain life in 1880 but these particular Finns came from a similar village in Finland which hadn't shown much change in hundreds of years!

Nobody had bothered about Hellmouth since the Great Fire, accepting somebody's *word* that it had been destroyed. The word stuck and nobody bothered to come up here and find out. Jake had guided the artist Charles Russell to some other valley in this high, wild terrain. As for others, there was no profit in Hellmouth. Money was all that mattered. Hellmouth was dead and forgotten.

Steve asked about Art Mackey.

"Where is he staying? At Widow Puski's boardinghouse?"

"EL" No.

"Where, then?"

Rillo shrugged. Steve sipped his beer and tried not to react to the change that swept over the big barman's face at the mention of Art. Suddenly the two booted figures were up from their seats and behind him, closing him in. The atmosphere of camaraderie and awed curiosity about the *toistalainen* had changed. The lamplit air swirled with sinister innuendo.

They were right behind him. Steve felt the weight of their heavy breathing on his neck. He grabbed hold of the pine counter and found his feet. His head was spin-ning, but he held on tight.

He gaped at Rillo's wide face, smiling strangely. It spread out and became two black-bearded faces, blending, unblending.

"You put something in the beer!" he yelled.

Rillo shook his head, still smiling. "*Ei. Eipa.*"

Steve groaned, drooping his head, hanging on to consciousness by a thread. No! Rillo hadn't needed to put anything in the beer. He'd watched him decant it, anyway. It was Steve's crystal cells and that silver plate. He wasn't supposed to drink heavy stimulants, and that beer was far from 3.2. Rillo's home-brewed concoction, on top of his intense physical stress, and now—this icy wash of sudden terror.

He whirled. The two behind him were staring at him. Coldly, it seemed. Speculatively. Their big hands were poised as if to seize him and tear him limb from limb. They were big-muscled brutes and capable of it easily.

Steve wrenched his whirling head back to Rillo. "Where's Art Mackey?" he demanded. "What have you done with my friend?"

"We haven't touched your friend." Rillo spoke softly through his half-bared teeth. "He went away." He pointed toward the hills.

"No!" Steve mouthed, feeling his knees buckle under him so that his fingers began to slip from the bar. "No! Art wouldn't leave—not without Ilma!"

Pregnant silence while the room tilted and rocked. Falling to his knees between the rude counter stools, battling the surging oblivion, Steve heard one of the men say, "*Ilma is with Ukko.*"

"Sssshh!" Rillo hissed.

"He's out," the man said when Steve tumbled and his head knocked the pine floor planks.

"We must be careful."

"But Ukko needs him, too. Norma has said it."

"Shh! Art Makki first."

"Where shall we take him?"

"To the Widow's. She will keep him until morning. Then we will see what we must do with him."

Steve's eyes were shut tight by the time he crumpled. He sensed it vaguely when the two lumberjacks lifted his limp body and carted it out into the street. Holes punched out of oblivion gave him sound and sight of swinging lamps. There was a woman's voice clucking and asking questions. The thumping of boots up narrow wooden staircases, with himself dangling between. The sensation of soft warmth as he was laid down on a creaking bed. His army boots were unlaced and dropped to the floor. The lampglow moved away from him then, along with the rustling of long dark skirts. The black, merciful sleep.

CHAPTER SIX

Rain tap-tap-tapping on the roof directly over his head and on the small window wakened Steve. He lay against the rough bolster for a moment, then, remembering last night, he bolted up. The room he had been deposited in was small, slope-ceilinged, an attic bedroom that smelled musty from disuse. An oil lamp with a fresh-sooted chimney stood on the small bed table and the pine floor was partially covered with a many colored braided rug.

Steve swung his legs down and tried not to make any sound while he put his shoes on. He must escape as Art Mackey had, before Rillo and the others came back to dispose of him. Head for the hills as Art had. He knew now why the mention of Art's name had disturbed them. Art had eluded them, escaped to tell what he knew about Hellmouth. The truth was far more sinister than its placid appearance. All men yearn toward older, easier days. *They* knew that, whoever was behind all of this. The facade Hellmouth presented hid something strange, incredibly strange.

Even as he stood up there came a rap on the thick door, and the pull up latch lifted.

Widow Mamie Puski was a big-bosomed, strong-limbed woman. She swept in with her round tray of coffee and fresh rolls, with all the briskness and lack of ceremony of a hearty creature used to seeing her men boarders in all stages of undress and giving them back oath for oath when they had it coming. Under a faded blue apron she wore an old-fashioned shirtwaist with frillery at the high neck and her dark skirts swept the rug when she set the tray down on the night table. She gave Steve a quick birdlike smile.

"*Syodase.*"

The coffee smelled good. Sitting, sipping from the wide cracked mug, Steve wondered vaguely that it *was* coffee. Real coffee. And where would Hellmouth get coffee? The other things they could raise. Game was plentiful, and the sheep they kept gave them wool for the carding and spinning. But—coffee?

"Eat!" said Widow Puski. She added that breakfast in the dining room was long past. The men had gone to work at the mill, and this would have to do until lunch-time. She kept strict meal hours. She had to.

Steve understood. He nodded and munched. The wheat rolls were morning fresh and liberally smeared with butter that had a faint haybarn smell but tasted delicious. While he ate, Widow Puski moved to the window to glower out at the dreary skies and cluck, "*Voi! Voi!* More rain! Winter is upon us!"

Setting down his empty cup, Steve saw her lumpy face tighten up oddly, as if she saw something outside the window beside the rain that displeased her. He stood up and moved up to the window.

"What is it?"

She pointed. Steve followed her finger through the dragging downpour across the smaller houses and smoking chimneys to a point downriver in the direction of an old, brown covered bridge just visible over the sodden cottonwoods and between their denuded branches. Where Mamie Puski was pointing looked like the town's trash dump. There were wet, tangled lumps of debris on the bank edge and tumbling down into the swift-flowing river. There was evidence of a periodic burn-off of the debris, but an assortment of new trash on top.

"*Voi! Voi!* Her again!"

Steve peered harder. When she moved, he saw her. A slim girlish figure in a yellow skirt and a dark sweater. She wore a yellow scarf over her hair to protect it from the ram, but wheaty strands flung free into the wind. The girl's fists were jammed down into the pockets of her sweater, but now she whipped out her right hand and waved it wildly in the direction of the sharp bend in the river, toward the old wagon bridge.

There was something desperate about her movements, frantic. Also, something forlorn, strange, ghostly.

"Who is she waving at?" Steve asked.

Her odd laugh spun him. Widow Puski gave a bosom shaking giggle and put her hand to her mouth.

"*Ei mita.*" Nothing. Nobody.

The rain-washed scene was drearily lifeless.

"Standing there on the dump," Widow Puski said, "every morning. Waving goodbye." The symbolism made Steve shiver.

"Who—who is she?"

"Ilma. Ilma Halvor."

Steve could still feel the rake of the Widow's nails on his arm as he grabbed his corduroy jacket from its wall peg and flung out. She yelled something about his waiting, screaming and invoking Ukko at him all the way down the stairs.

It took him less than ten minutes to reach the knoll of wet debris where Ilma had stood, waving, but now she was gone. Vanished. She could have been an illusion, a pale ghost, standing here in the middle of all the junk the villagers didn't want any more. Was Ilma that, too. Unwanted? Had the thing that transformed his stomach into a solid knot of ice driven Ilma insane? Was *knowing* the prelude to madness? Sloughing across the springy mass that represented years of Hellmouth discard, Steve strained his look in wide circles across the river, beyond the frosty-fingered trees where the cattail islands sulked defiantly at this wide place between the steep banks.

Nothing. Just the moan of the wind and the furtive licking of rain on the rank, rotting discard. A bird

veered up from its sodden nest in the cattails, venting a disconsolate shriek like a doom call.

Steve clambered to the very edge of the bank. Below him the bank dropped abruptly, thirty feet or more, into the slaving side stream, swiftened by the presence of the upthrusting islands. His weight shifted the projecting mass of debris. It teetered.

He leaped back just as the mass cracked and half of it tore loose and dropped.

He squatted, collar upturned against the needling nag of rain, trying to find some evidence of anyone's having stood here recently. Muddy footprints. Something. But the rain had washed any such evidence away.

The swift, black water below made vague sounds of content as it devoured the break off. Steve started. Suicide? Could Ilma have leaped in? Lord! He shivered and gave a brief look back toward the houses. They squatted unwholesomely against the bank and even the tendrils of blue white smoke coming out of the rock chimneys had lost its coziness.

His squinting look followed a muddy, use-widened path uphill toward the rear of the valley, to the mill, close against the sheer cliff of solid rock. The triple stacks were disgorging heavy black smoke; the obscenely shaped burner was belching black smoke, too, and quantities of sparks. The mill was running at full capacity. Why? Hellmouth was hard at work turning logs into useful lumber. Why? What happened to the lumber? Where did they sell the end products of their enslaved endeavors? Where and how? Hellmouth didn't exist so far as the rest of western Montana was concerned!

Crouching there, Steve's hands idled among the **wreck**. His tramping about had shifted some of the top layers of sodden trash. He found himself staring down at semi-dry papers. And cans. Metal tins. Containers for food.

He picked up a can. Hills Bros. Coffee. Well, that told him where the coffee he'd drunk came from. The tin bore the familiar Arab figure in the yellow robe and turban. But there was something different about it, apart from its being there at all. He pried off the lid and sniffed. Yes. The two-pound tin had contained coffee recently. It was shiny bright inside.

"What?" His wincing pain from the fingernail he had broken the day before on the suitcase hardware told him what was odd.

The lid pried off. No vacuum pack. It lifted off and under it was an old-style wax-paper fringe. And the can was new. Shiny new.

He scabbled around for other things. Came up with a torn soap wrapper. King Soap. Where had he seen that pompous bearded monarch figure with the storybook crown on his head? Where? Staring, it came to him. Just the year before, one of the San Francisco museums had presented a display of antique posters gleaned from torn-down buildings. One of the proudest finds, when they had ripped out one of the Victorian Market Street buildings to make way for the new subway, was the King Soap poster. King Soap hadn't been manufactured since World War One. And here in his hand was a fresh King Soap wrapper.

He started up at the sound of low voices. Three figures, muffled in dark wool mackinaws and toques, were approaching along the path from where the boardwalk ended. Steve thought he recognized the short one as the baldie from Rillo's, and Rillo himself. That great black beard was unmistakable. The third of the trio was tall, spare, old. Instead of a logger's coat, he wore a long gray robe and carried a staff. His beard was snow white and so long it whipped about in the wind, but there was a patriarchal dignity about him. Striding purposefully toward Steve ahead of the others, he might have been a grim, thatch browed prophet out of the Old Testament. Or someone far more ancient.

Terror took hold of Steve's insides again. Whatever they wanted of him, he would have no part of it. Like Art, he must flee the village, or what happened to Ilma would happen to him. Madness, at the least.

He stood up and ran, in a circle, loping like an animal from his hunters. They shouted, but Steve didn't even look back. He ran full tilt, keeping to cover as much as he could, cutting across the wide field toward the old covered bridge and the Halvor farmhouse. The Halvors had shunned the village as much as they could, and for good reason. What reason Steve dared not even try to fathom. Escape! Run! Flee!

He bypassed the picket fence and the gate to the little schoolyard and, when the door of the schoolhouse cracked open, he dived for the irrigation ditch that surrounded the wide grain field.

He panted up to the old bridge, leaning for a rest on the first of the rotting posts that triangulated up to it. Here, at the abrupt bend where Hellmouth River ran swiftest of all, because narrowed by half, the wooden bridge lay on its log and rock piers like a memento of time fled and gone. Each of its lodgepole-pine timbers had been well picked and creosoted, adzed only slightly on top to form a washboard passage between the dark steep-roofed tunnel. For wagons. Horses. Not for trucks. Not for cars. *Eipa*.

When his panic and his lungs would permit, Steve tramped through the dark tunnel and up a winding road to the Halvor farmhouse. The tarpaper structure leaned against the wind at the headland of the

Hellmouth's sudden snake turn, an ugly, dilapidated spectacle. Where the houses of the village, even the boardwalk, had given the appearance of newness and care, the Halvor farmhouse tottered and flapped its loose black wings like something disused and forgotten for decades.

So the sizable barn with the lopsided running-horse weathervane. So the lean-to with the rusting farm implements. So the weeded fields and the rampant brambles crawling up the falling-down porch. So the rusty-wired chicken coops.

Steve swabbed the wet off his face, hesitating. He stared up at the sagging screendoor with repugnance. The whole place was haunted by age and abandon and strange, secret sins.

He was soaked through and shivering. Better to go in and light a fire. There must be some kind of a stove or fireplace. He must dry himself off or catch pneumonia or something. It was no good standing here, soaking wet. No good fleeing off in the rain pell-mell.

He forced himself up on the creaking porch, jumped back with a yell when the screendoor screws gave way at his tug and the whole door clattered down on him.

"Damn!" he cried out loud to any ghosts peaking around any corners. "Damn you all!"

Reluctantly he moved up again and pushed open the door. It was dark inside, musty, and it smelled of insect invasions. He lagged across the threshold. He was in the kitchen. There was an iron cookstove in one corner, an oilcloth-covered table, shelves, oddments of dishes and pots lying carelessly about. The two water pails on the bench by the door had mold on them. The water dipper, crooked over a pail's edge, had slime on it, too. But there was wood stacked up by the stove, so Steve moved across the gloom, reaching inside his coat for his cigarette lighter.

He was lifting up the round top iron stove lid when he heard a scratch of footsteps from the inner room. He poised, waited. Nothing.

"Mice," he decided, reaching for pitch slivers from the kindling box. "Although I don't know what there is to eat in this tar-paper tomb."

Again stealthy sound from beyond the inner door. Steve set down the stove lid and walked to the door and pushed it open. It was even darker there in the parlor; vines across the bay windows had thickened over the years to close off all daylight...

Steve gave a harsh yell when he saw him.

At the far end of the long room, limned by odd bluish light from an open door to a room that must front the river headland, stood a tall, gnarled figure. His pate had a few wisps of hair left on it, once coppery red, and the wild tangle of beard fringing his pudding soft, worm white face still had a wiry, coppery look.

"Izza!" Steve cried. "Izza Halvor!"

The figure cocked its head, tittered.

"Izza, where is Ilma!" Steve blurted. "And Art Mackey? Have you seen my friend Art? Where is he?"

Izza Halvor chewed his toothless gums thoughtfully, then gave a petulant little whine, like a puppy. He started to say something, then whined louder and tossed a fearful look over his shoulder toward the front room and the odd blue light. Then he straightened up and the mindless vacancy behind his rheumy off-white eyes seemed to fill up.

"You must come with me, Doctor Stephen McCord," he said.

Steve gaped.

"Come!" The childish-soft face took on a stern, demanding cast. Izza beckoned. "Come!"

"Why? W-Where?"

"To Ukko."

"But Ukko is only a—"

"Come with me, Doctor McCord. See for yourself that Ukko lives. That Ukko has always lived. That Ukko lives forever."

It was the brightening of the blue radiance behind him that gave the lie to the phenomenon of an intelligent Izza. For, while the voice spoke, Izza's lips did not move!

Steve gave a wild yell and scrambled for the kitchen door.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Steve's second flight plunged him over the bridge halfway, before he thought about frying pans and fires. He wheeled and fled back past the Halvor farmhouse into a thicket of scraggling second-growth fir. This was the hind side, the up against the mountain side of Hell mouth River, a seeming dead end. The old bridge had been fashioned specifically for the Halvors, and possibly for a logging run in the old days when timber had been cut 'way up on this tortuous mountain. Before the fire.

Yes! He stopped crashing through the underbrush to pant and notice that this whole mountain, while furred over patchily with secondary growth, showed clearly that once a ravaging fire had indeed swept through the valley, gobbling up everything edible in its path. Stump holes showed where the fire monster had bit deep into the earth itself, smouldering long after the initial conflagration had subsided.

Beyond the forest, he found an old logging path that showed signs of recent use. Animals. Yalmar Halvor. Who else? He flung along the raggedy path, stopping with a groan when he came to an old landslide; unprotected by anchoring roots, the topsoil had at some past time slid down into the river, leaving a wide, precarious gouge. The slippery clay and loose gravel he would have to cross was actively dangerous; the slide had taken the bank with it. He shivered at the two hundred-foot drop that invited him to watery doom should his slick soled Army shoes betray him.

He groaned and started to make the ninety-degree climb up around the slide area, taking care not to approach the edge. The nagging rainfall was even now pawing down little showers of earth and rootlets. Scrambling, slipping, grabbing weeds and whatever for an assist, Steve's social-science level of thought mulled over visions of Smokey the Bear and what lasting scars a forest fire out of control leaves in its wake.

Going down the other side was easier. He forgot to be careful. Impatient for the path, he permitted himself a rain slick slide, yelled when his fast plunge carried him toward the flaw. He struggled to gain his feet, panicked. His hands grabbed for something to hold on to. His muddy fingers clawed into weed clumps, which pulled free at a tug. Then, just at the outscop's edge, he caught hold of a twig, lifted up on his feet, and went galloping helter skelter away from the slide.

A lightning felled fir stopped him suddenly. His face hit the ground with a jolt that jarred his teeth. He lay there, stunned, aching, wondering idly how many bones were broken.

He wondered too, if there was any point in getting up again. Ever. He tried to build up some anger within him that would sustain him, some get even anger at whoever had brought him to this. For the moment, fight was knocked clean out of him. The best he could manage was a weak moan.

Then the hand came down from behind and lifted him gently to his feet, wet, battered, muddy from head to foot.

"Art!"

"It's me, all right." Under the hunter's coat hood, Art's handsome blue eyed face split in a white grin. "I'm not sure who you are, under all that blue clay, but I think you're Doctor Stephen H. McCord. Right?"

Steve swabbed his mouth to remove the bad taste and grit.

"I think my left eye is gone. I can't see out of it."

Art laughed and removed the wet leaf from it gently. "Better?"

"Lots. You don't by any chance have a dry towel on you, or a mechanic's rag?"

"Will this do?"

Steve gratefully accepted the big blue country-style handkerchief Art pulled out of the utility double back of his dun shed-water jacket. He wiped his face and his hands with it, handed it back with an apologetic wince. "I think I dirtied it a little."

Art laughed and Steve started a barrage of questions.

"Later. Let's get you up to the cave and wrung out a little. I've got some dry clothes for you. They'll hang loose but you can roll up the pants legs."

"Cave?"

Art nodded, pointing up a trail, nudging Steve to move ahead of him with paternal concern. When Steve had to stop for a rest, leaning back dizzily against one of the many low cliffs of solid rock they skirted, Art moved ahead with a frown of impatience. Big muscled, athletic, the ex-football star was tireless and at home in this wilderness. He prowled the path like an Indian, dressed the part, confident, organized, natural to the environment.

Steve gave his broad back a grunt of admiration not unmixed with gratitude and pleasure that he had found his friend—alive. Resting there in the semi-shelter the overhang of rock offered, he turned a sweeping look down across the valley. Hemmed in by towering ranges on every side, the whole rain blurred vista showed evidence of the Great Fire of 1906. From the great white wall against which Swenson had built his mill, reaching around on both sides to where he stood now, was a complete circle of fire-blasted forest. And yet down there—down on the elongated flat, from the village of Hellmouth to the mill—all was green and lush. No fire had ever touched it. By some miracle, Hellmouth had survived intact. Under the wet smoke drift the patches of tilled acreage with esthetic windbreaks of tall trees seemed not ever to have tasted the scarlet flame. Steve envisioned the horror of it. The sky overhead red as blood. The driving windstorm billowing black walls of smoke as the crimson inferno swept over the far ranges and down until

finally all you could see were hell flame and panicked animals, fleeing, dying.

But in Hellmouth—
"Steve! Get going!"

Art refused to talk until he had a fire going at the mouth to his cave home and Steve had peeled off his soaked clothes and wormed down inside Art's nylon sleeping bag. Propped against the dry rock wall, the chill in his blood ebbing, Steve glanced around him. The cave wasn't deep; perhaps that was why some prowling cougar family or grizzly hadn't appropriated it. Or perhaps that would come later. While Art coaxed the semi-dry wood into warming flame, Steve took in the neat array of hand tools and cooking gear set out by the big packsack. Rifle, canteens, *pukko*, even a small hatchet.

"All the comforts of home," he remarked, accepting the plastic mug of hot tea Art handed him with a wince at his own dude's shortcomings.

Art nodded. "Lucky I found it. I was pretty sure there'd be at least one cave up here. What I wanted was something close enough for reconnoitering—and unoccupied."

"Unoccupied?"

"Ever try evicting an eight hundred pound grizzly?"

"Not lately. Ouch! That tea's scalding hot!"

Art grinned. "Take it slow. Hungry?"

"Sure. But first of all—give out! Let me in on what goes on around here! Put me up to date from your tape!"

"You got it, then." Art's blond eyebrows blended in a deep scowl. "I was afraid maybe somehow *he*—"
He bit off the unsavory thought. "You shouldn't have come, Doc. Why did you?"

"Well, you saved my life."

"And you came to return the favor."

"Curiosity had something to do with it," Steve admitted. "C'mon! Tell Doc everything!"

"I don't know everything. As a matter of fact, I know damn little that you don't, from the tape and what you must have seen yourself. What did you see, by the way?"

Steve told him briefly. "Now will you put me up to date?"

Art's eyes took on a faraway look. "It's hard to pin the whole business down, but what it looks like is that, somehow—call it shamanistic magic or superscience or whatever—Hellmouth has stayed exactly the way it was around 1900. Absolutely status quo."

"Coffee cans, soap wrappers, and all." Steve gulped down his tea and Art poured out more from the camper's utility pan. "But riddle me this, Finn! What are they doing at the mill all this time? If its lumber, where are they selling it? What's their outlet?"

"First I thought of spies, or of some secret organization dedicated to some sinister plot."

"With all this Spirit of Christmas Card Past as camouflage for some totalitarian take-over! *Wow!*"

Art shook his head. "It can't be that. The homespun artifacts are *too* complete. Hey, I forgot. I've got a little brandy left. I'll lace your tea with a nip. Do you good."

"I'm not supposed to. My silver-plated brain, remember?"

"I remember. But you're not supposed to die of exposure, either. Say when." He poured out a liberal drop from the pint and took a swig himself. "Let's see. You left your gear down at Widow Puski's, so I'll have to dig you up a change."

"Sorry about that. I was trying to catch Ilma at the dump."

Art nodded grimly. "I've tried to catch up with her, too. Several times I thought I almost did but—she moves like a—"

"Ghost?"

"*No!* She's alive! I know she is! I'm not so sure about the rest of them, but Ilma lived Outside. She went to school in Astoria, then San Francisco. Whatever *they* are, the Halvors aren't. They've always lived just on the fringe of the—whatever it is. Across the bridge. Old Izza didn't approve of his two kids mingling much. Yal-mar's always adored his pretty sister. His keeping check on her when she tried to attend Toini Teckilla's school was only part of the reason for Izza pulling her out, sending her to Astoria to her aunt."

"Which Yalmar resented and showed his resentment by leaving the farm and the old man to fend for himself. No wonder the Halvor house and all is in such bad shape!" Steve downed his brandied tea in a swift gulp. "Hey! I just thought of something! Do you suppose *they*—whoever *they* are—maneuvered the message that brought Ilma back? Because without knowing it, she, as well as Yalmar and Izza, pose a threat to *them*, to whatever they're up to? Do you think they even—"

"—caused those strange accidents Ilma had? I've thought of that. But if they've got that kind of

power—"

"The ancient Finnish sorcerers controlled the wind and the storm." Steve felt a prickling where his back hair needed trimming and his stomach tighten up. "Do you think—? Could they have caused the Great Fire to bypass Hellmouth with their primal song magic? Could they create a space warp of some kind that makes the occasional trekkers *into* this valley see it as dead and empty?"

"What about a time warp? Some kind of deflection of the time stream that keeps the people who first settled the valley alive forever? My father talked about Squire Temmy and Rillo and the Widow Puski. *They're still down there!*"

Steve stared at the Finn narrowly, with suspicion. "How come we see what those occasional trekkers-in can't?"

Art stood up. With the firelight leaping on his bronzed features, his wheat-gold hair, he seemed suddenly supernaturally tall. Strong. Godly. Steve's mind jumped to legend, to the stories of the golden-haired

Lemminkainen, who slew armies and loved a whole islandful of beautiful women. A ripple of something like fear stiffened his nerves. What if—?

"How?" Art scowled down at the fire. "Because I'm from them. My father and mother were children when the boat sailed out of Oulu."

"Sailed!"

"Sailed. No other boat would take them. They had no money and in them days Finns were black sorcerers to their neighbors, especially those from the far north. Bad luck at the very least. That's the way my father told it when he told me what a harrowing trip they endured across the North Atlantic before they finally reached Boston." He chuckled. "I always thought it was the lack of money more than anything. Old Swenson had sunk all his money into the Hellmouth venture. He had little to spare for such luxuries as food and decent accommodations. Let's face it. He hired these immigrant Finns because they were tough as nails, would improvise their own needs, and work for practically nothing."

"You sound bitter."

"I *am*, damn it!" Art shrugged. "But those were the old bleed 'em dry days of the empire builders. No worse than the city sweatshops and child labor. At least up here they had fresh air and venison, grouse, bear steaks. In a way, it was their promised land."

He lobbed a couple more chunks of wood onto the fire with a gusty sigh. Steve helped himself to a jot of brandy, straight.

"I get it about you, Art. You have this 'song magic' in your genes. You're *them*. But what about me? I'm Irish, clear through. Well, not so clear, maybe. A little English. A shot of Scottish. But not a trace of your preterphysical Finn magic. Not a trace."

Art gave him a long look across the fire. "Through me, maybe. And what you've learned in your studies. You empathize. Besides, who says the Finns have any monopoly on this nature magic, star power, or whatever it is? The Blackfoot Indians of this region had beliefs that were pretty close to the same thing. The Water Mother, our Ahti. The Thunderbird—"

"Ukko! The top god of them all! Hey—I just remembered something. I heard the lumberjacks in Rillo's bar say something about Ukko, just before I passed out, and—"

"They were cussing."

"I don't think so. Then when I ran out of Widow Puski's attic room, she yelled for Ukko to stop me!"

Art grinned. "She was cussing, too. She's a strong-minded woman, Mamie Puski. No, Doc. The Hell-mouth Finns are Christians through and through, like most of Finland today. Hardheaded Lutherans with strict ideas of right and wrong. Puritanical about it. Church every Sunday and no nonsense. When they hark back to Ukko and the other old gods, it's like invoking the devil. Anything anti-Christ is evil. Just like Cotton Mather. For 'Ukko' read 'Satan.' "

CHAPTER EIGHT

The rain, one of the sodden autumnal variety that looks as if it will never stop, kept them close to the cave. Art fixed a kind of rabbit stew, using dried vegetables and spices from his pack for garnish. Steve wolfed down his ration as if it were tournedos à l'Oscar of the Waldorf. Mental exhaustion and battered muscles made it very easy for him to fall in with Art Mackey's suggestion that they sack in early and make their explorative foray into the village before dawn the next day; hopefully the weather might ease up, although blue skies were too much to expect. Art insisted that Steve use the sleeping bag. He was used to roughing it, in top shape, and besides, he wanted to stick near the cave entrance and keep the fire up.

Here, in this caveman's milieu, with the strange, soft sounds of nature for his lullaby, Steve found it easy

to believe in Ukko and the old gods, and how the ancient Finns had hit upon their animistic song magic that was able, by some revision of the natural vibration patterns of space and matter, some cosmic alchemy, to change things. To transmute not only metals, but living creatures into what they were not. The old legends of lycanthropy and other-dimensional monsters disguised as men seemed logical, childishly so. What man truly knows the truth of what marvelous or terrifying things lie *out there*, beyond the stars? What scientist can honestly be sure that his puny knowledge is the final truth? Einsteinian theories are postulated and "proved" only to be tossed in the slag heap by succeeding "truths."

The answer? Somewhere, perhaps there was one. Perhaps it lay as much in the most ancient legends of the planet—how disturbingly similar they were, after all—as well as in the most future-thrusting sciences. Perhaps it would all come full circle one day. Perhaps Ukko, labeled "Satan" by the neo-Christian Finns, was actually—

The Great Truth tantalizing Steve's half-conscious mind drifted away like a bit of fluff on the errant breeze. Head on knees, rifle close to hand, Art's cowed figure sat framed in the ragged outline of the cave's mouth. He moved his booted legs for a more comfortable position; his capable hands clasped his legs, drawing them in. His blond head sank lower.

The fire crackled.

Sleep was knitting up Steve's raveled sleeve of care into a grotesque nightmare. He was running, running like a deer from a hunter with a telescopic rifle. The forest he was running through was black as death. Then, when the thick branches over his head loosened, he saw that there were stars on the night canopy, stars like pins stabbing down on the world to stop it from revolving, from spinning across the void. The stars formed patterns that were chaotic, mocking, horrible. They indicated something monstrous about the cosmos, something unbearable to a puny human mind. Now great cloud shapes formed above the pinlike stars. They moved down on him as he fled, inexorably. He knew he couldn't escape such infinite horrors but he had to try. He had to keep running and running, if only to please them by his panic, to go along with the preposterous cosmic, charade.

The world was lost and didn't know it. *Steve* knew it, but all he could do was run, run, run.

The dark, infinitely large shapes closed in.

He woke up floundering in the sleeping bag, sweating, whining like a puppy for some god master to come and save him. His thrashing bumped his head on the cave wall and that knocked him awake. He sighed tremulously and blinked over at the barely smouldering fire. Beyond the dark cave mouth the rain had stopped. A low wind moaned through the hemming pines, herding cloud-wrack across the moonless sky. There were stars, though, and when he remembered his dream, Steve shuddered.

Art Mackey's head drooped down between his knees, his hands were limp on the small canvas tarp he'd laid down on the cold rock floor. Asleep. The fire was all but out.

Steve was about to call out when a huge shadow suddenly blocked the sky. Something monstrous, lumbering from side to side up the tenuous trail, snuffling, growling.

Steve tried to yell but he was still too much with his nightmare, his tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth. When the monstrous, grotesquely man-shaped shadow moved up on its hind legs, Steve saw its jaws unhinge in the faint fire glow, saw rows of sharp teeth like sabres.

"Art!" he yelled. Knowing what it was helped. "Art! Your rifle! *Quick!*"

With a roar the shadow lunged on Art as he leaped out of sleep. Before he could grab up the gun, the shaggy arms with their curved knives had him embraced for a leisurely kill. The size of the animal paralyzed Steve while he watched Art struggle. He zipped out of the bag, finally, with some notion of snatching up the rifle from between the creature's legs.

"Pistol!" Art yelled. "Holster! Hung over my pack!"

Steve moaned his citified inadequacy while he groped in the dark cave, trying to make his brain remember where the packsack was. When he kicked over the leaning hatchet he knew the pack was near. He scrambled his hands down, over, right, then felt the sleek hard shape of the bullet belt and the holster. He dragged out the gun and cocked it.

"The head! Aim for his head!"

Art was crouched over, protecting his face while the animal's raping claws tore at the heavy double-thick hunting jacket. The cold handle of the pistol in Steve's fist sharpened up his senses; his Army training snapped to the fore. He moved on the horrendously huge shadow Art was battling, washed over by calm, icy necessity—of kill or be killed—rammed the pistol into the beast's head and pulled the trigger. Twice.

The grizzly, the Beast-That-Walks-Like-A-Man, swayed; he shook his head to remove the lead bees, then toppled, dragging Art down with him. Steve waited until Art had eeled out from between the powerful clawed arms; then he pointed the pistol down at the writhing giant's middle and emptied it.

Art stood up, flashed his flashlight down at the Rocky Mountain grizzly. He turned to Steve, grinned. "Looks like we're even."

There was no more sleep and, anyway, a hint of brightness showed over the high ridges. Steve patched up Art's claw rakes with sulfa paste and, while Art made some effort to sew up his lashed jacket, Steve built up the fire and reheated the previous night's stew. Sourdough biscuits, hard as rocks, filled in the crevices, washed down with scalding-hot tea. They finished up the brandy. They needed it

"Any ideas?" Steve broke the silence while they waited for the night shadows to lift a little more.

Art shrugged. "Only that the sphere of influence, or whatever you want to call it, exists in that one area—the valley floor, proper. The fire ring tells the story."

"The Halvor farm?"

"Part of it. The magic circle includes the tip of that headland the farmhouse itself was built on."

"The blue light! It was as if—as if Old Izza was being controlled!"

Art shrugged as he handed Steve his extra flashlight and buckled on his gun belt. "Forget it. Let's cut off this speculating and get fogging."

"*Jopa*," Steve grinned. "And where do we start?"

"We'll check out your blue light. I never saw it myself. Ran into Izza once." They moved out, down the misty trail.

"How'd he look?"

Art tapped his forehead. "Old guy's gone through a lot. What with his wife drowned and Yalmar the way he is, it's no wonder he retreated into fantasy. He sort of sheltered Ilma with it too, then, in a burst of savvy, sent her away to her maiden aunt's in Astoria."

"How'd his wife die?"

"She was drowned. Nobody saw it but it was probably a simple accident."

"Where?"

"At the dump. Rini was a roly-poly woman with an inclination to gossip. Izza kept her home as much as he could, but one day when Ilma was at school and he and Yalmar were out in the fields, she went into town for a round of *kuppikumma* and housewifely chatter, then stopped by the dump to check for anything they might be able to use at the farm. These old country folk are frugal by nature and an old apple box or a torn garment might come in handy. Especially they could use simple manufactured items. Like I said, Rini was plump and cheerful and not overly bright. She must have crawled too close to the edge of the dump for something that took her fancy and the junk broke off. It could happen."

"Easily. It almost happened to me!" Steve frowned. That dump again. Ilma's waving goodbye. Rini's tumbling over into the rush water. The shiny containers and discards that could not exist. How they must have fascinated the old, fat farm woman! And when the gossiping soul asked naive questions of the villagers?

The farmhouse door was just as Steve had left it. Wide open. Art sent his torch's light ringing into the stale silence and Steve stepped cautiously after him. Here and there the dust that layered the floor in a furry patina was disturbed by footmarks, mostly rodents', but there was no evidence of anyone's having lived here in months, perhaps years. Art slipped his pistol from its holster before easing open the door to the front parlor, the room with the elongated bay windows overlooking the cliff headland and the river.

"Empty," he observed unnecessarily.

Steve pointed to half-dried mud tracks. "Somebody's been here. That proves I wasn't seeing things, at least—and that what I did see wasn't a ghost." He tramped across the creaking floor to the dirty windows, and stared out across the river. Beyond the steep clay banks and a copse of naked cottonwoods, the land dipped so that only the homely rock chimney tops showed, with blue breakfast smoke idling up into the morning wind, like a scene out of Whittier or Robert Frost.

"I did see an eerie blue light behind Old Izza!" Steve said. "And I did see him change—suddenly. As if something behind him in this room took over that—that drooling mind!"

"You thought you saw it," Art shrugged. "You scientists always figure these things out in your own hard-nosed technical terms. Izza Halvor was 'controlled' by some new-fangled machine, no doubt."

"What do *you* think?"

"I'm trying to find some simple explanation for all this, not complicate it."

"Like—Ukko himself!"

Art shot him an odd look. "Let's go upstairs."

The first two bedrooms of the rambling house were bachelor messy, stench-up by the ravages of rodents which had ripped up clothes and bedding for their nests. The third was a surprise. The door had been nailed shut so that it took several driving butts of Art's powerful shoulder to open it.

"Hey!" Steve gasped.

"Ilma's room." Art's lips curved a tight smile. "Yalmar's kept it just the way she left it, for the time when she would come back."

It was all there—the elaborately carved child's poster with the faded ruffles, the line of home-fashioned dolls in the windowseat, the lovingly sanded and oiled floor-ing with the round braid rugs on either side of the bed, the child's cradle, carved with gnomes and trolls, the wooden toy box with the hand-whittled mountain scene on the lid, the neat row of ten-year-old's dresses and pinafores and fur-trimmed cape.

"What's the green stuff in the cans at the corners?"

"Strychnine, to keep the rats out of this one room. The rest of the house didn't matter. Look how Yalmar's filled in the window cracks against bugs and mosquitoes."

Steve's scalp prickled. "He's made fetishes out of everything." He picked up a rag doll with black button eyes, then set it down carefully where neat little Ilma had liked it to be. "How old is Yalmar?"

"About thirty now, I guess. Seven, eight years older than Ilma."

"How he must have loved her!" Steve exclaimed. "I mean, following her around like a watchdog, to and from school. And—all this. What do you suppose happened to him?"

"He's around somewhere. It's easy to see that he's kept a check on this—this—"

"Shrine?" Steve blurted. "But why hasn't he showed himself? Doesn't he realize that you're only trying to save Ilma?"

Art's laugh was dry, flat. "He's heard all about me. He hates my guts."

"Why?"

"Don't you know *why?*"

"I'm trying not to," Steve gulped.

CHAPTER NINE

Tulle fog swathed the bridge and the fields beyond in a gentle winding sheet of pearl gray; their boots made loud clump echoes within the dark tunnel over the river so that Steve was inclined to tiptoe. Art noticed, laughed.

"Trying to keep them from hearing us?"

"I'm just cautious," Steve defended. "You're the one with the gun."

"Do you want it? Shall we hike back for my rifle?"

"No. I'm not so sure bullets will kill them, anyway."

"Think of it this way, Doc. They had every chance to kill both of us. Looks like they're saving us for—something else."

Steve half-ran to keep up with Art's purposeful stride. "Where we going, by the way?"

"The dump, for a start. Isn't that where Mamie Puski keeps seeing Ilma?"

But, trekking across the shrouded meadow in a beeline, Art pulled up suddenly, touching Steve's arm for silence. A ululation, a many voiced chanting, drifted across the befogging field. Accompanying this euphonious mingling of basses and baritones and quavering sopranos, rising, falling, came a windy ghost's cavatina Steve recognized from his GI days as a small hand pump organ. The kind used in country churches half a century ago and longer, still used by missionaries and Army padres where there was no electricity.

"Where?" Steve whispered.

"The schoolhouse. It's their church, library, city hall. The works. And Toini Teckilla's not only schoolteacher; she's verger, librarian and the only one in Hell mouth who's read anything besides primers and the Christian Bible."

He nudged Steve to follow him up the frosty cross-field ditch to the clump of bushes near the sagging schoolyard gate.

They crouched, straining to pick up hints of meaning from the loud portions of the prayerful chorus.

"Must be Sunday," Steve whispered. "I've lost all track of—"

"Shhh!"

A rich bass voice thundered out as the chorale concluded. Steve's skin crawled at the name it invoked.

"UKKO! UKKO! *Autaaka! Pysaytta!*"

The ragged-voice chorus repeated the invocation with tremulous emotion. Steve tugged at Art's ripped jacket.

"Shades of Kaleva! They're praying to Ukko! The ancient *Suomi*, God of Thunder! I thought you said these Finns were all honest Christians, devout down to their prenatal gills!"

Turning on him, Steve's blood leaped at the odd primitive look that had come over Art's handsome face. "They've gone back. Living up here close to nature, with the thunder rolling down out of the mountains, nobody to pump them up with the latest trends in orthodoxy, they've reverted. They've gone back. Why? Why?"

Ukko cannot die. Ukko lives forever. Steve heard the bell deep voice out of Old Izza's sunken lips say it. Then Art was wrong! When the Finns in Rillo's bar spoke of Ukko, when Widow Puski screamed his name, it wasn't a curse. It was what they were all doing in the schoolhouse now—invoking the old legendary chief god of the Kalevala. Praying to him. Swearing their allegiance to him. Begging him to lavish down with fire and thunder his powerful boons upon them. Within the priest's fervent exclamatory credos, within their awesome reiterations, there was a kind of strange eldritch beauty, like the terrible beauty of an approaching storm out of the high hills. Gratitude. Fear. Humility. Aching desire for their god's acceptance of their worship. And the tremulous sincerity of it all made Steve shudder.

"They've lived up here so long, been so much within themselves, that's all they've got." Steve muttered fiercely, as if to persuade himself of something he didn't quite believe. "No movies. No TV. They got bored with the Christian concepts. Somebody saw something up in the hills or—Hey! Maybe it was because Ukko spared them from the Great Fire!"

"Did he?" Again that odd Lemminkainen look. "You don't believe in anything, do you, Doc?"

"Wait a minute! Sure, I do. I guess I'm an agnostic. I believe in something, all right. I just don't pin labels on it. So far as Ukko goes, I'm as willing to accept him as my personal savior as anybody else. All you've got to do is show him to me! Prove him!"

Art curved a wide grin. "Could be. Could be. Now let's get out of here before somebody spots us. This might be a good time to case the dump, with everybody in the village up here at the schoolhouse."

The mist was rising. A wash of salmon and amethyst thrust through the clouds that topped the surrounding peaks. The small, neat houses with their meticulous rock chimneys lay in the deep turquoise shadow of the canyoning mountains like something only dreamed or half-dreamed, a dream of eternity and peace. Content against the brown breast of the planet, Hellmouth seemed to have been here always, here aloof from the strident clamor and pollutions of the flesh and the mind and the breath of the cities.

The river flowed deep and clean. Across, on the cattail islands, a bullfrog belled his pleasure in the new day, a bittern boomed out.

Hellmouth was a bucolic haven from the mechanized horrors of civilization. Or was it?

Shading his eyes in a kind of dumb reverie involving his own extremely personal hungers for beauty and truth, while Art loped on ahead, Steve thought he saw something flutter near the bank, where the ground dipped. Like a hand?

"I think she's there!" he cried, panting abreast.

Art stared. "I don't see anything."

"I don't now, but I did. Let's get there before she pulls her Houdini act."

Art was already running. The white hand of humanity, silhouetted like a flowing patch against the dark mountain across the river, lifted her arm, waved frantically, then was gone.

Steve puffed up onto the soggy debris.

"Where is she?"

"She just vanished! I had a clear view of the bank in both directions this time. Where in the name of—?"

"Ukko?" Steve suggested. "How about down the bank? It's the only place."

Art moved across the mud. "I don't see how, but—"

"Careful!" The rain-soaked mass shifted. Slats creaked, sodden cardboard made sly slipping noises. Art leaped back.

"Could there be an opening of some kind in the bank? What a place to hide it! Who wants to claw around in this stench? Perfect!" Steve had a sudden vision of Rini Halvor, having pried too close and learned things she wasn't supposed to know, being teased close to the bank's edge then—a hand coming out and grabbing her fat ankle, tumbling her into the swollen stream below.

"Where you going?" he asked Art.

"Around the side. There are some roots here to grab hold of."

Steve trotted around, flashed his light from the safety of solid ground, so that Art could explore the tangle of wet roots that tentacled out of the bank.

"Watch it!" he warned when Art's foot slipped in the red clay.

"Yes! I think I found the key! There's a kind of rope ladder just to one side of the big dump. See?"

Steve edged in cautiously; below them the black water gurgled, chuckling as it devoured the mud mat their experimental edgings around the overhang tore loose. He pocketed his flashlight and grabbed for the improvised ladder of knotted rope when Art looked up and wriggled it.

"I've hit something solid down here. Actually, below the soil layer, this is all rock and that dense red clay. Come on!"

Steve scrambled down, scrabbling wildly when his legs missed the rope and his boots slid down the slimy bank; his hands lost their grip and he shot down, dangling, until Art caught his knees and dragged him rope and all into gloomy sanctuary.

CHAPTER TEN

"What is all this?"

"Looks like an old gold-mining shaft. The gold fever hit Montana Territory hard after the big Bannock strike. Everybody had a go at. The Finns in Hellmouth did, too, in their spare time."

"I didn't know they did any mining."

"Why wouldn't they? Everybody hoped to hit a big glory hole like some of the big Alder claims. Lots of the prospecting was done on the quiet, like here, to keep rumors from snowballing a rush. Especially these Finns. They didn't like the idea of a horde of gold-hungry jaspers digging holes in their peaceful valley. They had extra time from their mill duties, though; it was logical they'd just give it a try."

"I get it." Steve's flashlight danced a ring across the damp rock and clay. Away from the tunnel's mouth, it was all rock, and here and there the light glinted dully on striations of greenish ore. "Is that gold?"

"Copper. Not much." Art's flashlight zigzagged from wall to wall and over their heads. "Very low-grade ore, what there is of it. Why?"

"I was just wondering if—could it be possible that—?"

"You mean, is all this a cover for some secret mining gig? That they did make a spectacular strike and all these years they've been working it, using the mill operation for camouflage? That it?"

"Well? There's got to be some explanation and you're the one who wants it simple!"

Art grinned. "There's one way to find out what Hellmouth is all about, and my guess is we're heading toward it right now! Shall we?"

The tunnel lay dark and sinister ahead. The floor was remarkably smooth and free from rubble. Here and there, at more or less regular intervals, especially where there was water seepage, the long tunnel was shored up with greased timbers. Like the houses and boardwalk along Hellmouth's main street, the timbers looked uneasily *new*. The rot-deterioration compound soaked into them was pungent and strong.

Steve followed Art silently, while the hollow echoes of their footsteps followed them both. Art had said it, almost casually, but plunging deeper into the now curving tunnel, Steve felt the hand of cold fear on his throat. The rabbit stew lay uneasily in his stomach. His mouth was paper dry. Once or twice, staring at that big, broad Finnish back, he wanted to wheel and run away from the whole thing. Art was on his way to Ilma. Let him follow through. What was Dr. Stephen McCord doing skulking through this lost wilderness valley, anyway? This was strictly for believers or half-believers in Ukko. Finns, with the old *Kalevala* animistic deities still spinning in their genes.

"How did Ilma find out about this old tunnel?" he wondered half-aloud.

Art said nothing. His face, when Steve's light slashed it, was like a graven idol's; his eyes glowed with a kind of cold blue fire, as if strange preternatural forces drove him toward some goal that even he could not understand.

"Izza might have known about it," Steve went on, determined to get a rise out of that muscular block. "Izza knew Hellmouth from the beginning. Golly, he must be close to a hundred! Odd about that blue light. When I first talked to him, all he did was drool and bab-ble, like the senile creature he must really be by now—living alone, catch as catch can, with his only son a misshapen timber wolf and his gorgeous daughter gone off to the big city. Wife dead, Lord knows how, his farm gone to ruin. Sitting on the edge of—"

Art Mackey's sharp *Suomi* expletive cut him short. It was harsh, primal, wrung out of a deep ancestral well by the sudden knowledge that all existence as he knew it was suspect. The harsh timbre of that single cry was like a memory of a cave dweller confronted suddenly by the inexplicably awesome.

It was as though Art Mackey's fragmentary jolt of ancient memory were shared in that blinding instant of instinctive knowledge *of what had happened before...*

He came to them mantled in a swirling pillar of eye-tearing blue fire. He was huge, so that the ceiling of

the mine tunnel must soundlessly vanish to make room.

What they saw brought tears to their eyes. He was of man shape, although too supremely beautiful to be merely human. He wore shining armor and a helmet with glowing wings. His contours, the sculptured planes of his face, the smile on his lips—were a god's. There could be no doubt about it whatsoever. Call this being by any name you wished. When those eyes turned finally from Art Mackey who was slumped humbly to his knees, they gave Steve a momentary glimpse of sheer cosmic glory. He knew in that instant before he fainted one irrevocable truth and one only:

This is God.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

His long, arduous climb out of unthinkable abysses drained Steve of every cell's electric power. He yearned to tumble back and be dead forever. He had known the One True Glory. *He had seen God.* What more can Man want? What else is there? Everything from now on must be pointless, futile, anticlimactic.

Yet some nagging trace of survival canon persisted. It told him to move, to open his eyes, to exist and, by existing, suffer.

Suffer the little children...

Steve wrenched his eyelids up from eyes that still burned with the Glory. It took a while to focus them on the so-called realities around him—the small window-less room he was in, the table and two straight chairs, the oil lamp flickering on the table, its flame yearning in the direction of some unseen vent. The lamp house was caged in wire, with a handle to it; the yellow flame flung smoke shadows around the wooden walls of the small chamber and spiderwebs from the cage.

His head throbbed. It was as if somebody had crawled in his ear and was using his silver plate for a tom-tom. With Thor's hammer. No, not Thor. Ilmarinen, the red-bearded wonder smith of the *Kalevala* legends, banging on his anvil while he forged the magic *sampo*.

"I suppose Ilmarinen's around here someplace, too," he groaned, managing to lift and crawl shakily up the bare wall.

A low door opened. At first, Steve didn't know the girl because she was out of legend, too. She wore a fancified Lapp dress with a bead embroidered bodice and a dark blue full skirt. Her ceremonial apron was rich with bright reds and greens, primary colors; but her high Russian Queen headdress shimmered with a thousand blue diamonds. The headdress was the one false note in an otherwise typical costume such as Steve had seen at Lapp weddings and in *National Geographic* a hundred times. It was out of this world. Its dazzle of true diamonds was a fantasy designed in an imaginative young girl's rarest dreams.

"Ilma! It is you!" Gone was the shapeless sweater, the forlorn lost-kitten look. She was radiance personified.

"Yes, Doctor Steve. It is I." His intimates called him "Doc," as did Art Mackey, but Ilma, awed by his col-lege degrees and professional standing, had compromised with "Doctor Steve."

Steve thrilled to hear it. And the light shining in her eyes sent electric sparks all the way down him to his toes. He started drunkenly toward her.

"Doc, we're all together again! Fine!"

"Art!"

As Ilma stepped through the doorway, bobbing her headdress to do so, Art shouldered through. He had a firm grip on Ilma's hand, smashing Steve's compulsion to take her in his arms, giving the lie to the radiance in her eyes.

Art Mackey was altered, too. His long, muscular legs were pulled into tight-fitting breeches of what looked like chewed fawn hide. The dark, gleaming boots over them were trimmed with white fur, as was the high-collared jacket over his embroidered white blouse. The jacket was more cape than coat, the sheer blouse was full sleeved and there were no buttons, so that Art's chest was bare and gleamed with crisp white gold hair. His ragged wheat-colored beard had been trimmed, eyebrows too, and his lion's mane of blond hair was combed back and over his ears.

He swaggered and seemed comfortably at home in these clothes. Steve grudged that he looked well in them, as Ilma's demure but provocative garments suited her. They *belonged*. It was as though all of their lives before this had been prelude. This was the real thing. This was what they'd been born for.

It shone in their eyes, like diamonds rivaling those on Ilma's extravagant headdress. In their smiles.

Steve gulped and leaned harder against the wall for support.

"Are you all right, Doc?" Art asked; "Can I get you anything?"

"I'll make it. What you can get me is out of here."

Art grinned his Lemminkainen grin. "When you know what we know, you won't want to leave."

"Want to bet?" Steve grimaced. "At least tell me what this is all about."

"Better sit down. Ilma, will you please get Steve a mug of *kallia* from the other room? Sit down at the table."

Ilma nodded and moved out, her headdress shimmering on the air even after she'd gone. Steve fell in a chair and watched Art stride the room in those ancient new boots, clothed, as he had been in his University of California gridiron uniform, showing confidence, a kind of acknowledgment of superiority that had nothing to do with arrogance. Some men, Steve had noticed with sneaking envy, had this. Not many, though, and those without the physiomagnetic aura that drew women to them like flies, could take comfort in the fact that, on an average, their muscles fell into a potbelly in ten or twenty years. Not Art, somehow. And, as with magnificent Ilma, there was more to it. Superhumanly more.

Art waited until Ilma returned with a foaming mug. Steve was reminded of Rillo's bar and what happened after he had downed the mug of *kallia* in Rillo's. It must not again. He must keep his wits about him. He sipped cautiously.

"Well?"

"I'm trying to think how to say this to a man like you, a scientist trained to skepticism."

"You mean I won't believe what you tell me? It's too incredible? All those cliches. Well, you can't say I haven't been primed. I've had all the come-on, the build-up. I think you can safely assume that I'm ripe for the big revelation. Wouldn't you say that— *Lemminkainen*?"

Art's high cheekbones bloomed with ripe anger. Then he laughed. "Yes. I'd say that—*toistalainen*!"

"Somehow," Steve said, "in spite of all the *Suomi* artifacts, I don't think the *Kalevala* has a damn thing to do with all this. It's just window dressing."

Art frowned. "Not quite. Not exactly. It's true that the old-timers here in Hellmouth believe that—that what has come to them is all part of the old legends. They don't comprehend the overtones—the overlaying, you might call it. Toini Teckilla might, just a little.

She's read a few books. Also, she isn't the kind to accept anything on faith alone. It was only after Ukko demonstrated himself to *be* Ukko that she believed and became his staunchest disciple."

His tool, you mean. Steve's mind was groping for rational explanations, meanings that would not outrage all he had been taught. It was all very well to stand in the middle of a grand forest, with the light sifting down through lacy branches, and to *feel* God. But to see a being in a winged helmet, beautiful as all heaven though he be, and to be informed by some extraphysical lightning from his eyes that he was God Almighty— well, now that Ukko wasn't here, Steve's science outlook snapped to the fore. He rebelled. He grabbed for mundane explanations.

"How about you, Art? You didn't go to the University of California only to play football. You made straight 'B' as I remember and it wasn't all your baby-blue eyes. We've had some mighty serious talks, you and me. Now, all of a sudden you come up with Ukko!"

Art's demigod scowl moved closer. He sat on the table's edge and stared down into Steve's eyes, deep down. Suddenly Steve knew what the diamonds in their eyes meant. What he saw was a reflection of what the creature in the cave had turned on him, the look that had made him faint dead away. The look of cosmic power, of revelation. Things a human can't take yet. He hasn't made it up there yet.

Steve's hand shook while he waited for Art to give him a blast of revealed glory. Instead, Art's voice was soft, persuasive, but gentle. Now Steve was the footballer, Art was the egghead.

"You've made an important study of early man, Doc. The things he thought about and imagined just after he crawled out of his caves. Or before. During those long, dark eras when the shamans were the scientists and bards, the teachers. Finland, for instance. Well, take a good grip on that *kallia* mug and listen!"

"I'm listening."

"Well, these latter-day farmers and fishermen and hunters looked up at the sky and wondered. Their shamans had made gods out of the sun and the moon and the storm. The sea, too. Powerful things. Natural forces that awed them because they could harm them or grant them boons, one way or the other. If the rain came, the crops were good. If Ukko, God of the Storm, looked unkindly on them, their houses got knocked down or burned by the fury of his lightning darts.

"Suppose, in the middle of this—up there where the winter night is six months long and the summer, always light, makes you funny in the head—a vastly powerful being came down from the stars and stayed among them for a while, granted them boons that made their shamans powerful wizards, things that wouldn't mean so much now but in those primitive days were magic of the highest caliber. What would they call such a radiant being from out of the stars?"

"Ukko, I guess." Steve swallowed the cotton-dry nothing the ale couldn't alleviate. "Especially if he came

down in what looked like them to be a storm. If there was something about him—a glowing glory intermingled with great power and force—that reminded them of thunder and lightning."

Art nodded slowly. "Now you're getting it, Doc. Well, Ukko *did* come down to Earth once before, a long, long time ago. The old bards passed on this historical fact to younger bards, and so on ad infinitum. Of course, it was all distorted by so many retellings, bragged out of shape, intermixed with all their other legends. And there was nothing to prove Ukko had come. The boons he granted were mind things. Song magic. Why? Because Ukko is beyond the physical. Still, all-knowing as he was, Ukko realized that physical manifestations were necessary. He had to communicate with them through things they could understand. He wove his gifts into their shamanistic culture as god given powers, careful not to overload their primitive minds. Too much candy isn't good for children. He came, examined, left."

"Why did he leave?"

"There wasn't much to stay for, for Ukko. The world was still too primitive. But, leaving, he implanted the irrevocable knowledge *within their genes* that one day—when Earth was ready for him—Ukko would come again!"

Staring up into the blazing blue light in Art's eyes, Steve understood it all in one world-toppling crash of revelation. Ilma and Art were Finns. What Ukko had implanted in the genes of their ancestors was still there—like their robin's egg blue eyes and their blond hair. They believe in Ukko! They had to! It was inescapable! Instinctively their psyches had blundered through life hoping, yearning, bleeding in their souls that it would be them! *Them!* That this would be the era of fulfillment, that the superbeing from beyond the stars who called himself Ukko would return now, revealed in all his mind tottering glory, to grant them far greater boons than he had that other time. The world was ready for him now!

"Sounds wonderful," Steve muttered.

"It is, Doctor Steve!" Ilma choked. "You have no idea how sublimely wonderful he is! Ukko is everything! His power has no end—literally!"

Steve's trained mind went unerringly to the big flaw.

"So Ukko has limitless power? Then why all this hanky-panky up here in this forsaken wilderness? Why a handful of horny handed peasants instead of brass bands and ticker tape down Fifth Avenue?"

"You know why!" Art flipped back his cape jacket impatiently. "We're ahead of the *Kalevala* a couple thousand years. We've learned a hell of a lot. But we aren't quite ready to graduate."

"Graduate?"

"To the stars. To move in great sweeps across the universe. Not just from planet to planet, or even from star to star. From galaxy to galaxy! From dimension to dimension!"

Steve jumped. "Ukko does that?"

"Yes. And a lot more we humans can't begin to understand. He makes everything you scientists have ever thought of doing look a little silly!"

"O Shining Great Spirit!"

"Exactly. Think of the most wildly wonderful hope man has ever dreamed of doing—*Ukko can bring it about!*"

Steve thought. Of poverty. War. Cancer. Mars. Death. Alpha Centauri. Taxes. Air pollution. Traffic problems. All of the bumbling yet seemingly wonderful advances of scientific and social achievement that man had so arduously striven for and gained. And here was a superbeing who could wipe away all man's troubles in one fell swoop.

If he could do all this, then Ukko was indeed—

Steve's mind boggled at the word. As a concept, he must reject it. It couldn't happen *this* way! Could it?

"I still don't get it," he said, swigging *kallia* recklessly. "Why 'way up here? Why not Finland, for instance, since that was where he appeared before?"

"Ukko selected Hellmouth because of its isolation, and because of its inhabitants' peculiarly insular attitude toward the outside world. Of course, he came here some time ago."

"When?"

"Some time before the Great Fire of 1906."

"Then he did save Hellmouth!"

"Not exactly."

"What do you mean—not exactly? It's here, isn't it!"

"No-o. Not exactly."

"Will you please stop saying 'not exactly' and explain?"

Art's eyes gleamed with such brilliance that Steve yanked his look away. Such evangelical intensity burned him like an acid. Steve thought if he kept on looking into those lambent diamonds, or Ilma's, he

would find himself compelled to submit to Ukko's godhead by some process light-years removed from hypnosis.

"Very well. Lesson Number Two. Ukko had to show himself to members of the Finnish race since it was in their genes that he had implanted his true godhead. Searching, he found this lonely little valley and the old Finns at a crisis. Swede Swenson had left. The mill had stopped running. The delivery wagons had stopped coming. They had no money put by to take them anywhere else. None of them, except Toini Teckilla, the school teacher, spoke English. What were they to do?" Art reached over and shook Steve's shoulder. "Doc, I can't help but believe with the villagers that Ukko chose Hellmouth out of compassion for their desperate plight."

"And because, as you said before, they were *peculiarly* suited to his purpose, psychologically and geographically!"

"Okay, okay. Then, on top of everything else, came the Great Fire. Ukko saw it coming. He had already chosen Hellmouth as the site for his return and fulfillment. Had he not been God, the destruction of Hellmouth would have spoiled this phase of his plan. He'd have had to find some other similar place. Being God, he found a solution."

Steve's scalp tingled. "Ukko could control the elements. Maybe Ukko *started* the fire!"

"He did not!" Ilma blazed. "It's true that he has powers over natural elements, but once a fire like this gets started, it ceases to be *natural*. He couldn't suddenly change such a great holocaust without revealing Himself."

"Why not, if he is God."

"Even God—" Ilma bit her lip. "Check your Bible."

"All right. So what did He do?"

"He overlapped time."

Steve jumped, choking on the thickness in his throat. All of the physical and mental stimuli he had had thrust upon him, warped, twisted just slightly askew, had its genesis in those three words. He hated what was coming, but what other explanation fitted the facts?

"What do you mean—he overlapped time?"

"He jumped time back a decade. That's why everything in Hellmouth gives the appearance of turn of the century. That's why the new King Soap wrapper and the new-old Hills Bros. coffee can. Why the houses and sidewalks don't seem to be sixty years old and falling down, but relatively new."

"And the people?"

"Selective. Only the old tried-and-true ones. The young ones who left the valley could not be—"

"Rerun?"

"Rerun. That's kind of crass and commercial, but that's what happened. He could only do it with those who stayed. My father and mother left—remember? Also Swenson, and the young malcontents. So it was left to the hard core of fiercely independent souls who refused to give up their homes and scratched out gardens to aid Ukko in the Second Coming!"

Steve set down his empty mug with a deliberate *clunk* that shook the table. "Then it became a series of taped reruns, not just one. Selective. Plucked out of time, as an isolated camera picks out Finn Mackey running a sixty yard TD. This obscure wilderness town transfers its allegiance from their johnny-come-lately Hebrew god to the old so-called pagan god, Ukko."

"Why not? He gives them something besides pie in the sky!" Ilma put in jubilantly.

"Just exactly what does He give them?"

"The privilege of working here, living their lives indefinitely as they want to live them, toward the day when Ukko will manifest Himself to the whole world!"

Steve stood up with a rough growl. "I thought that was coming. The take-over."

"Take-over?" Art took hold of Steve's hand, gripping it earnestly. "You don't understand. The villagers have been working here in the mill all these years to build a machine out of Earth materials, Earth metals, which will enable Ukko to do more than merely project his image and his mind here—but to actually come to Earth physically! To live among us for such a time as he may choose, granting us fantastic gifts that will push mankind's progress ahead thousands of years!"

Steve avoided Art's ecstatic eyes. "Why? Why will Ukko do these things?"

"Why! Because Ukko is *God!* That's why!"

"Because—hell! Never mind. Let's go back a little. Do the villagers know they're being rerun over and over to build Ukko this machine that will bring him here?"

"They don't know they are reruns. They do know about the machine. That's why they're willing to work ten, twelve, fourteen hours.

"And, God or no God, Ukko has to have the thing that will transmit Him to Earth fashioned out of matter that exists here on Earth in fact. Right now He is merely projecting His mind across the galaxies, taking any shape that suits Him. For instance, taking the shape of an ancient *Suomi* god who—"

"—who actually came here once before!" Art burst in. "I told you that. You don't seem to get it, Doc. Ukko is what we have all consciously or unconsciously prayed for all these centuries. What the flying saucer buffs have really been grabbing at straws for—something magnificent beyond dreaming that will come down and solve all our problems!"

"There's more to it than that," Steve muttered stubbornly. "I can't believe that—"

"Then I've said all I can, Doc. There's only one thing left to do."

"What's that? Eliminate the negative—namely me?"

"Of course not! It takes enormous power of concentration for Ukko to show himself to us. Of course, all that will be changed soon. The machine is almost ready for the Return. That's why He had me brief you first." His arm went around Steve's shoulder; his Lemminkainen smile glowed with happy promise. "Now you will see Ukko again. Ukko Himself will reassure you, remove all your doubts. Then you will be like us. Then you will believe."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The way to God-Ukko was long. A gently spiraling ramp took them up to the titanic machine that Ukko's mind was teaching the alert villagers to build. The Finns were uneducated but they were far from stupid. Ukko's projected mind had found them able, willing and industrious. That they were often inarticulate and wore blinders to all, but their narrow lifeline of endeavor was to his advantage. Their power of utter concentration on the tasks he set their pliant minds and hands to was second only to the fierceness of their genetic drive toward Ukko. Ukko was all. Ukko was the totality of their existence. They laughed over their *kallia* betimes; they sang; they tilled their fields and garden patches; they herded their sheep and milked their cows; but always there was *Ukko*. Ukko. To believe in, to pray to, to await...

Steve mulled this over as he followed Ilma and Art to the terminal chamber where Ukko made His infrequent self-projections.

The domed room was not large, but its emptiness and a kind of supernal luminescence within the walls suggested the immensity of deep space. A gentle rise of the floor to a conical sheered-off central pedestal, with the floor of the room itself for a base, suggested that this superbeing from beyond the farthest stars well knew the value of dramatic flair. Steve could imagine the villagers, on very, very special occasions, being permitted access to this sanctum. He could see them kneeling around the periphery of the sacred cone. All those blue-eyed faces, staring, slack-jawed. Adoring. Yearning toward the god who had re-created them, although they didn't know it.

It was beautiful by its artful simplicity. The machines that were to bring Ukko to Earth physically were elsewhere. The workers were not permitted here except on those rare occasions when Ukko appeared to reassure them and bless their labors.

Steve looked at Ilma and Art. They were silent within this cosmic shrine. When Steve started to say something, Art frowned at him to be still, to fall on his knees as they were doing. After all, while they had been Outside and had endured the sophisticated nonsense of the computerized world because there had been no other recourse for them, were they not but poor dumb creatures fumbling in the dark compared to Him? Was not Dr. Stephen H. McCord by comparison a mere savage, as well?

Steve refused to kneel. It was his small act of defiance. The Hellmouth Finns—and that included Ilma and Art—were genetically compelled to accept Ukko as God. Not him!

It became hard to do.

Ukko was beautiful, wondrous, deific. Beyond the power of any human mind to endure without worshiping.

He appeared first as a submicroscopic spot of light, a glow from within space that gradually turned itself inside out. And grew and pillared itself, shimmering with all the glory of all the blue-white diamonds in the world cascading before his eyes. And this was only an approximation. For what Ukko was, even in three-dimensional projection from beyond this universe, was beyond the power of any human mind to delineate or describe.

Ukko was Ukko.

Ukko was a splendor that drew out of Steve's very pores all of the psychical longings and emotions toward beauty and positive thought of which he was capable.

Gaping up at this tower of magnificence, with a man's face and a winged helmet to identify Ukko with

He-Who-Had-Come-Before, Steve found every fiber of his body shaking, trembling; it was as if his atomic molecules were about to shatter. It was unendurable. It took all the strength of will he could find in himself to think *away* from Ukko so that he could make his right arm upfling and hide his eyes and his soul from such rapturous glory.

Gasping, reeling back, Steve realized something terrifying. Such was this superbeing's titanic power that, the greater a man's mind was, the more intense was his capacity to worship Ukko! The ancient Finns were undeveloped mentally. They adored as a dog adores his master who tosses him a bone. Even the Hellmouth Finns were ingenuous. Even Art. Even Ilma.

And Ukko wanted more! That was why He had left the Earth that long time ago. This planet wasn't ready to worship Ukko to the fullest possible extent.

Ukko wanted more.

"Yes," Ukko's voice thundered in Steve's mind. "There is no great triumph in being adored by savages. It is too easy. I must be worshiped by the greatest minds on your planet. *You are the first, Doctor Stephen McCord!*"

Steve shuddered against the back wall.

"Now I understand. Now I know what you want. You want us to love You, to adore You as our One True God. Everybody on the planet, crawling to You, groveling before You, slobbering in ecstasy because You condescend to show Yourself to us. For this You will give us—what?"

Ukko's mind thundered displeasure at Steve's crude manner of expressing an obvious truth, yet behind the ripple of master-to-canine displeasure was cool confidence in His ability to manipulate this low-level creature, as He had the others.

"What do you want, Doctor McCord?"

Steve gasped. "You mean You'll give me anything I want if I admit You are God? Anything?"

"Anything."

"For instance?"

"Perfect health. Time to complete all the research that pleasures your keen human mind. After you have finished with this world, an infinite number of others to 'explore. Racial types you cannot even dream of, but fascinating enough to keep you busy for a millennium or two."

"Time!" Steve was dizzy at the thought. To do all the tasks a man dreams of doing and must forego for lack of time! No need to be selective, to choose one minor branch of learning. There would be time for them all! "You mean I would live forever!"

"Forever by your human calculation. Time is relative. To Ukko, it has seemed only a brief span since He sent His mind to your planet before. To you, it has been some thousands of your years. Yes. You would have an infinitude of time, as Ukko has, or almost."

"But eventually—"

"All energy passes into other forms, eventually. Even the gods die out and old ones take their places. But they are the same gods. Ukko is—whatever god you choose to call Him. No doubt He will become known by a great many different symbols by the plethora of groups and sects on this planet. Here in this small valley he is Ukko. Let us stick to that for the time being."

"You mean that when You take over, Ukko will be Vishnu or Wotan or Jupiter or even Jesu—"

"Let us leave off such discussion for the present. I have shown Myself to you, Doctor Stephen Howard McCord, because it is you who shall bear the message of My second coming to the world."

Steve swallowed, managing a weak grin. "You mean I'm to be Ukko's High Priest? I'm to go back to San Francisco and all the other major cities to preach the gospel of Ukko, preparing the Way? Do I get to wear a pretty tight-pants getup like Art? How about a gorgeous girl like Ilma to help me in my Holy Crusade?" It all came out in a wild, semihysterical burst.

Ukko's glory darkened. "If this elementary display of satire helps you retain your equilibrium in the presence of what your petty human mind cannot cope with, by all means indulge yourself. Well?"

Steve turned his eyes to the glory that was Ukko, venturing meekly, "Of course, I realize why Ilma and Art are wearing those clothes. They are symbols of what Ukko implanted in the genes of their ancestors once upon a time. It helps them focus their worship. Also it demonstrates just a taste of what You can do."

"The garments were made by the villagers, except for the headdress. That was my own touch."

"And, of course, it isn't real."

"Real, yes. But not on Earth."

"Projected here, like—uh—Ukko."

The seemingly solid vision nodded. "I dipped it out of Ilma's rarest fantasies. It represents just a hint of the paradisiacal glories Ukko brings to Earth."

While Ukko was having his instructive dialogue with Steve, Art and Ilma had remained genuflecting statues; now Art made a sign that he wished to speak. Ukko nodded benevolently.

"Speak, my son."

"*Kiitos, taivan jumala.*" He turned and smiled at Steve. "I don't think you quite realize what a wonderful thing has happened to you. What a rare privilege you're about to receive."

"I hope I'm not about to become a virgin mother," Steve said hollowly.

Art scowled blood. "You are the third step. First, the villagers of Hellmouth. Then, Ilma and me. Now—you."

Steve whistled. "Lord! I do get it now! You were brought here to Hellmouth purposely. Ilma was the bait. And the tape you made was deliberately permitted Outside so that it would bring me here—to become Ukko's chief stooge!"

"The machine that will bring Ukko here is almost ready. You, Doctor Stephen H. McCord, will be privi-leged to bring Ukko's initial pronouncements to the scientific world. Why scientists? Because they are, after all, the brains of the planet. They are the only ones capable of understanding the enormity of Ukko. Religious leaders will quickly take it up; politicians, businessmen, all the greedy ones will fall in line to snatch up the monetary benefits Ukko's power will offer them." Art's lip curled. "After all, this planet is ruled by greed."

"Not all," Steve said devoutly. "Not *quite* all."

Ukko's mind-thrumming voice took charge again.

"Doctor McCord is right. Not quite all. One must examine the motivations behind this international and individual avarice. When the reasons for it—the fear, the poverty, the driving need for personal appreciation—have been abrogated, the greed will vanish. The planet shall become the shining example of perfection that I shall will it to be."

Steve wrenched a fierce groan. "*You* will it! *YOU!* Won't we have anything at all to say about it? Won't we be permitted to do anything for ourselves? We humans like to think we are clawing our way up to something resembling perfection by our own devices, our own wits. Won't we have anything to say about it?"

"You seem to be doing quite a lot of talking, Doctor McCord. No doubt others will talk their heads off in all directions. It will be permitted. This kind of catharsis is favorable to Ukko."

"Talk!" Ilma cried. "That's all they can do out there! Talk and build machines that can do things better than they can, demigod machines to which they will eventually become slaves!"

"If they aren't already," Art said. "Think, Doc! *Think!* The world's in such a mess that it is on the razor's edge of suicide right now. Even if it isn't, how long must it go on being the ugly spectacle of poverty and bigotry and waste that it is now? Isn't it time for God to come down here and clean house? Ask yourself, Doc! We need Ukko—desperately!"

Steve closed his eyes, groaned. Every word Art said fell like a hammer blow against his silver plate. Every word was true and what Art hadn't said about the wretched job man was doing running his world would fill all the craters on the moon.

His riposte was lame, whispered. "But Ukko is *not* God."

"Isn't He?" Art asked. "Define God."

"God is the creator of all things. Ukko is not."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know," Steve admitted. "Not for sure. But there's, something—something—"

"All right. Forget the creation part. You're a scientist. You know that suns are formed by exploding nebulae. All that. Better than I do. Matter. Energy. You know the basic rules about these things. How about a 100 percent realistic approach to God? What can God do for Man or his counterparts in other star systems?"

Steve swallowed the desert in his throat. "Supposedly God gives them everlasting life. Makes everything peachy keen. Takes Man back to Eden. No sickness. No poverty. No mental problems. All he needs to keep him busy and happy."

"Ukko will do all that for us. He will make the deserts bloom, shave down the hills to order, make the blind see and the lame walk. All the revelations and then some!"

Steve groaned. Art's logic was wearing him down and what with the purely residual power of Ukko's cosmic brilliance... How could any mere human resist such a combination? Such a chance to do so much good for his whole hungering world?

"I know what you're trying to do," he whimpered. "You want to con me into going out there—start the ball rolling." A shiver of understanding scalded him. "Hey! I get it now! In some crazy way, Ukko needs

me! *Me!* Doctor Steve McCord, seeker after primitive truths! There's some kind of deadline to this. That's why you're so anxious to persuade me to become your advance guard! The machine is about to pop loose with a god—and if I don't hightail out of Hellmouth right away and start spreading the gospel—"

Ukko grew taller, more beautiful.

"There is no need to pursue such an ignoble thought any further. Yes, Doctor McCord. Ukko does need you. Oh, He can get along without you personally. There are plenty of others. Yet you have been selected and carefully pretrained to understand the true magnificence of Ukko, to be his primary viceroy—if you will permit—in the unindoctrinated world outside of this valley."

"That's it!" Steve blazed. "*Unindoctrinated!* These Finns have you in their blood. I don't! Neither does the rest of the world! You need me for a kind of bridge to reach the skeptics. Without me, you can't even get started. Which means that your incredible power is limited. There *is* a time factor! It's got to be now—soon— or never! That's the way it is, Ukko!" He laughed a wild, shrieking laugh, half prideful, half pitying. That he should be the final catalyst in producing a god!

Art was up on his feet now, coming toward him. His friend, the comrade who had saved his life. A demigod, prototype of all that was clean, masculinely virile, handsome, wholesome. And behind him, Ilma, her diamond-eyes both beseeching and demanding.

"Doc," Art said gently. "Don't. Don't do this. Think of what it means to the world. There won't be another chance. Not ever."

Steve felt tears blur the sight of Art's accusing face. He curled his hands into fists and wept.

"No! No, Art! There's something wrong with all this! I can't tell you what it is. I just *know* there is! I want to believe in Ukko—that He is everything you believe He is. But I can't. I won't do it!" He turned to the shin-ing glory. "I won't do it!" he repeated.

Ukko's thunder quaked the round room. Steve raised his hands to shield his eyes from the blinding storm of bioluminescence that Ukko projected out of his god's anger. He shuddered back into the wall as if to push his way into it, sobbing, sweating, waiting for the power creature to expunge him as a man might eliminate an annoying flea.

"No," Ukko's thunder voice said, when the light maelstrom had abated.

"You're not going to kill me?"

"Of course not. Ukko does not destroy. There are other ways. I preferred not to do it this way, but..."

Ukko's blue light made a pencil shaft and aimed it at Steve's head. Steve knew. He was about to be taken over. His mind would become Ukko's tool. Whatever there was inside his head that needed changing, Ukko would change it, so that he would do anything Ukko wanted him to do. Ukko preferred his worshipers whole-minded, so that their adoration would not merely be a reflection of His own narcissism, but rather a voluntary act of worship by a superior brain. However, since Steve wouldn't play ball...

Steve yelled when the concentration of Ukko's power light touched his forehead. Involuntarily he crouched, jumping from one side to another like a rat in an experimenter's cage.

"Art!" he yelled. "Help!"

"I can't, Doc. I tried to make you see. You wouldn't understand. You had to have it like this. You asked for it."

The light pod burned into his skull.

Steve was frozen by it. Then, while Ukko groped to pierce the cranium, an odd thing happened. Something blocked the way; Steve gave a harsh laugh when he realized what.

The silver plate! Ukko hadn't expected that; had prepared his final checkmate for what a normal human brain would contain and now he must make a lightning-quick revision.

Steve had to use this split second well. When the freezing paralysis that pinned him to the wall was removed, he leaped for the door. Art's six foot two form moved in a crouch to block him. Steve's mind leaped to absurd thoughts about U.C.-Stanford gridiron games and just how he could possibly avoid Art's trained tackle.

There was no way.

Yes, there was. One. The coward's way.

He grabbed Ilma and flung her at Art and, when Art's arms went around her to keep her from hitting her chin on the floor, Steve darted past them.

He raced down the spiraling ramp as if all the fiends in hell were following him. He didn't dare look back. He ran until it became a way of life.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

First he tried blindly shambling down the old mine shaft to the dump, scared to show a light lest those following him (Ukko would have sent Art after him; they couldn't afford to let him escape and tell the world what he'd found), but after he stumbled flat on his face a couple of times, he yanked out the flashlight Art had given him, to get him out of this panic producing blackness faster.

Tumbling forward, his harried brain popped up with a few bits of logical thought. Why weren't they following him?

They didn't have to. At least they needn't hustle their bustles about it. Steve was on foot. Steve was a tenderfoot. They had a village full of residual zombies to stop him long, long before he could reach the sentinel pine and the split boulder. Steve was unarmed. There was Art's rifle up there in the cave. Yes. The cave. Art's citadel B.U. Before Ukko. Before Ukko, with Ilma's help, had Shown Him The Light.

He would rest, scrounge something to eat, then make ready for his Outside trek. If he found one of Yalmar's old hunting trails out of the valley, he might just take that. No. Better not get himself lost farther up. He wasn't equipped physically for any extended exposure to the elements, what with winter chilling in by the hour. No, armed with Art's rifle, rested, he would circle the village, keeping to the fire-blasted area outside the time enchantment of the rerun. Ukko, he believed, could not make any appearance beyond the time-trapped ellipse, and if he sent Art—well, Steve would have the rifle.

Then what?

"They'll have to believe me!" he gritted. "Somehow or other, whatever lies I have to tell them, because they'd lock me up in a booby hatch if I told 'em the truth! I'll get 'em to drop enough bombs on that place to send Ukko back to..."

But what about Art? What about Ilma? The villagers were by all reasonable time values dead already—but Art and Ilma?

Steve groaned, tottering into the root-fringed light of late afternoon. He was grabbing for the knotted hemp rope to pull himself up onto the dump when the sound of voices pulled him sharply back into the shadows.

The voices of the two men were jocular, as if they were indulging in man-type gossip while attending to the weekend task of wheelbarrowing a week's household trash to the dump before a pint or two at Rillo's. Steve strained for the *Suomi* words, caught only one or two, yet enough to convince him that these villagers (and probably all the rest) were blissfully ignorant of today's doing at the mill—or rather beyond it, inside that white-faced cliff. No. The villagers were as children before the whys and wherefores of Ukko. They worked at the tasks they were taught; they prayed to Ukko as God Almighty at the little schoolhouse. They wouldn't dream of questioning His ways.

More important, Ukko had no contact with them outside of the mill. It wasn't necessary. There was no need for a warning system or to post guards at the val-ley's entrance for the random hunters or prospectors who might chance by saw Hellmouth as it was *now*—not as it was in 1900. Steve was admitted only because he, like Art and Ilma, was to be used.

Yes, used for a particularly nauseating form of takeover. Ukko wanted intelligent minds who would worship Him, declare Him God. For this, He would grant incredible boons, sure. But always the iron god fist would be up there under that velvet glove.

A corny old commercial flipped into Steve's mind.

Mother, we'd rather do it ourselves! Father-Mother Ukko might know the best recipe for reaching the stars or for curing cancer. Yet if these things came as a package deal with soul slavery to a star being who fancied Himself as our God—it just wouldn't do. Man was a weirdly independent organism, basically; he had to have complete freedom of mind and movement—even to kill himself if he must, in his blunderings toward human progress. *Ukko, we'd rather do it ourselves!*

After a while the voices and dumping noises overhead stopped; the wheelbarrows trundled off. Steve waited a few minutes, then hoisted himself up the rope onto the malodorous masses of mud. The villagers had set a fire going, since the weather was damp, and that meant they'd be back presently to check on it. Right now great billows of smoke clouded the bank, forming an excellent screen for Steve sneaking behind Rillo's and into the chokecherry-lined field ditch.

Overhead, nighthawks wheeled. The lamps in the village houses began to bloom. By the time Steve reached the schoolyard, he was confident that the hazy twilight hid him from prying eyes. He didn't see the bony figure in the severe black dress moving briskly down the dirt path from the schoolhouse steps until it was only a few yards from the sagging gate. She saw him, though. She stopped, cocking her iron-gray,

severely bunned head to one side and lifting a thin, blue-veined hand to adjust her silver-rimmed bifocals.

"Yalmar?"

The bushes at the gate screened Steve somewhat. He dived for the gully.

"Yalmar, is that you?"

Steve played doggo, trying not to breathe.

"Listen, Yalmar." Toini Teckilla tapped a high button shoe and gave her head a brisk toss. "We've been waiting for you to come back to us. Izza and Ilma are with Ukko, finally, don't you understand? And now we need you, Yalmar! Stop playing cat and mouse, peeking about this way, or you'll never see your father or your sister again! Yalmar, join us! You *must*, eventually! Can't you understand that?"

Steve kept his crouch until, with a severe cluck of her tongue and an uncomplimentary expletive about Yalmar's mental condition, she swished her dark shawl tighter over her bones and clipped away across the field. She looked, Steve thought, not unlike an earthbound crow.

The schoolteacher was regarded with a good deal of awe by the village. Caps were lifted, heads bowed, when she passed along the street. Miss Teckilla spoke English. Miss Teckilla had read *books* in English! It was up to Miss Teckilla to gather Yalmar into the fold, as she had Ilma and Izza. Of what use he might be Steve was not prepared to say. Perhaps to keep Ilma happy. Izza's mind was a bag of mush into which Ukko had inserted his admonition to Steve in the parlor of the old farmhouse. How? Perhaps he had engraved it on the doddering mind, pretaped it toward any random time it might be needed. Not only for Steve, but for Yalmar, too.

But Yalmar had resisted Ukko.

Lifting out of his cramped position, making for the old bridge, Steve had a sudden thought.

Find Yalmar.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

His boots thudded on the bridge, on the rotting planks laid at right angles across those big logs for iron-rimmed wagon wheels, and now Steve felt able to breathe again. He was home safe. Ukko's power had not yet reached here. Why not? Tramping in, then out of the deep, shadowy cover, Steve's silver-plated mind grabbed hold of the answer in a sudden flash.

Ukko had power within the circle because the villagers of Hellmouth believed in Him. *Belief was the key!* In some manner beyond human comprehension, Ukko was able to accomplish the things He had done only because the Finns believed Him God. His being fed on their worship, their love, their implicit belief in Him. Now He had Ilma and Art, too. That gave Him more power. Whereas Steve, somehow the key to the science world itself, took away power because he resisted. That Steve fought Him was in itself a weapon!

All of this was nothing so new, really. The "magic of belief" was an old story among humans. Total belief, especially when it involved many minds in concert, accomplished things to startle the stars. It was this very kind of adoration which had given Adolf Hitler and other tyrants such power. Total emotion, total love—worship, abject and without compromise—multiplied the power of any god-dictator-tyrant-demagogue by the electric energy in all his worshipers. The magnetic power surging up out of their souls struck some cosmic source of energy and tapped it for his perverted uses.

Ukko fed on such energy. He projected His mind around the universe, enslaving this world and that, by becoming their god. He was avid for worship. He craved it, died without it. That, Steve realized now, was what made Ukko so dangerous to the world. He would suck the souls of men dry, leaving them blubbering vegetables, then move on.

Dizzied by such thoughts, Steve marched up to the rear door of the tar-papered farmhouse of the Halvors and started to go in. He must find Yalmar; this was a start. The sloping porch creaked dismally under his tread. About to move in, a furtive, breathy sound from behind spun him around.

He scanned the half-dark farmyard, tumbling shed, to privy, to weed-tufted pump base, to barn. Straining, he thought he saw the hay door above the sagging ani-mal ramp and the great double doors move.

"Yalmar!" he yelled out. "Are you there?"

The hayloft door did creak open wider for sure this time. Then another sound, a dry, deadly snap. Steve jumped when something whistled by his head and spit a hole in the doorjamb. Without waiting, Steve dropped, rolled into the dry brambles below the porch. He crouched down, waiting.

There was one more manifesto of Yalmar's suspicious illwill toward any and all. It blatted above his head, snapping dry twigs, when Steve made the once neat vines shake.

Steve gulped wet dirt and waited. Yalmar's life had been devoted to hunting in these hills—which meant he was a dead-shot. Which suggested something else.

He could have killed me. Easily. He wasn't sure.

With a minimum of movement, Steve bawled across the barnyard, "Yalmar, I'm not one of *them!* I want to be your friend! I want to help you save Ilma! I'm not from Ukko—honest!"

Silence.

Below the headland, the river gurgled its strange secrets. The dry cottonwoods rattled in a low night wind, dropping the last of their shriveled leaves. A bird off on the hillside sang a brief night song and fled.

"Yalmar!" Steve tried again. "I'm from Outside. From San Francisco. I came to find out what happened to Art Mackey. Ukko's got him, Yalmar. He's got your sister, too! I want to help you save her! Can't we talk about it?"

Silence. Steve's crouching position was prickling his arms and legs with a million pins. Minutes crawled by. Finally the prickling and the mouldy stench became too much. Steve stood up.

Seemingly that was what the laconic Finn wanted.

"Show yourself!" Yalmar's voice was harsh, shrill, too. It needed oiling. And use. "Ukko is full of tricks."

Steve moved out of the bushes. "Don't I know it! He tried to take hold of my mind when I wouldn't fall down on my face before him."

The door creaked wider, inches only. "How did you get away?" Yalmar's raw, phlegmy voice dripped suspicion.

"I've got this silver plate in my head. It's a war souvenir, to keep my brains from spilling out. Ukko tried to bum his way into my head, but this plate—hey! I know how weird all this sounds, but it's true." I had to sock Art Mackey to get away. Toini Teckilla thought I was you. They want *you*, Yalmar. I'm here to tell you to watch yourself, to help and get Ilma away from them. That's what you want, isn't it? And Izza?"

"Izza is—dead. I buried him this morning."

"Sorry." Steve had begun walking slowly toward the barn, aware of Yalmar's steely eyes following him, along with the two inches of rifle barrel trained on his forehead. Steve could almost feel the pressure of Yalmar's blunt finger on that hair trigger.

He sweated until he reached the plank ramp up which cattle and work horses had once clumped. He squinted up at the half-open hayloft door and tried for a grin.

"Can I come in?"

"Door's locked from inside. Wait."

The figure in the greasy logging boots with worn homespun jeans folded down into them was oversize from the waist up; his worn red and black checkered mackinaw concealed grotesquely unnatural body **humpage** about his shoulders and waist. The deepening gloom hid Yalmar's physical defects somewhat, but Steve could not hold back his shudder of distaste. There was something not quite right about Yalmar, apart from his twisted body, something shocking, if he permitted himself to examine it and dwell on it.

Yalmar nodded him in, his face hidden by shadow and a flap eared cap. Steve followed his oddly irregular footsteps down the wide dung-smelling aisle between empty animal stalls to the hayloft stairs halfway down. The night wind mourned through cracks like the ghosts of the killed or strayed beasts which had once tenanted the place.

Yalmar's hayloft aerie was equipped with a musty straw pallet. There were some battered tin dishes and evidence of recent cold meals. Some innate vestige of Finnish tidiness had prompted the loner to sweep up the corner with a barn broom. The apple box which served him for table had a lantern, flickering uneasily. Yalmar moved in a stealthy animal prowl; now, as he crouched over the lamp to turn up the wick, Steve got a good look at his face.

It was wide, rough-chiseled, under the ragged red-blond beard. His eyes were sunk so deep that they gave the effect of none at all, only black caves. His eyebrows bristled like twin thickets and the unkempt hair straggling out from under the leather bill of his ancient cap (it could have once belonged to Izza) was like white straw. When he picked up the lantern to give Steve's face a careful scrutiny, his mouth gave a lurch that showed his teeth; he mumbled something to himself and set down the lamp.

"Sit."

Steve joined him in an Indian-fashion squat on the straw. When Yalmar pushed off his cap, Steve saw that his hair was snow-white. He wondered if nature, along with the swayback and the camel's hump left shoulder, had neglected pigmentation (his eyes were flint-white, too, the lantern revealed) or whether something he had seen in his Hellmouth skulkings had turned it white overnight. Possibly, Steve thought.

While Yalmar stroked the barrel of his rifle with an old rag, fondling its worn stock as if this exponent of death were his only friend, Steve felt a rushing wave of compassion for this twisted, forlorn creature. Yalmar was like a wild animal, taking his cue from nature, who had deceived him and mocked him in the borning, distorting his emotions as if to complete the job.

"Kullervo."

Steve wasn't aware that he had spoken the *Kalevala* name aloud until Yalmar jumped with a sharp, snuffling oath.

"Sorry," Steve said awkwardly.

"I know what you're thinking. Izza used to tell us the old stories. How Kullervo was born bad. How Kullervo magicked the cows into bears to kill everybody on the farm of his mistress when she put a rock in his bread and broke his *pukko*. How Kullervo met his sister after many years and, not knowing she was his sister, took her on his sledge and—"

"Suppose we match up what we know about Ukko," Steve broke in, alarmed at what he had stirred up in that blunt unkempt head. "Would you like to hear about Ilma, how she looks?"

The lurking horrors in Yalmar's eyes retreated. He nodded eagerly.

Steve told him the essentials, taking care to avoid references to Ilma's *feelings* toward Art and Art's obvious devotion to her. When he skirted too close, Yalmar's wide face burned and his hands moved over the rifle in his lap in a kind of frenzy. Getting any information out of the farmboy turned hill beast was like striking a miner's pick into solid rock.

"You live here all the time, Yalmar?"

"Sometimes here, sometimes up there." He jerked a thumb toward the surrounding hills.

"You've known about the villagers for a long time?"

Yalmar's neck cords drew tight when he nodded.

"What about your father?"

"Izza was a great man, once. I don't mean he knew what the big city folks know. He only knew what the forest and the lakes and the rivers told him, what the wind sings when it brushes across the rye field in midsummer, what the storm howls when it drives the snow down from the north, what the stars whisper when they lift the moon up over the black bills," He gave a raw chuckle. "That's not me talking, *toistalainen*. That's Izza, chanting the old songs to Ilma and me when we were kids. Before—before he found out about Hellmouth."

"When did he? Find out, I mean?"

"When Aiti drowned. She was a good woman, our mother. But she loved to gossip and pry. It was Aiti's nagging that made Izza a good farmer, because he was inclined to be dreamy and lazy. He liked the whiter best because, after the animals had been fed, there was nothing to do but listen to the wind howl and curl up together by the fire and sing the old songs. When Aiti found out about Hellmouth and drowned, Izza sent Ilma away to her aunt. After that Izza didn't care if things got done or not; there was nobody to sing the old songs to any more. It was like a light had gone out. Izza knew, more than ever, that we must stay away from the village, across the river. I—I didn't care about the farm, either, after Ilma was gone. It was like we were doomed, anyway. Izza went around with a funny empty look on his face; sometimes I would hear him singing to himself as if Ilma was back with us again. But she was gone. Gone."

"So you took to the hills."

"There wasn't much food. If Izza didn't care, why should I care? Oh, I saw that he got enough to eat. When the cattle were all slaughtered or gone off, and the chickens and all, I would bring down a buck side and hang it in the cold room for Izza. We wouldn't talk.

Just sit. Then I would take off again after—"

He broke off, flushed. Steve knew. That room on the second floor of the farmhouse. Neat as a pin toward Ilma's return, if she ever did.

"Why didn't you and Izza leave the valley, go down to Clinton or someplace? You could have got a job on one of the Swan River farms. They'd have taken care of Izza, seen that he got doctored when he needed it."

Yalmar stiffened. "Why should we leave? This is our home! We didn't need anybody else's charity! There's plenty of game in these hills. They leave us alone. Izza wouldn't be happy in somebody else's *tallo*."

And this was where Ilma had laughed and played and listened to Izza's song stories with you, Steve thought. You had that to hold on to. And Ilma's neat room with the poster bed, the carved chest, the row of dolls on the windowseat.

"How did you find out about Ukko?" Steve asked.

"Izza."

"You mean Ukko spoke to you through Izza's mind, like he did to me?"

Yalmar's jaw balled out. "Izza used to sit wrapped up in an old blanket in Aiti's old rocker, by the window in the front parlor, staring at the river and moaning to himself. Sometimes I think he didn't even go

to bed, just sat there, staring. I'd find him like that when I brought down food for him. Then, one day—I was standing in the parlor doorway—when Izza got up and his face changed. It was like there was a bright blue light behind his head. He told me Ukko had Ilma and that I was to go to her at the sawmill. Ukko needed me, Izza said." Yalmar gave a wolf's dismal, frustrated howl. "I knew! I knew then *they* had him. I knew for years about Hellmouth, how they prayed to Ukko instead of Jumala. I used to sneak around the schoolhouse and listen. And Rillo's. I *knew*. I didn't believe it was really Ukko! Not Izza's Ukko from the songs! More like Hiisi or Lempo, one of the bad ones, if He took Ilma without even letting me see her!"

His agonized groan was a terrible thing to hear.

"What did you do?"

"I reached out and grabbed Izza out of that room. When he started to drool and spit and sob, I knew what happened before wasn't Izza. I wanted to take him away, but he wouldn't go; I knew he wouldn't last long up there on the mountain, so I fed him like a baby, then I left him. What could I do? An old, old man, with no mind at all except when the monster who calls himself Ukko puts in his false one. The Izza who sang those old songs to Ilma and me died a long time ago."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

After a while they moved out into the moonless dark and Yalmar led the way up to Art's cave. He knew every dim trail on the mountain by feel, by ESP. He knew all about Art Mackey's living there those frantic weeks; he even knew about the grizzly.

"Why didn't you—?" Steve started to ask, then broke off. Why not indeed? Yalmar trusted no one. His abnormal jealousy made him detest Art and wish him ill.

Yalmar cocked his rifle and prowled up to the cave's mouth in a wide, silent circle. There was something about his low bird whistle indicating all was clear that hinted disappointment. Yalmar irrationally blamed Art for Ilma's vanishment. Art had known her during the absent years, touched her, kissed her. Ilma of the golden hair and the dryad's laughter was the totality of Yalmar's life. She had never flinched at the sight of his crooked back and dour face. She had loved him simply, easily, with her whole heart. Ilma epitomized to Yalmar all the radiance of Ilmatar on her rainbow, spinning golden dreams out of her silver shuttle. And now Art Mackey had shattered those precious childish dreams beyond mending.

Yalmar created fire with a Blackfoot's efficiency; they munched dried meat and biscuits, washed down with tea from Art's stores. Yalmar's conversation became grunted monosyllables, but Steve did manage to coax up some nebulous mutual half-plan to be executed come dawn.

The last sensory consciousness Steve's sleep-ravenous nerves retained was the sight of Yalmar's shadow prowling about the cave entrance, like some pre-*homo sapiens* creature, something only slightly less terrifying itself than the terrors of the night it feared.

The hillside glinted with rime when they left the cave, stamping their feet against the hard earth and blowing on their hands. The morning was raw with early winter. Below them, Hellmouth lay bathed in ground fog, thicker than before; even the rock chimneys were shrouded. Except for the hints of blue wood-smoke, Steve could almost believe that the reruns were over, that the village had leaped back into the limbo of the past where it belonged. Then, when the small forest broke clear, he saw the bullet-nosed sawdust incinerator of the mill, glowing like the eye of an angry Cyclops. Yes. The men of the village were already hard at work, putting the finishing touches on Ukko's teleport device.

Why the sawdust burner? Perhaps as a symbol. It comforted the time slaves of Hellmouth by reminding them of the old ways.

Yalmar voiced his pent-up wrath. "I'd like to go up there right now! Send a rifle bullet ripping into what calls itself High God!"

Steve touched his arm. "You can't shoot a bolt of star lightning. Let's try it my way."

For one thing, Toini Teckilla spoke English. For another, the schoolteacher was a reader. She had knowledge of the sciences; *circa* 1900, true, yet some facts remain basic, while the rest of the turn-of-the-century villagers were intellectually naive and had to believe anything that demonstrated itself superior to them. Ukko had once been God—until the wave of Christianity swept north across Europe and toppled Him from his throne. Now He had come back to re-prove His omnipotence. As for Miss Teckilla, she must have at least an elementary knowledge of astronomy and physics. It might work.

And Miss Teckilla wanted Yalmar. For Ukko.

Sloughing down to the bridge and across the misty river, Steve mused about old-maid Toini, the schoolteacher. She had probably never slept with a man. She was overripe to adore somebody. Ukko

showed himself to her as something magnificent beyond her wildest, most secret dreams. Man shape, yet godly. Why wouldn't she fall on her knees?

It wasn't going to be easy.

The schoolhouse was not locked. In Hellmouth, as in northern Finland, no doors were locked. While Yalmar built a fire in the oval tin stove with the shiny iron trim, Steve wandered along the aisles between the double desks, touching the corked inkwells set in them, the worn chalk slates; the initials carved into the oiled fruitwood—all the things he had read about in *Tom Sawyer*, remembering with a hint of borrowed nostalgia. On the blackboard at the head of the room and behind Miss Teckilla's neat desk, written in her best Palmer Method script, was the legend: "*Today is Monday, October 23, 1903. Praise Ukko.*"

In one corner, curtained off against schoolboy vandalism, was a rough lectern that might have come all the way from Finland, predating Ukko's return, and behind that, a newish altar made out of pine and adorned with autumn leaves and berries left over from the previous day's service. Steve's boot kicked against a large rolled-up art print, careless and dusty in one corner. He set down his rifle and unrolled it a few inches, revealing a view of green-blue water and beautifully modeled bare feet walking on it.

He was leaning it up in the corner when the sharp, brisk clip of shoes up the porch steps caused him to turn.

Out of decadal routine, Toini Teckilla moved in rapidly, removed her dark cloth coat and her scarf, her pinned-on hat, and hung them up neatly behind the partial wall of the narrow cloakroom, on the last, special hook. It was then she must have noticed that the schoolroom was warm. Steve couldn't see her. Yalmar was standing, grim, stolid-faced, arms akimbo, between the narrow windows.

Silence. Then a gasp. Then skirts rustling out from behind the cloakroom partition.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded severely. "Who are you?"

Steve nodded, smiling. "I stayed at Widow Puski's the other night. You must have heard."

"Oh." Under the small bifocals, the eyes pinched thoughtfully. "Yes. You are our Arthur's friend." Toini Teckilla was the manageress type, the kind of woman who heads clubs, helps run political parties, an organizer and an overseer. Good.

Her glance flicked to Yalmar. "I see you brought our lost sheep with you." The pale thin lips relaxed, smiled. "Well, now! We are all in the fold, as it were. Ukko will be pleased that you have joined us." Ukko's ward leader was jubilant, too. Her voice wore a lilt. Ukko would be pleased with her, for she would bring them to Him.

"*Perkele!*" Yalmar growled. "She thinks we have come to give ourselves to that *satana Hiessi!*"

Miss Teckilla gasped. "Blaspheming! At His very altar! Shame on you! *Voi, voi, voi!* Well, Ukko will forgive you. When you have been washed clean by His heavenly radiance, you will beg to belong. Praise be to Ukko!"

Yalmar turned scowling to Steve. "Tell her!"

"Tell me what?"

"That Ukko is not *Ukko!* Lempo, the dog of evil, is more like it!"

"Honestly, Yalmar! Lempo indeed! I have always shushed those who labeled Ilma's brother as warped in mind as he is in body, for the sake of our High Priestess if nothing else, but after this outburst...!" She whirled on Steve. "Just what have you to say to me, *toistalainen?*"

"I know the Kaleva legends, too, Miss Teckilla. I have studied the Ukko myth perhaps even more carefully than you have, though granted I don't have your racial insight."

"Myth! Ukko is no myth!"

"Unfortunately he is a myth. Ukko, Ilmatar, Tapio, all the wonderful rest of the *Kalevala* gods and heroes. Inspired legends. Unique. Glorious. But myths all the same."

Toini Teckilla's eyes snapped blue fire. "I know you scientists! Nothing exists unless you can put it under your microscopes or dissect it on your laboratory tables! You give yourselves such airs! Because *you* have not seen Ukko, He can't possibly exist! Perhaps you fancy that you scientists are the true gods, since you set yourselves up as the final judges of what can and what cannot be!"

Steve faced her blazing fervor with admiring pity. This was no run of the mill country schoolma'am. A few years of modern formal training at one of the universities and Toini Teckilla's mind might have stirred up tempests.

"But I have seen Ukko," Steve said. "It's because I have seen Him and talked with Hun that I *know* He is not your Ukko of the old legends. He only assumed the role when He projected His mind to Earth that long ago time because that was how your ancient race was able to understand Hun. They had no scientific knowledge. Beyond the moon and the sun, the universe was a blank."

"And what is it now?"

"*Touche*. Still, we have learned a little. We scientists are able to extrapolate, to imagine what could lie farther out, more than you can realize." Knowing that once he got started he must tell her everything, Steve swallowed hard, pulled his own eyes away from those indignant, honest eyes.

"No, Doctor McCord, you are wrong! I believed in Jumala along with the rest because I was taught to. You must be as a small child, they said. I *was*—yet, I always had my secret doubts about the Christian God. It was too pat, too easy. Then Ukko came—in a wondrous blaze of cosmic light! There was no need to deceive one's self about Ukko! Ukko *is*! I saw the miracles He performed!" Her face was transfigured in her intensity to make Steve understand the truth. "Oh, how glorious! To be *sure* at last! To be unalterably *certain*! How can I make you understand that this is *real*?"

Steve winced and looked away.

"I'm sorry. You can't. Because it's not real. Even you—" He broke off. How could he tell her? How could he tell them all what they were?

"But Ukko is there, within that face of rock! I have been there! Seen Him! Heard His voice, learned of the glory that is to come to us!"

Steve took a deep breath.

It took most of the morning. The children of Hellmouth came trouping in. Miss Teckilla sent them out to recess and recess lasted two and a half hours. At first, she refused utterly to allow herself even to admit that any fragment of what Steve told her could be true, that it was absurd and just what she would expect from a member of the skeptical, never-believing world of science; then, gradually, the dam of resolution began to crumble and break through.

"Star creature who feeds on adoration, who—who has *used* us all these decades, used us to build a machine that will bring him here so that his strangling desire for the power within our belief—our love—can take over the world! But this is so fantastic!"

"Think," Steve said. "Think carefully. The other villagers are like sheep, fine, well-meaning sheep—but sheep all the same. But you, Miss Teckilla! Think of *small things*. Such as why no outsiders have visited Hellmouth in such a long time?"

"But they have! Only last week the stage brought a dress drummer who—"

"Was it last week? Or last year? When exactly was it, Miss Teckilla?"

"I don't pay much attention to these things. I have my school work, choir meets—and Ukko." Her voice quavered on the holy name.

Steve shook his head gently. "Miss Teckilla, what date is it?"

"See for yourself." She pointed at the blackboard. "I wrote it there last night. October 23, 1904. What would it be?"

Steve took out his wallet. He handed her his membership card in the American Science Academy, several credit cards, a Bancroft Library card, and finally a small plastic service station calendar.

"Nineteen seventy—" Her face drained white while she studied them frantically, turning them over and over between her thin capable fingers.

"Why? *Why*? Why would He—"

"To keep you working for Him, to keep the rest of the world from finding out until He was ready for them to find out. Actually, Hellmouth village was burned out in the Great Fire of 1906."

"Then we are only—but, Doctor McCord! Doesn't that alone make Him God! If He can do such things?"

"Sorry. Of course, it depends on what you call God. If soul slavery to a star entity that feeds on the chemical-vibratory energy induced by mass worship is what you want—"

"Not what we want, maybe! But, Doctor McCord, that's all we've got! Without that we are—dead."

Steve closed his eyes as though that could block out the terrible thing he had done to her; but he heard her gaunt body when it fell helplessly onto one of the desk benches. He heard her dry, racking sobs when the dam broke.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The town meeting lasted well into the night. Everybody in Hellmouth, take away a few dodderers and sleepy tots, was in attendance. Everyone had his say. Toini Teckilla said come, they came; the schoolroom was warmed by their breath and their well-bundled bodies.

When Miss Teckilla had finished, the unearthly silence that followed was swept away by a torrent of angry disbelief. As is the case with untutored minds, Steve thought grimly, they tried to shout down what

they could not grasp. They whirled on Steve accusingly. *He* had done this thing. *He* had brought them to this. They moved on him to kill him, so that everything should be as it was before he came. Steve tried, with hands at his throat, to explain that things could never be as they were before. Ukko had used them. He was all but finished with them; back they must go into their proper time-slot, to have-been but not to-be presently. With the Second Coming of Ukko, Hellmouth could no longer be the bucolic cul-de-sac it had once been. Hellmouth would become a shrine. Like Bethlehem. Like Mecca.

Oddly, it was gnarled Yalmar who stood between Steve's halting words of Finnish and the blazing fire he had kindled. Yalmar reminded them of Izza and Ilma and how the Halvors were always "different," different because it was they who were the real ones, the villagers were the two-headed calves, the odd unnatural.

The tormented rumbling of the stolid men, the irate shrilling of the women grew and grew, as the full significance of what this meant to Hellmouth seeped through. Rillo, the bartender, blustered through to face Steve.

"We are not dead! We are flesh and blood! *See!*" He slashed his thumb with his ubiquitous *pukko*. "*See*, I bleed!"

Steve stared with dull, dizzy eyes at the drops falling on the oiled planks. "Don't ask me how Ukko has done this thing. I don't know. All I know is that He is using you. He has clouded that part of your minds which ought to remember when there was a narrow gauge railway for lumber puffing down the hillside to Swan River, when wagons and coaches made weekly runs to Hellmouth, when mail came in and went out. Try to remember these things. Can you? Can you?"

"I have tried," Miss Teckilla said. "I have searched my mind and found walls. Something is wrong, very wrong."

"What must we do?" Widow Puski demanded.

"We must go to Ukko. Now. We must find out the answers to these questions, for good or for bad."

Under an icy, cloud-strewn sky the file of townspeople wound its way across the field, through the silent streets, then up the same mill road where these workers had wended each morning to sweat and toil for Ukko. So many, many dawns. Blazing hot summer mornings when the meadowlarks called and the trout leaped. Frozen dawns when the snow lay three feet deep and made hills on either side which they had cut through. Could this be the end?

The voices were silent now. The crunch of their boots, the patter of the women's low shoes to keep up with their men, only these sounds echoed between the sky high mountains.

Below the blurred gray barrier of cliff the mill buildings humped up like some slumbering prehistoric beast that should not be awakened. Suddenly, while the file moved up, Toini Teckilla, Steve, and Yalmar at its head, the dark sky burst open. Lightning limned the craggy hills and the valley. Cold, spectral blue bolts of sky fire, followed by distant reverberant thunder, as if somebody were playing ninepins with asteroids for balls and dry, forlorn planets for pins.

They stopped. A child whimpered into its mother's apron.

"It's past season for thunderstorms," the schoolteacher gasped.

"It's Ukko," Yalmar growled.

Widow Puski ran up and shook Toini Teckilla's arm. "Didn't you hear *His* warning? *He* doesn't want us to go up there in the middle of the night like this!"

A wind swept down from the canyon's mouth, cold and gibbering. The storm began to speak with Ukko's stentorian voices.

"Back!" somebody wailed. "Back to our homes! Ukko will destroy us all!"

"*Jo!* Ukko commands the storm! He will send down hailstones out of the sky to shatter our homes, drive our flocks to their death. He will freeze fire itself!"

Steve turned his face from the driving wind, the sudden pelting drops of rain, like frozen metal, to yell at them to go on. Then he stopped. Why bother? Let them go back. They were like panicked cattle. They didn't want to know the truth about their deaths—yet, who does? If a person has terminal cancer eating his insides out, does he want to know about it? Does he, really? Let them go back. Forget tonight. The end would come all too soon; let it come in Ukko's time, not theirs.

He whirled when Toini Teckilla shrieked out. She was a disheveled mess. Her scarf had blown off her neatly bunned hair and, for once in her straitlaced life, she had forgotten propriety. The drenching, wind-driven rain made her long black skirt cling to her spindly legs.

"No!" she shrieked again. "Come back! We must find out now! Tomorrow we will lull ourselves into a trap of complacency and do nothing. We must act now —while we have the courage! We must make Ukko reveal the whole truth to us—*now!*"

She faced the storm, her long thin frame bent to thrust her legs farther up the puddling road. Steve moved with her, step to step, toward Yalmar, who had never stopped. Steve admired this woman above any he had ever known, in this instant.

"Follow me! *Lahestya!*"

She lifted her sodden skirts and tramped ahead up the hill toward Yalmar, who was already knocking open the padlock on the high gates, a remnant of old Swenson, with a shard of rock. Whether it was Miss Teckilla's admonitions or the shock of seeing the lock jump out of its customary hardware, the desolate huddle pushed after her. The official guardian of the great key for the old lock shouted "Hey!" at Yalmar, jangling his badges of office to indicate it hadn't been necessary. But Yalmar was prowling his way across the yard and into the planing sheds. This was his do or die moment.

They sloughed across the muddy mill yard after him. Their swinging farm lanterns tossed toothed shadows of the great circular saws in the rolled runners across the cavernous walls. The lumber dollies sat neatly fore and aft each long sawyer's table, empty.

Yalmar's humped shadow leaped up at them where he stood, like a flint eyed specter, beyond the planer, at the fore of a series of runways. Toini Teckilla gasped; then she pointed to the one they were to take. It led them down through a new door, down more stairs, then sharp right toward what must be the cliff face. They were underground by now; gleaming artifacts of Ukko began to replace the seldom used mill machinery. Steve's side glances caught glimpses of chambers containing metal-refining apparatus, ingenious kilns, electric powered mining drills, sleek workbenches for designing arid building the parts of the machine that was to bring Ukko to the world.

They moved silently now. There was no whispering; the men made a physical effort to muffle the clumping tread of their boots on the metallic floor.

Something barred their way to Ukko's sanctum.

"Art!" Steve exclaimed.

He looked for Yalmar; found him slumped against the floor where the blond giant's backlash blow had flung him when he tried to push through. Art Mackey's face glowed grim with determination. They were not going through, not any of them. His blue diamond eyes fanned from one to the other of the intruders with cool, heartfelt admonishment.

The schoolteacher faced him without a flinch. She was a bedraggled mess, her shawl had slipped off and the driving rain had glued her dark dress to her dried-up breasts, her hair was a lank tangle. Yet this blonde Lemminkainen out of legend, this guardian of God's high altar, might have been a ten-year-old with a forbidden slingshot.

"Get out of my way, Aurturi Makki. I must speak to Ukko, now!"

"You can't."

"I will!"

Miss Teckilla thrust forward so that Art had to embrace her to hold her from slipping through. She struggled violently, then tottered back with an angry, frustrated moan.

"Don't you see?" Art addressed the workers behind her. "It's almost time for Ukko to come to us! You have done your work well. You must be patient for only a very short time longer. Then Ukko will come to us in the full strength of His godhead. Then you will have your reward for all your toil and hardship. Go home now! Be patient for this brief time!"

"Reward!" Miss Teckilla cried out. "What reward? To become nothing! To be dead!"

Art's scowl lashed Steve's face like a whip. "You told them!" He bit back the ground-out whisper, but the schoolteacher caught it, and whatever persuasive dam Art had started to build was lost.

"Stand away, Aurturi. I'm going in. I have something to say to this—this Ukko of yours!"

"What does it matter if He is the legendary Ukko or not?" Art demanded. "What matters is that He comes from the farthest stars and can bring our world out of the hopeless muddle it's in! *That* is what matters, not labels! Believe me, Toini. What we call 'Ukko' is magnificent and powerful beyond our wildest dreams. You have done all He asked you to so far. Be patient just a few days longer! The machine is almost ready! Don't let this *toistalainen* spoil the wonderful thing that is about to come to us! Don't, I beg you—all of you! Go home! Wait! Follow what is inside of your hearts, as Ilma and I are doing. You know us. We are *of you*."

That did it. Behind them, the villagers began to mutter among themselves. Art Makki was right. He had been born Outside yet he was of their own blood. Was not his word to be believed above that of a *toistalainen*? Those Outsiders were greedy, predatory, self-seeking. What did this scientist fellow care about Hellmouth and its trivial problems? He was out to glorify himself, and whether they lived or died was of no importance to him.

Steve read this in their eyes. Also they were cold, wet. The warmth of their own hearths was what they needed right now. Perhaps a cup of *kallia* at Rillo's.

Ilma appeared and stood close to Art in the doorway. The jewels in her headdress dazzled their eyes. Her diamond-bright eyes told them to believe Art; so did her happy smile, happy for them all.

"I have work undone," Widow Puski yawned suddenly. "And I am sleepy." She turned on the others. "Why do we stand here dripping water on Ukko's clean floor? We have wasted too much time listening to nonsense already! Let's go home!"

Steve turned to the schoolteacher for opposition. None came. Her strength to resist was ebbing fast. Her eyes were fixed on Ilma's radiant headdress and they were wistfully hungry.

Steve took hold of her arm and shook it.

"Listen! If your Ukko is so benevolent, why can't He at least show Himself to you, to reassure you?"

"It takes fantastic amounts of power for Ukko to project His mind across the stars," Art grated. "He can't waste it. He must conserve it for the Coming!"

"He could just show Himself," Toini Teckilla rallied, blinking from Steve to Art.

"No! Not to every whim—"

"Whim!"

"Does this look like a whim?" Steve taunted. "The people of Hellmouth want to know the truth about themselves." He cringed inwardly to rub salt in the wounds he had opened in them, but there was no other way. If there was a prayer toward Ukko's defeat, it lay in keeping them here and stirred up. The time was brief. To overcome an adversary one must face him. With Ukko it must be mind against mind, a flea's brain against an Einstein's, yet...

"I am sorry!" Art's voice thundered now and he planted his boots firmly in the trapezoidal archway. "Ukko has given me his instructions and I cannot permit—"

"See?" Steve yelled. "Art Mackey has become His tool—just like the rest of you! Ukko is using you, all of you. He has taken possession of Art Mackey's mind and Ilma's, too. He will promise you anything until He gets what He wants, then see—"

Art's lunging fist stopped him. Steve fought, but there was no contest. Art had him pinned to the wall by the wrists, yelling to the villagers, taunting them to mobhood. But they only stood there, with dangling hands, watching.

Ilma's scream turned their attention. A lumpy shadow had slunk along the wall to the archway, taken hold of her. She squirmed on his humped shoulder as Yalmar started to carry her off, back to the farmhouse, out of Ukko's range of domination.

Art loosed his hold on Steve to leap down the corridor after them. Steve leaped through the door of the round sanctum.

"Come on!" he yelled to the villagers. "We'll beard this so-called God in his den!"

Toini Teckilla was the first to follow his impatient beckon; confused, awkward, some of the others moved in after. Curiosity had a hand in it, too, and soon the sloping chamber floor was ringed around with wondering villagers, caps in hand.

At the moment when Art burst in with Ilma, Yalmar trotting doggedly after them, Ukko chose to appear. The bewildered faces around the ring were limned by sudden sprouting light. First, the utter blackness at the apex; then, as if space were being turned inside out, the spot of light appeared, flared out bluely and became a radiant pillar of effulgence.

Thunder, as if space itself were being torn apart, vibrated the unnatural movement of the air.

"I am here, my children," Ukko's voice said, like the most wonderful music. "Your long vigil is over."

His more than classic beauty radiated out upon them from the vertex; His presence overwhelmed them with all the glories of heaven, driving them to their knees.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As with the others, Steve sensed the molecules of his body melt; his mind surged with insupportable longing to shed itself of his body, to blend with theirs in lem-ming-like compulsion to be eaten up by this tormenting Glory. The utter sublimity of the Presence revealed de-manded Steve's complete absorption, his total adora-tion. Everything else in life was swept away like rub-bish. All that mattered was to be overtaken, wholly, by this being from whatever was true Heaven. He was the Truth and the Light, the quintessence of all Beauty, the very distillation of what all art and all science strives for. If there was God, this was He. If there was Perfec-tion, nowhere else could it be found but here. That any puny human might try, or even wish to try, to resist having his soul taken over by such shining magnif-icence, was unthinkable.

Steve stared, mouth sagging, moaning, drooling to be possessed, to become one molecular part of—Him. "Ukko!" The sound of His Holy Name sibilating from the apostolic circle was itself a prayer; no other sound, no creed, no elaborate oratory, could hold more meaningful worship within it than the sound of the Di-vine Name itself.

Steve prayed along with the rest. Toini Teckilla ex-uded all the torments of a flagellant at having doubted. That Ukko had chosen this minuscule planet among so many trillions of trillions was awesome and to fling one's self into some gaping pit was the very least one could do to express one's abject and ineffectual emo-tions in the face of such rapture.

To see Hun, face to face, like this!

It was beyond everything the human mind can con-ceive, for Ukko represented the absolute pinnacle of what man might strive for for a million millennia and yet never quite achieve.

Steve understood all this now.

Understood—and worshiped.

"Yes, My children," Ukko said again. *"I am here! Your work is at an end! I have projected all of My power from beyond the stars and completed the work you began. You provided all of the physical compo-nents needed for Me to transfer My being to your plan-et. My mind was at last able to fuse them into the nec-essary whole. I am here and I shall stay with you until —until you have no more need."*

Steve gasped. Something of the scientific acumen left in his brain, under the silver plate, shuddered at the enormity of this cosmic happening. The Supercreature Who had heretofore only beamed His incredible mind across the ocean of stars was now on Earth in the full-ness of His power, to demand the total adoration of these primitives, to bring them heavenly gifts so that their worship would know no bounds. It was this plane-tary worship which fed Ukko. He, the Lord God, was a jealous god. He wanted it *all*.

While understanding all of this, Steve was unable to resist falling on his knees with the rest. In fact, his intel-ligence magnified his capacity to worship Ukko. The villagers adored with childlike rapture. Even Toini Teckilla, even Ilma and Art, were only slightly capable of realizing who and what Ukko really was. Knowing this star creature from another galaxy, perhaps from another universe or another dimension unguessed by Man, was the end and all of what may be achieved by a thoughtful organism. Steve had even more reason to kneel in awe of Him. Yearning toward Him with out-stretched hands, as the others were doing, Steve felt his emotions shatter in a feeble attempt to reach terrifying excesses. Ukko's beauty contoured all the grace of line, the color, the supreme radiance, of every branch of art which had ever touched his soul. Ukko was a Handeli-an chorus, a Rembrandt painting, a sculpture by Mi-chelangelo. He was everything, all of the misty attempts Man has ever made to search out what true happiness and cosmic symmetry might be.

Steve prayed to Ukko—gratefully, completely, avid-ly. The completeness of his yearning made surrender in-avoidable, yet something under his silver plate lingered, as if to taste the acolytic joys of this wave crest before the soul-searing plunge.

Ukko's deific smile made them tremble.

"You have done well, My children. Your rewards will be great."

"We want no rewards," they said rapturously. "Only to serve You."

"Bless you, My children." Ukko's radiance touched Art Mackey and Ilma with special pleasure. "These two are truly Mine already. They have given themselves to Me."

A low wolfish growl desecrated the sacred moment.

Steve whirled angrily to see who would dare. It was Yalmar. His grotesque body was half-crouched behind his sister; his curled fists were lifted to protect her, his dull flint-gray eyes glared defiance. It was as though Yalmar were unable to grasp the magnitude of Ukko. He was a throwback, a savage. Or was it something else—a kind of bestial jealousy?

Staring away from the Glory, seeing Man just out of his cave, Steve felt a small worm of rebellion crawl down under his silver plate. Rebellion toward the god thing. Embarrassment of his babbling acceptance. What gave the cave savage the guts to face a hairy mastodon, to face the thunders of his age with pitiful weapons?

The others were too involved in their surrender to Ukko to even notice Yalmar. Ukko noticed. He noticed Steve, too.

"You have doubt. You don't believe in Ukko."

Steve swallowed hard to breathe; he resisted the overwhelming desire to look at Ukko. If he looked, he was lost. "Yes. I believe in Ukko. I know who You are, what You are, better than the rest. And I want to adore You! To share! God, how I want to!"

"Then do so. Ukko offers you everything any god your race ever dreamed of can offer, and more. Ukko can make your world a paradise. No war. No disease. No poverty. Everything free from blemish, or, as your ancient Chinese artists saw it, leaving a small blemish here and there just to make the beauty more beautiful. Endless advances of your sciences. Everything!"

"All this will I give you if you will bow down and worship me!"

Ukko smiled. "When we met before, you accused Me of labeling Myself incorrectly. I pointed out that the primitives I found here did the labeling. Now you label Me Satan. Is there a difference, so long as you get what you want, what your planet so desperately needs?"

"There's a difference. *You are not God.*"

"I thought we had settled that point. God is a state of mind. Your own small race has invented an infinite variety of deities to suit individual tastes. Believe me, Doc-tor Stephen Howard McCord, I have been everywhere in this universe and far beyond it. *There is no other god but Ukko.*"

"No!"

"What then?"

"A superbeing, as far advanced from mankind as Man is from an amoeba. You can transport Your thought images across the stars, and some part of Your tremendous power. You can make us see You as any-thing You wish. But You are not God!"

"Why am I not God?"

"Because You did not create our universe and what lies beyond it! God is the creator of all things! You are not!"

Ukko's brilliant light deepened to low spectrum hues.

"Yes, Ukko, I know what You are!" Steve shouted. "I figured it out, little by little. I figured out that Your benevolence is only a secondary attribute, resulting from Your *need*. You need our adoration, Ukko! You feed on us! Having reached some incredible pinnacle of intelligence on Your own world, having devoured it all into one single unit, You now forage the stars for new blood, new dog-like worship. Long ago You lost all need for sexual or propagative satisfaction. There is only one thing left for You: You must be God! You have reached the absolute top: *You must be God or die!*"

Ukko shivered the walls with his thunder.

"Is there more?"

"Yes, Ukko! To You we are nothing better than pets. Less, actually. The more advanced the race, the better for You. Yet none of them even comes close to You. You live, from our standpoint, 'forever,' so Your need is insatiable. We Terrans are only a stepping stone in your ego-feeding star conquests. These poor suckers were easy. I'm not quite so easy, Ukko! *I know!*"

"What do you know, Doctor Stephen McCord?"

"I know that You will suck us dry in time. Oh, we might last you a few hundred years of our time. That's nothing to You. But eventually You'll have exhausted all of the subtle emotional energy our worship provides for Your ego; then You will take off somewhere else, leaving behind You a world full of gibbering idiots who have lost all power to think and do for themselves."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The storm outside the cliff was as nothing compared to the shock wave of spatial cold that Ukko aimed directly at Steve. Had it persisted longer than a few seconds, he would have been turned into a solid statue of ice suitable for a centerpiece on Ukko's apostolic table.

Steve thought, He must rid himself of me, before I shake the others again. But wait! No. As the teeth-chattering cold diminished abruptly, Ukko's wrath momentarily abated. Steve thought: *He's giving me another chance. He still needs me to start the ball rolling out-side this Montana Mecca.*

"Yes," Ukko thundered. "I am giving you another chance. One only. It is necessary for a god to demonstrate his power from time to time, to keep his worship-ers on their knees. But that isn't the—"

The thought was sheered off but Steve guessed the rest. He couldn't help blurting it out. "But that isn't the way You want it, is it, Ukko? The adoration must be pure, unadulterated by compulsion and fear of what You can do to them if they don't knuckle under. It must be voluntary to be *total*. Why is that, Ukko? Isn't there a touch of sadism in all you gods? Don't you all want us to fear your terrible wrath? Don't you get a kick out of sending down fire and flood from time to time, to destroy those who displease you? Of course, You're different. You don't qualify for the god union because—"

Steve bit off the thought. Already he had said too much. If he had somehow managed to keep tongue and mind in leash, he might have escaped to the outside where somehow he might convince *somebody* of

Ukko's presence high in the Montana hills and that steps against him must be taken. But it was too late now. Too late.

"Yes," Ukko told him and, oddly, there was a touch of weariness, of desperate cosmic sadness, in his sten-torian voice. "Yes, Doctor Stephen Howard McCord. Being God is hideously lonely. As you guessed, My race advanced in intelligence until the obvious happened: All minds became one. Me—I have lived so many millennia, I have searched and searched for others like Myself. There are none, none at all. Conceive of the unbearable loneliness of wandering the star wastes and never finding anything even faintly approaching My own intelligence. With whom can I communicate? You say I treat you like pets. Can I help doing so? Even a god requires love and, being a god, he needs whole planets full of worshipers to assuage the terrible loneli-ness of his position. But there has been too much talk. I am hungry for love. Since you cannot be persuaded, it seems that we must find another link to your science world. Arthur and Ilma will be fine. It is simply a mat-ter of a somewhat different approach. Your world's business is conducted by means of propaganda; even your politicians do best when their personal appearance is pleasing. Ilma is beautiful, talented. Arthur is the very image of Lemminkainen, the warrior lover. I had preferred to deal with the science leaders, whom I ad-mire more than your sheeplike masses who buy what they are told to buy, read what they are told to read, have sex when and where and how they are told to, and even smell the way they are told to. Your great minds are the ones I really want." He gave a god's shrug. "Oh, well, that must come later. We will use the religio-the-atrical approach. Ilma and Arthur will go out into the world and embark upon a subtle saturation campaign which will set the scene for Ukko's advent. By the time they are through, every tongue will be lolling and drool-ing in anticipation. Yes, Arthur, Ilma, under My mind supervision you will make them want Me so dreadfully that at My first wondrous appearance the whole world will fall at My feet."

"How—" Steve started. His face burned to imagine that it could be so easy.

"With unlimited money, anything can be bought. Of course, I must have more than purchased adoration. Here is where the great minds of your planet come in. I must have them, too!"

"You will, Ukko!" Art promised. "Ilma and I will bend every iota of our physical and spiritual strength toward this great new dawn. Seeing what You can do for them, what an Eden You can make out of the pol-luted waste dump our world has become, no one—*no one*—can fail to worship You."

Art looked straight at Steve. Hope, impatience, anger that his friend could not see the wonder and glory and miracle of Ukko—all these spilled out from his shining eyes. Steve saw something else in his eyes, and in Ilma's, too. He saw that their belief in Ukko was so ab-solute that they must do anything he demanded of them. Nor had it been forced on them. Their minds had not been taken over. They had been *won* by belief.

"Sorry," Steve said to Art.

Art nodded. His face was a radiant mask when he turned to his god.

"What must we do with him?"

"Eliminate him."

"I?"

"Yes."

"Now?"

"*Now!*"

Steve saw Art flinch back a fraction, watched Ilma's knuckles whiten as she squeezed his hand. Art's eyes sought the girl's; a wordless expression of compassion-ate understanding passed between them. It was as in the good old days, when Moloch's priest demanded that a mother fling her baby into the fire pit between the god's knees. It must be done. One must not question the will of a god. And what Ukko offered the world was of such importance that the life of one stubborn scientist could not possibly matter. Further, it demonstrated Art's love for his deity. Ukko needed such demonstrations, espe-cially so early in the game. He needed their love and he needed Steve's absence. Steve was a prickling thorn, a flaw, a negative ion. The small ceremony of fidelity which Steve's elimination would represent, witnessed by his first band of Terr an disciples, would serve as an expression of love, a token of this planet's adoration. To disagree with a president or a king was all very well; to challenge the will of a beneficent god indicated warped thinking. Regretfully, the warped dissenter must be eliminated. God's will must be irresistible.

Art looked at Steve, setting his mind and body to the act he must perform.

Toini Teckilla, the schoolteacher, gave a nervous cough. As if to delay the inevitable, she piped in a timid voice, "He said that we were all dead. 'Taped reruns' was the way he expressed it. He said Hellmouth was de-destroyed by fire in 1906. But it isn't 1906 yet! Is it?"

Ukko beamed His glory down on her puzzlement. "Child, you must not worry about such trivial matters. I have the power to bend Time just a little."

"But if we're dead!"

"Think, child. If I could do such a thing when I was still out there beyond the farthest stars that you can see, what can I not do? What I did for the faithful of Hell-mouth I can do again and again and again, ad in-finitum."

"You mean you can bring back the dead? If you are God—" She smiled blissfully. "But then, you *are* God!"

"He is not God," Steve said. "He can not bring back the dead."

Ukko scowled thunder. "Perhaps not. But you are not dead! I snatched your village out of the fire's path. So whether I can bring back the dead or not is of no importance to any of you here."

The villagers nodded among themselves. Being self-ish of life, as all men are, they were satisfied. Ukko had deflected them from the Great Fire of 1906 by trans-portaling them back in time; if he could keep on doing this ...

They turned to watch Art kill Steve with complacent eyes.

Art untwined his fingers from Ilma's and moved to-ward his target. Steve edged back until he bumped the curved wall; he planted his feet firmly, faced the foot-ball giant with a determined yet sad face, himself deter-mined to die fighting to the last breath. It wouldn't take long. Art's muscles were like steel. The books and an-thropological scraps Steve had spent his life poring over had not taught him how to handle himself in hand-to-hand combat.

He must try words, one final time.

"Art!" he cried. "Don't you understand what Ukko represents? I mean, actually? *Tyranny!* It's a different kind of tyranny, but it's there, under all that benevolent velvet glove. Ukko feeds on worship! He has to have it or He will die! It's all He has left, and Earth is only a couple good meals before He takes off again to delude some other planet into accepting Him as God! *Think, Art!* His way will strip the human race of all incentive. You can't *give* progress and happiness the way He says it! We have to earn it—the hard way! I know we've made one hell of a mess of our world, but we can dig ourselves out of it. We can and we will! Don't you see?"

"Think what kind of mindless, ambitionless slugs Ukko will leave behind Him when he goes. Our race will have been breast-fed for so long, we won't be able to do anything for ourselves! Is that what we climbed up out of the swamps for? Don't you understand what I'm telling you, Art? Ukko sounds glorious. He is glo-rious. But there's a price tag on what He offers us—our pride, our drive to claw our way to the stars the way we clawed our way out of the swamp! Our souls, Art! Our souls!"

Art's serene smile belied his purposeful fists.

"Ukko has my soul. I want Him to have it. Ukko will take Ilma and me—all of us—with Him when he goes. He has promised this. So what will He leave behind Him? A sterile planet with all the resources stripped off. It will be a long, long time before this happens. Even then, we will live in Ukko and go with Him when He goes. He promised."

Art reached down for the *pukko* in his ornately tooled belt. The pointed steel blade flashed with Ukko's fire.

The time ort before Art would drive his knife home in Steve's heart lingered on the lip of eternity. Perhaps Ukko held it, savored it. Steve dug involuntarily for a side weapon that wasn't there; he remembered with lashing regret that the rifle he had taken from the cave was still standing in the corner of the schoolhouse be-hind the altar screen alongside the discarded chromo of Jesus walking on water. After all the palaver, the need for guns had somehow seemed superfluous and, in any case, useless against a god.

There was some confusion in the villagers' looks, but Ukko had them by the short hair. Not to believe in Him now meant they had been dead for sixty years; none of them wanted that.

The knife came down.

Steve ducked in time. What hope was there? Art crowded him in close now, so that his second stroke would do the trick and get it over with. Killing one's best friend isn't fun.

One small tatter of hope burst into being under Steve's silver-plated cranium.

"*Yalmar!*" he yelled out.

Yalmar was somehow beyond Ukko's power. There was a tenacious atavistic streak in his mind that re-belled against God Himself, as Kullervo, his counter-part, had rebelled.

"*Yalmar!*"

Behind the others, lurking like some primal pattern for a latter-day gargoyle, Yalmar heard him. He moved; his apish arms hurtled him through. His brooding eyes flashed kill-hunger at Art as he jumped onto his back.

Art's yell was of frustration, frustration of his all-consuming desire to carry out Ukko's will. What he did

was done fast, the reaction of a physical body in perfect condition to do what God commanded. He could no more help doing what he did than a starving rat in a cage can help eating food that has been poisoned.

His arms tore at the creature snarling on his back. He yelled again, Lemminkainen's warrior yell. He struggled to throw Yalmar off. Then, oblivious to the pounding of Yalmar's fist on his head, he flung himself into a crouch, sending Yalmar tumbling forward. Even before Yalmar's body hit the floor, Art's *pukko* came down. Swiftly, a streak of Ukko's own lightning. It struck the thudding body in the middle of his ragged homespun blouse.

Yalmar snarled, writhed his ugly body up once, clawed out in the direction of Ilma. Died.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Steve didn't want to look back, ever. It was as if he were wearing blinders or walking up hill and down dale through tunnels. Staggering across the bleak dawn, he wouldn't even permit himself to be sick until he had made the top of the hill. His hands groped out and found the cold wet of the split boulder by the sentinel lodgepole pine; he leaned over and retched. When he couldn't retch any more, he sobbed and sobbed.

Something in him had had too much. Too much.

What followed that climactic moment of Yalmar's death was a merciful blur, a tempestuous montage of sound and tearing light. He heard Ilma scream out, first, then run past Art to kneel by her brother and sob his name.

"Yalmar! *Yalmar!*"

The ring of time-struck villagers gaped, meaner emotions pulling them away from Ukko and their ecstasy. Why did Yalmar have to die? Why this? They understood that the *toistalainen* must, but why Yalmar? He could have been persuaded, converted. Izza had been, Ilma had.

Why this ungodly act?

They all stared down at the grotesque on the floor, pooled in his own dark blood.

Something whispered to Steve: *Act! Now!*

He lunged at Art. He put every shred of his strength into his balled fist when it contacted the blond giant's chin. Art grunted back in surprise. There was agony in his eyes, agony that drained off some of the diamond shine. He crashed back on the floor. He lay there, moaning at what he had done to Yalmar.

"Listen to me!" Steve yelled out. "Don't give in to this thing! Ukko is not God! He is not even Ukko of the legends. He's used you, all these years. He'll use you again, drain you of all your manhood. Fight Him! Don't let Him take over the human race!"

He babbled on, half-Finnish, half-English. If his words didn't make sense, the wild gestures, his obvious sincerity, did. Toini Teckilla screamed out with him, hysterical phrases that meant only that her mind had been pushed too far; yet what boiled out of her out-raged mind was interpreted against Ukko, since Ukko was God and God was responsible for everything.

The moment of exaltation washed away. The magic was over. What had been ecstasy became hate. Their overbalanced, high-key god crest tumbled too far. It turned to blind, mindless anger.

They were a mob, surging toward Ukko. Steve's skin crawled and rippled on his body, watching them. Ukko, the star god, looked down on them, His face pale as marble and as without expression. Within Him, a kind of storm voice spoke, but His lips did not move. And, while the villagers moved toward Him, they became translucent, then transparent, then nothing.

Ukko had shattered the time magic. Their sudden tide of nonbelief broke the pattern.

At Ilma's forlorn cry, Steve turned. Art was on his feet and Ilma was clinging to him. They were like one. Before Ukko vanished, it seemed to Steve that the lips smiled a gentle smile. His hand moved. A shaft of blinding light struck Ilma and Art and now they were gone, too.

A gust of winter wind made Steve huddle against the split rock, soughing through the wet-needed branches over his head. He turned to look a last time at Hell-mouth. He had to do it. He didn't want to, but he had to.

Of course, there was no Hellmouth to look at. There hadn't been a Hellmouth since the Great Fire of 1906. Where log houses had once stood, wet weeds bent to the wind. Where the sawmill had made a shadow leap across the face of the white cliff, there was only a form-less gash in the earth. The neat, harvested fields were returned to the wilderness.

Steve strangled down a cry for the dead. When a sound like torn canvas cut the clouded sky, he shot a de-fiant look across the valley and fled. Like a damned one he fled. Like Weiland fleeing from God.

It came to him somewhere in his panicked flight that he must tell somebody about Hellmouth or go mad.

Yet who could he tell? Who would believe? Yalmar was dead. Izza was dead. Art and Ilma were gone.

Yes. Gone to glory as Ukko had promised them. Their belief in Him had never wavered and He had tak-en them back with Him across the stars.

As for Steve, he was forever damned for his nonbe-lief, damned to wonder all of his life whether he had really done the right thing or not. He had denied billions groping in the dark the promise of wondrous things. Miracles. And for what? For the stubborn whim of a savage, an intellectual infant, a god's pet. Well, at least they would never know. There was that.

And Ukko, the lonely god?

Would he ever come back to Earth?

And if he did, what would he find?