

## Urdumheim by Michael Swanwick

*From his home in Philadelphia, Mr. Swanwick reports that he is just about to leave for a trip to Chengdu in Szechuan Province, China. His latest story collection, The Dog Said Bow-Wow, is due out this fall and a new novel, The Dragons of Babel, is due in January. He says that "Urdumheim" is a creation myth told by the inhabitants of that new novel—but don't expect to find it in the book. Its only publication is here, in the copy you hold in your hands or on your PDA.*

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Every morning King Nimrod walked to the mountain, climbed its steep sides to the very top, and sang it higher. At noon ravens brought him bread and cheese. At dinner time they brought him manna. At sunset he came down. He had called the granite up from under the ground shortly after Utnapishtim the Navigator landed the boats there. First Inanna had called upon her powers to put the rains to sleep. Then Shaleb the Scribe had picked up a stick and scratched a straight line in the mud, indicating simply: *We are here*. Thus did history begin.

But before history existed, before time began, King Nimrod led the People out of Urdumheim. Across the stunned and empty spaces of the world they fled, through the plains and over the silent snowy mountains, not knowing if these places had existed before then or if their need and desire had pulled them into being. The land was as large as the sky in those days, and as unpopulated. But in no place could they linger, for always their enemies were close on their heels, eager to return them to slavery.

So came they at last to the limitless salt marshes that lay between the land and the distant sea. It was a time of great floods, when the waters poured endlessly from the heavens and the grass-choked streams were become mighty rivers and there was no dry ground anywhere to be seen. They built shallow-drafted reed boats then, well-pitched beneath, and set across the waters, where no demon could follow. Skimming swiftly over the drowned lands, they drove into the white rains, seeking refuge. Until at last they came upon what was then an island barely distinguishable from the waters. Here they settled, and here they prospered.

They were giants, that first generation, and half the things in the world were made by them first. Utnapishtim invented boats and navigation. Shaleb invented writing and record-keeping. Inanna invented weaving and

the arts of lovemaking. Nimrod himself was responsible for bridges, houses, coins, and stoneworking, as well as cultivation and animal husbandry and many other things. But greatest of all his inventions was language. The People could not speak before he taught them how.

I was a boy when the winged lion came. That morning, Ninsun had set me to work pitting cherries. It was a tedious, fiddling chore, and because Ninsun had gathered four bushels, it lasted for hours, but there was no way out of it. So as I labored, I asked her questions about the way things used to be and why things were as they are now. Of all the First, she was the least closemouthed. Which is not to say she was at all talkative.

“Why is there work?” I asked.

“Because we are lucky.”

It didn’t seem lucky to me to have to work, and I said so.

“Work makes sense. You labor, you grow tired. You make something, you’re better off than you were before. Imagine the world if it weren’t that way.”

“What was the world like before the People came here?”

“There are no words to describe it.”

“Why not?”

“Because there was no language. Nimrod invented language as a way for us to escape from Urdumheim.”

“What was Urdumheim like?”

“King Nimrod gave it that name afterward so we could talk about it. When we lived there, it wasn’t called anything.”

“But what was it *like*?”

She looked at me without answering. Then abruptly she opened her mouth in a great O. The interior of her mouth was blacker than soot, blacker than midnight, black beyond imagining. That horrible hole in reality opened wider and wider, growing until it was larger than her face, larger than the room, until it threatened to swallow me up and along with me the entire village and King Nimrod’s mountain and all the universe beyond. There

were flames within the darkness, though they shed no light, and cold mud underfoot. My stomach lurched and I was overcome by a pervasive sense of wrongness. It seemed to me that I had no name and that it was thus impossible to distinguish between myself and everything else, and that therefore I could by definition never, ever escape from this dreadful and malodorous place.

Ninsun closed her mouth. "It was like that." The clay pot where we dumped the discarded pits was full, so she tossed them out the window. "This is almost done. When we're finished here, you can run along and play."

\* \* \* \*

I don't think that Ninsun was my mother, but who can tell? We had not invented parentage at that time. No one had ever died, and thus no one had foreseen the need to record the passing of generations. Children were simply raised in common, their needs seen to by whoever was closest.

Nor was I the child Ninsun thought me. True, when she released me at last, I did indeed react exactly as a child would in the same circumstances. Which is to say, I was out the door in an instant and hurtling across the fields so fast that a shout to come back would never have reached my ears. My reasons, however, were not those of a boy but of a man, albeit a young one still.

I plunged into the woods and cool green shadows flowed over my body. Only when I could no longer hear the homely village noises of Whitemarsh, the clang of metal in the smithy and the snore of wood at the sawyer's, did I slow to a walk.

Whitemarsh was one of seven villages on an archipelago of low hills that rose gently from the reeds. On Great Island were Landfall, Providence, and First Haven. Farther out on islands of their own were Whitemarsh, Fishweir, Oak Hill, and Market. Other, smaller communities there were, some consisting of as few as three or two houses, in such profusion that no man knew them all. But the chief and more populous islands were connected by marsh-roads of poured sand paved with squared-off logs.

By secret ways known only to children (though I was no longer a child, I had been one not long before), I passed through the marshes to a certain hidden place I knew. It was a small meadow clearing just above the banks of one of the numberless crystal-clear creeks that wandered mazily through the reeds. In midday the meadow lay half in sun and half in shade, so that it

was a place of comfort whatever the temperature might be. There I threw myself down on the grass to await Silili.

Time passed with agonizing slowness. I worried that Silili had come early and, not finding me there, thought me faithless and left. I worried that she had been sent to Fishweir to make baskets for a season. A thousand horrid possibilities haunted my imagination. But then at last, she stepped into the clearing.

I rose at the sight of her, and she knelt down beside me. We clasped hands fervently. Her eyes shone. When I looked into those eyes, I felt the way the People must have when the first dawn filled the sky with colors and Aruru sent her voice upward to meet them and so sang the first song. The joy I felt then was almost unbearable; it filled me to bursting.

We lay together, as we had every day for almost a month, kissing and fondling each other. Silili's skin was the color of aged ivory and her nipples were pale apricot. Her pubic hair was light and downy, a golden mist over her mons. It offered no more resistance than a cloud when I ran my fingers through it. She stroked my thighs, my chest, the side of my face. Then, blushing and yet not once taking her eyes from mine, she said, "Gil ... I'm ready now."

"Are you sure?" It is a measure of how deeply I loved Silili that I asked at all instead of simply taking her at her word. And a measure of how much I wanted her that when I asked I did not stop stroking her gently with one finger, over and over, along the cleft between her legs, fearful that if I removed my hand her desire for me would go with it. "I can wait, if you want."

"No," she said, "now."

We did then as lovers always do.

\* \* \* \*

Afterward, we lay together talking quietly, sometimes laughing. Inevitably, our conversation turned to what we would be wearing when next we saw each other.

Children, of course, go everywhere naked. But after this, Silili and I would need to wear clothing in public. Tonight she would go to Inanna and beg enough cloth to make a dress, and thus claim for herself the modesty of a grown woman. Like any male my age, I had already made a shirt and

trousers and hidden them away against this very day.

Silili brushed her hands down the front of her body, imagining the dress. "What color should it be?" she asked.

"Green, like the forest. Reddish-orange, like the flames of the sun."

"Which I am to be, then—forest or sun? You are as inconstant as the sky, Gil."

"Blue," I said, "like the sky. White, like the moon and the clouds. Red and yellow and blue like the stars. Orange and purple like the sunset or the mountains at dawn." For she was all things to me and, since in my present frame of mind all things were good, all things in turn put me in mind of her.

She made an exasperated noise, but I could tell she was pleased.

It was at that instant that I heard a soft, heavy *thump* on the ground behind me. Lazily, I turned my head to see what it was.

I froze.

An enormous winged lion stood on the bank of the stream opposite us. Its fur and feathers were red as blood. Its eyes were black from rim to rim.

Silili, who in all her life had never feared anything, sat up beside me and smiled at the thing. "Hello," she said. "What are you?"

"Hello," the great beast replied. "What are you? Hello. Hellohellohello." Lifting its front paws in the air, it began to prance about on its hind legs in the drollest manner imaginable. "What are you are what. You are what you are what you are. Hello? Hellello. Lo-lo-lo-lo-lo! Hell you are lo you are. What what what!"

Silili threw back her head and laughed peals of silvery laughter. I laughed as well, but uneasily. The creature's teeth were enormous, and it did not seem to me that the cast of its face was at all kindly. "A lion?" Silili asked. "A bird?"

"A bird a bird a bird! A lion a lion a bird!" the beast sang. "You are a lion you are hello what are a bird hello you are a what a what hello. Bird-lion bird-lion lion lion *bird!*" Then he bounded up into the air, snapped out his mighty wings, and, flapping heavily, flew up and off into the sky, leaving

nothing behind him but a foul stench, like rotting garbage.

We both laughed and applauded. How could we not?

But when later I returned to Whitemarsh, and my sister came running out from the village to meet me, I raised my hand in greeting and I could not remember what word I normally used in such circumstances. I wracked my brain for it time and again, to no avail. It was completely gone. And when I tried to describe the beast I had seen, I could remember the words for neither “bird” nor “lion.”

\* \* \* \*

Still, that strange incident did not stay long in our minds, for that was the summer when Delondra invented dancing. This was an enormous event among our generation not only for its own sake but because this was the first major creation by anyone who was not of the First. As adults we had to spend our days in labor of various sorts, of course, but we met every evening on the greensward to dance until weariness or romance led us away.

Music had been invented by Enlil years before and we had three instruments then: the box lute, the tabor, and the reed pipe. When the evening darkened, we lit pine-tar torches and set them in a circle about the periphery of the dancing ground and so continued until the stars were high in the sky. Then by ones and twos we drifted homeward, some to make love, others to their lonely beds, and still others to weep and rage, for our hearts were young and active and no way had yet been invented to keep them from being broken.

Which is what we at first thought had happened when Mylitta, who had hours before wandered off into the woods with Irra, returned in tears. (This was late in the summer, when we had been dancing for months.) Mylitta and Irra were lovers, a station or distinction we of the second generation had created on our own. None of the First had lovers, but rather coupled with whoever caught their fancy; but we, being younger and, we thought, wiser, preferred our own arrangements. Even though they did not always bring us joy.

As, we thought, now. Everybody assumed the worst of Irra, of course. But when Mylitta’s friends gathered around to comfort her, it turned out that she had been frightened by some creature she had seen.

“What was it like?” Silili asked.

“White,” Mylitta said, “like the moon. It came up from the ground like ... something long and slithery that moves its head like this.” She moved her hand from side to side in a sinuous, undulating motion.

“A snake?” somebody said.

Mylitta looked puzzled, as if the word meant nothing to her. She shook her head, as if dismissing nonsense and, still upset, said, “Its mouth was horrible, with teeth set in circles. And it ... and it ... *talked!*”

Now the forgotten lion came to my mind again and, apprehensively, I asked, “Did it say anything? Tell us what it said.”

But to this Mylitta could only shake her head.

“Where is Irra?” Silili asked.

“He stayed behind to talk some more.”

There was then such a hubbub of talk and argument as only the young can have. In quick order we put together a party to go after our friend and bring him back to us safe. Snatching up knives and staves—knives had been invented long ago, and even then staves had been employed as weapons—we started toward the woods.

Then Irra himself came sauntering out of the darkness, hands behind his back, grinning widely. Mylitta ran to his side and kissed him, but he pushed her playfully away. Then he made a gesture that took in all of us, with our knives and staves and grim expressions, and raised one eyebrow.

“We were going to look for you.”

“Mylitta said there was a...” With Irra’s eyes boring into mine, I could not think of the word for snake. “One of those long, slithery things. Only large. And white.”

“Why won’t you talk?” Mylitta cried. “Why don’t you say anything?”

Irra grinned wider and wider. And now a peculiar thing happened. His face began to glow brighter and brighter, until it shone like the moon.

He held out his hand, fingers spread. Then he squeezed it into a fist. When he opened it again, the fingers had merged into one another, forming

a smooth brown flipper. “The ... whatever ... showed me how to do this.”

Nobody knew what to make of his stunt. But then Mylitta started crying again, and by the time we had her soothed down, Irra was gone and it was too late for dancing anyway. So we all went home.

\* \* \* \*

After that evening, strange creatures appeared in more and more profusion at the edges of our settlements. They were never the same twice. There was a thing like an elephant but with impossibly long legs, like a spider’s. There was a swarm of scorpions with human faces that were somehow all a single organism. There was a ball of serpents. There was a bird of flame. They arrived suddenly, spoke enigmatically, and then they left.

Every time somebody talked to one of these monsters, words vanished from his or her vocabulary.

Why didn’t we go to our elders? The First had powers that dwarfed anything we could do on our own. But we didn’t realize initially that this was anything to do with *them*. It seemed of a piece with the messy emotional stuff of our young lives. Particularly since, for the longest time, Irra was at the center of it.

We did not have a name for it then, but Irra had become a wizard. He had a wizard’s power and a wizard’s weirdness. He would pop up without warning—striding out of a thicket, jumping down from a rooftop—to perform some never-before-seen action, and then leave. Once he walked right past Mylitta and into her house and before her astonished eyes urinated on the pallet where she slept! Another time, he rode across the fields on a horse of snow, only half-visible in the white mist that steamed off its back, and when the children came running madly out to see, shouting, “Irra! Irra!” and “Give us a ride!” he pelted them with snowballs made from the living substance of his steed, and galloped off, jeering.

These were troubling occurrences, but they did not seem serious enough to warrant bothering the First over. Not until I lost Silili.

I was working in the marshes that day, cutting salt hay for winter fodder. It was hot work, and I was sweating so hard that I took off my tunic and labored in my trousers alone. But Silili had promised to bring a lunch to me and I wanted her to see how hard I could work. I bent, I cut, I straightened, and as I turned to drop an armful of hay I saw her standing at



the edge of the trees, staring at me. Just the sight of her took my breath away.

I must have looked pleasing to her as well for, without saying a word, she took my hand and led me to that same meadow where we first made love. Wordlessly, then, we repeated our original vows.

Afterward, we lay neither speaking nor touching each other. Just savoring our closeness. I remember that I was lying on my stomach, staring at a big, goggle-eyed bullfrog that sat pompously in the shallows of the stream, his great grin out of the water, his pulsing throat within, when suddenly the ground shook under us and a grinding noise filled the air.

We danced to our feet as something like an enormous metal beetle with a kind of grinder or drill in place of a head erupted from the ground, spattering dirt in all directions. The gleaming round body was armored with polished iron plates. A crude mouth opened at the end of an upheld leg and said, "Who." Then, "Are." And finally, "You?"

"Go away," I said sulkily.

"Gooooooooo," it moaned. "Waaaaaaaaaay. Aaaaaaaaaa."

"No!" I pelted the thing with clods of dirt, but it did not go away. I snatched up a stick and broke it across the beetle's back, to no visible effect. "Nobody wants you here."

"Nooooobody." Its voice was rough and metallic, like nothing I had ever heard before. It reared up on its four hind legs, waving its front pair in the air. "Waaaaaaaaants." I smashed a stone against one of those hind legs, snapping it off at the joint. Untroubled, it snatched up Silili with its forelegs. "Yoooooooouuuuu!"

Then the monstrosity disappeared into the forest.

It had all happened too quickly. For the merest instant I was still, stunned, unable to move. And in that instant, faster than quicksilver, the beetle sped through the trees so nimbly that it was gone before I could react. Leaving behind it nothing but Silili's rapidly dwindling scream.

"Silili!" I cried after her. "Come back! *Silili!*"

Which is how, fool that I was, I lost her name.

Afterward, however, I discovered that the limb I had torn from the beetle was that same one that held the creature's mouth. "Where is she?" I demanded. "Where has she been taken to?"

"Ur," it said. "Dum." A long silence. "Heim."

\* \* \* \*

I ran back to Whitemarsh. There was an enormous copper disk, as tall as I was, leaning against the side of the redsmith's forge. I seized a hammer and began slamming on it to raise a great din and bring out everyone within earshot. They say that this was the first alarm that was ever sounded, but what did I care for that?

All the village came running up. Several of the First—Ninsun, Humbaba, two or three others—were among them.

I flung down the hammer.

"Girl!" I cried. Then, shaking my head, "Not girl—woman!" I had questioned the beetle-limb most of the way back to Whitemarsh before concluding that I would learn nothing useful from it and throwing it away in disgust. The interrogation had been a mistake, however, for it half-drained me of language. Now, because I had lost the word *lover*, I slapped my chest. "Mine." And, howling, "Gone, gone, gone!"

A gabble of voices, questions, outraged cries rose up from the crowd. But Ninsun *slammed* her hands together and silenced them all with a glare. Then she folded herself down and patted the ground beside her.

"Sit," she said to me. "Tell."

It took time and labor, but I eventually made myself understood.

"When did this begin?" Ninsun asked and, when everybody began talking at once, "You first," she said, pointing. "Then you. Then you." The story that she eventually stitched together was clumsily told, but the old woman nodded and clucked and probed until it had all been brought to light. At last she sighed and said, "The Igigi have come, then."

"What are the Igigi?" Mylitta asked. My body had caught up with the horror of Silili's loss by then. I was heavy with grief and speechless with despair.

“Igigi’ is just a name we gave to them so we could talk about them.”

“Yes, but what *are* they?” Mylitta insisted.

“There are not the words to describe the Igigi.”

A frustrated growl rose up from the assembled young. I noticed the First scowling at each other when this happened.

“It is the Igigi,” Ninsun said, “who ruled over us in Urdumheim. Surely I have told you about them before?”

Some of us nodded. Others shook their heads.

“The Igigi are logophages.” Ninsun regarded us keenly from under those bushy eyebrows of hers. “Nimrod put much of his power into words, and they make us strong. The Igigi feed upon words in order to deny us that strength. Thus they gain power over us.”

“Girl-woman-mine,” I reminded her. I flung an arm out toward the forest and then drew it back to me. “Woman-to-me. Woman-to-me!”

“Enmul,” Ninsun said. A boy who was known to all for his speed and endurance stepped forward. “Run to the top of Ararat. Bring Nimrod here.”

\* \* \* \*

King Nimrod came down from the mountain like a storm cloud in his fury. His hair and robes lashed about him, as if in a mighty wind, and sparks shot out from his beard. “You should have told me this long ago,” he said to me, glowering, when Ninsun had told him all. “Fool! What did you think language is *for*?”

Humbly kneeling before him, I said, “Girl-woman-mine.” Then I slammed my heart three times to show that I hurt. “Lost-fetch-again!”

With a roar, the king knocked me flat with his enormous fist. When I stood up, he struck me down again. When I stretched out a hand in supplication he kicked me. Finally, when I could not move, Ninsun snapped an order and I was lifted up by the arms and carried away. Radjni and Mammetum laid me down in the shade of a tree, cleaning my wounds and applying mint leaves and mustards to my bruises.

Miserably, I watched as King Nimrod sent runners to every village and

outlying house, to gather the People together. Already the First were gathering (they did not need to be sent for), and it was not long before there was such an assembly as had never gathered before nor has since, nor ever will again: all the People in the world.

King Nimrod then spoke: "Oh ye of little faith! I sang high the mountain so that it might be a fortress and protection for the People in times of peril. When I was done, Ararat was to tower so high it would touch the sky, where no demon would dare go. Then would we have made our homes there and been safe forever.

"Alas, our enemies have arrived before my work was done. The slopes of Ararat will slow but not stop them. So before their armies converge upon us, we must prepare to defend ourselves."

All this I narrate as things I have heard and know to be true. Yet, even though I was there, Nimrod's speech was incomprehensible to me. This is what I actually heard:

\* \* \* \*

faith! mountain  
fortress protection Ararat  
tower demon  
safe forever.  
Alas enemies Ararat  
armies converge

\* \* \* \*

After a hurried consultation among the First, Shaleb the Scribe began sketching plans for a defense. With a gesture, he stripped the land before him of vegetation. Enkidu handed him a staff and he drew a circle: "Ararat," he said. Along its flanks, he drew three nested semicircles: "Curtain wall. Barbican. Palisades." Squiggly lines made a river. He drew a line across it: "Dam." Other lines represented streams. He reshaped them: "Channels."

So it began. At King Nimrod's orders, we cut down trees and built palisades. We dug trenches, redirected streams, created lakes. Foodstuffs were brought in and locked away in warehouses we built for that purpose. Weapons were forged. All this was done under direction of the First. Those of the second generation who'd had the least exposure to the Igigi were made overseers and supervisors, in proportion to their ability to understand directions. Those who could follow only the simplest orders were made

runners and carriers. Down at the very bottom of the social order were those such as I who could not be trusted to comprehend the plainest commands and so were used as brute labor, hauling logs or lugging stones, driven to obedience by kicks, cuffs, and curses.

I will not dwell upon my misery, for all that it was compounded by being so richly deserved. Suffice it to say, I suffered.

Then one day a pillar of smoke appeared on the horizon. We put down our shovels and axes—those who were trusted with tools—and as we did so a second pillar arose, and then a third, and a fourth, and a hundredth, until we could no longer count them all. Dark they rose up and wide they spread, until they merged and turned the sky black.

Inanna, who was best-liked of all the First, passed through the camp, handing out strips of cotton cloth. So quick was she that her feet never once touched the earth, and to each one she met she said, “The Igigi are burning the forests. When the smoke comes, fold this cloth like so, dip it in the water, and hold it to your face. This will make breathing easier.” When she saw that I did not understand her instructions, she took me by the hand and comprehension flowed through me like a stream of crystal-clear water.

All in an instant, I understood the magnitude of her sacrifice. For the trickle of power that had flowed out of her was gone forever. She would never have it again.

Shocked, I bowed low before her.

My face must have revealed my every thought, for Inanna smiled. “I thank you for your sympathy,” she said. “But your gratitude comes too soon. I cannot stay here, holding your hand, and without my touch you will revert to what you were before. But be patient. Be brave. Work hard. And when all is done, there will be a time of healing.”

Then she was gone, and with her the temporary gift of understanding.

That night, for the first time, I wept for myself as well as for Silili.

In the morning, walls of flame converged upon us, destroying forests and reed-marshes alike. But Inanna’s charm was strong, and Shaleb had so cunningly redirected the waters that the flames could not reach us. Even so, the sun did not shine that day, and when night came, we could see the campfires of the Igigi, ring upon ring of them through the murky distance. Their numbers were legion. My heart grew cold at the sight.

For an instant I felt a bleak and total despair. And in that instant, I leapt up from where I had been lying, exhausted, and seized a rope, looped it around a nearby log, and turned to the nearest supervisor. It was Damuzi, who had never been particularly fond of me.

I snorted, as if I were an ox. Then I tugged at the rope. I looked around me, from one quarter of the camp to another. Then I snorted again.

Damuzi looked astonished. Then he laughed. He pointed to a far section of our defenses where the palisades were incomplete. His finger moved from palisades to logs, back and forth repeatedly, until I nodded my comprehension: As many logs as I could manage. Mylitta, who, through her frequent exposure to Irra, had become a man-beast like myself, had been watching us intently. Now she leaped up and looped a length of rope around the far side of my log. She looked at me and snorted.

Together we pulled.

\* \* \* \*

The next day, the Igigi had advanced so close that they could be seen, like swarming insects, on the far side of the lake we had created as our first line of defense. Those who could—those with wings or the ability to swim—attacked us directly. A monstrous feathered serpent came twisting through the water and smashed into the lakefront wall with such force that logs splintered and buckled. Meanwhile, creatures that were something like bears and something like squids descended from the sky and tried to seize People in their tentacles.

Though we cast them back, they kept returning. Pain meant nothing to the Igigi and so varied were their forms that it was difficult to find a way to cripple them all. Even King Nimrod was hard pressed to counter them.

It was then that Humbaba came lumbering forward. “Great hunter, draw your bow!” he cried. And when Nimrod had done as he directed, “Point it toward the nearest of the foe. Let loose thy arrow. Speed it toward the abomination’s body!”

The arrow sped. When it struck the feathered serpent, the demon threw back its head and howled. Then it fell and did not rise again.

“What wonder is this?” somebody asked.

"It is my greatest gift, for once given it cannot be taken back," Humbaba said. "I call it *death*."

At his direction, we set upon the invaders with sticks and knives and rocks. They fell before our onslaught and, briefly, all was satisfactory. But in the aftermath, there lay one body on the ground which was not that of an Igigi. It belonged to Shullat, who was gentle and fond of animals and of whom nobody ever had a bad word to say.

Shullat's death saddened us all greatly, for she was the first of the People ever to die.

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That same day, shortly after sundown, Atraharsis passed through the camp distributing spears and knives as long as a tall man's arm. These latter were unknown to us before this, and he had to demonstrate their use over and over again, the sweat on his face glistening by the light of our campfires.

He did not offer any to the oxen, of course, for we were no longer People. But I watched carefully and when I thought I understood how the knives were to be used, stood before him and made a coughing sound to get his attention. Then I pointed to the long-knife, made a slashing motion, and said, "Swssh."

Atraharsis stared in astonishment. I gestured in the direction of the Igigi hordes. Then I turned my back on them and, waving my arms in a whimsical fashion, cried, "Uloolaloolaloo!" in as close as I could manage to the demons' nonsense-speech.

Those standing nearby laughed.

I pretended I held a long-knife and spun around. I jabbed. "Swssh!" I became an Igigi again, clutched my stomach, and made "Glugluglug" noises to indicate blood flowing out. Finally, I became myself and, face furious with hatred, hacked and slashed at my imagined foe. "Swssh! Swssh! Swssh!"

Then I pointed to the bundle of long knives in Atraharsis's arms. "Swssh." I held out my hand.

Atraharsis's face darkened.

He aimed a kick at me.

I danced back and nearly fell into the campfire. He advanced upon me, speaking angrily. Out of all he said, I caught only the words “traitor” and “Igigi.” But it enraged those listening and they rained blows upon me.

All in a panic, I broke free of the throng and tried to escape their wrath. Jeers and clods of mud flew after me. The children pursued me with sticks.

I was harried across the camp all the way to the outermost palisade. There I slipped through the half-rebuilt gap in the wall created when the feathered serpent had smashed into it. I ran up the new lakefront until it opened out into marshland again, and there I lost my pursuers. For a time I wandered, lost and miserable, among the reeds and island copses, with nowhere to go and no place I could stay. Then a pack of seven-tailed wolves that glowed a gentle blue in the moonlight surrounded me and took me captive.

I became a prisoner of the Igigi.

\* \* \* \*

Now began for me the darkest part of that dark era. Every day I was driven along with the other captives to the lakeside across from the First Haven fortifications. The first time, we were lashed with whips that stung like scorpions while we tried desperately to intuit what we were meant to do. Finally, randomly, one of our number began scooping up mud with his hands and the whips moved away from him. We others joined him with hands and flat stones and scraps of wood and soon it became apparent that we were digging a trench to drain the lake.

How often I looked up from my work to stare longingly across that lake! The Igigi continued to attack the People by ones and threes. Sometimes they returned with captives, but more commonly they were slain. Yet they seemed not to learn from this, for they neither lessened nor increased their attacks, nor did they alter their tactics.

Nighttimes, we were herded into a walled enclosure (we had built it ourselves, of course) where we were fed from a trough and slept huddled together like animals. If I'd thought I was an ox before, I was doubly so now, for my fellows were no longer recognizable as People. They had given up all hope of rescue and when I tried to recreate my crude system of snorts and signs with them, they did not respond. They crapped and



coupled in the open as the urge took them and pissed right where they stood. Their eyes, when they looked upon me at all, were dull and lifeless.

They had despaired.

Almost, I despaired as well. But the Igigi had taken Silili from me and that meant that she was out here, somewhere, in their vast encampment. So my thoughts were foremost and forever upon her and even when I was most exhausted I never ceased from looking for her. Hopeless though my cause might be, it maintained me when nothing else could.

Then, one evening, Irra came to the slave pens. He was dressed in spotless white blouse and trousers. There was a coiled leather strap in his hand and a knowing smile on his face.

Reflexively, I tried to cry out his name—but of course that had disappeared from my mind long ago—and managed only a kind of barking sound.

Unhurriedly, Irra tied the strap about my neck. Then, holding one end in a negligent hand, he turned and walked away.

Perforce, I followed.

We walked not toward the dam but through the Igigi encampment. What a foulness they had made of the clean, stream-fed lands! The trees were uprooted and the marsh grasses burnt to stubble and ashes. Craters had been blasted in the earth. The ground was trampled into mud. This did not bother Irra, for he walked a hand's-breadth above it, but there were places where I sank to the knees in cold muck and was half-choked by his impatient tugging on the leash before I could struggle free. Dimly, then, I began to realize that Urdumheim was not a place but a condition ... and that, struggle though I might, I was helplessly mired within it.

Eventually we came to a halt in a place that was neither better nor worse than any other in that horrid and despoiled landscape. Here, Irra pulled a small but obviously sharp knife from his pocket. He held up his little finger before my face and made a long and angry speech, not a word of which I understood.

Then he cut off the tip of his finger.

Blood spurted.

Irra thrust the finger-stub at me, and I backed away uncomprehendingly. With a noise of disgust, he pried open my mouth and shoved the goblet of flesh in. I gagged, but he forced me to swallow.

“Can you understand me now?” he asked.

I could!

“This will only work between the two of us,” Irra said sternly. “Do not think you can return to the People now, for you cannot. To them, you will remain as dumb as a stone and their speech shall be to you as the twittering of birds.”

“I understand.” I almost didn’t care, so great was my relief to be able to speak again. I felt as if a part of my mind had been restored to me. I could think clearly for the first time since my capture.

“Then follow me.”

\* \* \* \*

Deep in the Igigi encampment, we came upon a tremendous fish. It was larger by far than any whale. A silvery film covered the vast, listless eye that stared blindly at the sky from its rotting side. Flies swarmed all about it and the smell was so terrible I almost vomited. Irra had to half-choke me to keep me going. The stench grew worse the closer we got, until we reached the pink gill slit and so passed within.

The interior was opulent beyond imagining. Polished stone floors supported pillars of agate and turquoise and jade, which rose to a vaulted ceiling so high that shadows nested in it. Flambeaux lined the fishbone-ribbed walls and wavering lines of white candles floated high in the air above. Beneath them clay-fleshed homunculi stumped and winged eyeballs flew and giant snails slid, all passing to and fro without any visible purpose amid splendors that dwarfed everything the People had. Such was the power of the Igigi. Yet they had forced their captives to slave in the mud to build what they could have made with a thought!

To the far end of the great room, a sweep of serpentine steps rose to a dais atop which were what at first appeared to be two mounds of garbage, but on approach revealed themselves as crudely built thrones.

We stopped at the foot of the dais, and the figures seated upon the thrones arose.

“Kneel!” Irra whispered urgently. He did not name the two, but by the awe and disgust I felt within me, I knew them for who they were.

The King and Queen of the Igigi advanced to the top of the steps and stared down on us.

The Queen’s face was perfection itself, as sweet and beautiful as the dawn of the very first day. She wore a billowing robe of soft scarlet feathers which opened here and there to reveal a body that would have been as ravishing as her face were it not for her breasts, which reached down to the ground and dragged on the floor behind her.

The King was entirely naked, but his legs were jointed wrong, forcing him to walk backward, buttocks-first. He had no head, but when he came to a stop and turned, I saw that his features were on his chest and abdomen, so that when he opened his mouth to speak, his stomach gaped wide and his penis wagged on his chin like a goatee.

The hall hushed in anticipation of his words.

“Brekekekek koax koax!” he cried. “Tarball honeycrat kadaa muil. Thrippsy pillivinx. Jolifanto bambla o falli bambla. Aeroflux electroluxe. Flosky! Beebul trimble flosky! Grossiga m’pfa habla horem. Archer Daniel Midlands codfeather squinks. Spectrophotometer. AK-47. Rauserauserauserause. Zero commercials *next!*”

The Queen threw back her head and laughed like a hyena.

“They demand to know,” Irra said, “what new thing this is that the First have done. We send out our best warriors and they do not return. Why?”

I said nothing.

“Why?” Irra repeated angrily. But still I did not respond.

The Queen looked at the King and yipped sharply twice.

“I don’t think we need to be sublimable,” the King said. “I think we agree, the past is over. I’m looking forward to a good night’s sleep on the soil of a friend. And, you know, it’ll take time to restore chaos and order—order out of chaos. But we will. I understand reality. If you’re asking me ... would I understand reality, I do. There will be serious consequences, and if there isn’t serious consequences, it creates adverse consequences.

Our enemies never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we. Does that make any sense to you? It's kind of muddled. I understand small business growth. I was one. They underestimated me. My answer is bring 'em on."

"He says that if you do not speak voluntarily, you will be made to speak."

I crossed my arms.

The King shrugged. Almost casually, he said, "Pain."

"Paain," the Queen repeated. "Paaaaaiiiiiinnnn," she moaned. She made it sound as if it were a good and desirable thing. Then she nodded in my direction.

Pain fell on me.

How to describe what I felt then? Perhaps once, when you were chopping wood, your axe took an unlucky bounce off a knot and the blade sank itself in your leg, so that you fell down screaming and all the world disappeared save your agony alone. Maybe your clothes caught fire and when your friends slapped out the flames, the burning went on and on because your flesh was blackened and blistered. You could not reason then. You howled. You could not think of anything except the pain. That was how it was for me. I folded into myself, weeping.

"Kraw," said the King. "Craaaaaawwwawaw. Craw-aw-wul. Crawl."

Irra looked at me. "Crawl!" he said.

And, pity help me, I did. I crawled, I groveled, I wailed, I pleaded, and when at last my tormentors granted me permission to speak, I told them everything I knew. "It is called death," I said. "Humbaba invented it." And I explained its nature as best I could, including the fact that the People were subject to it as well as the Igigi. It would have been better, far better, had I said nothing. But the pain unmanned me, and I babbled on and on until Irra finally said, "Enough."

Thus it was that I became a traitor.

\* \* \* \*

The next day the war began in earnest. Where before the Igigi had

attacked in ones and threes, now they came in phalanxes. Where before they had taken captives, now they sought only to kill. Such were the fruits of my treachery.

The People fought like heroes, every one. They *were* heroes—the first and the best that ever were. They fought as no one had ever fought before or ever will again. Glory shone about their brows. Lightnings shot out of their eyes.

They lost.

Do I need to tell you about the fighting? It was as ugly and confusing then as it is today. There were shouts of anger and screams of pain. Blood gushed. Bodies fell. I saw it all from across the lake where—pointlessly, needlessly—we animals labored to widen the drainage canal. This despite the fact that the lake was half-empty already and its mud flats no hindrance to the attacking Igigi at all. But if we stopped we were whipped, and so we toiled on.

The palisades fell. Then the inner walls behind them.

The People retreated up the mountain. Halfway to the summit they had built a final redoubt and this they held against all the Igigi could throw against them. The sides of Ararat were steep and the way up it narrow, and thus the demons could only attack in small numbers. Always, Nimrod stalked the heights, his great bow in hand, so that they dared not approach by air.

At night, as I was herded back to the slave pens, I could see the lower slopes of Ararat ablaze with fires too numerous to count. These were not campfires such as armies build against the cold and to cook their food, for the Igigi needed neither warmth nor sustenance. They were built for no good reason at all, as acts of vandalism. The closer ones flickered as the bodies of the Igigi passed before them, for their numbers were legion.

One evening as the gates to the slave compound slammed shut behind me and I sank to the ground, too tired to struggle through the other animals and fight for food at the trough, it struck me that I was going to die soon and that under the circumstances this might well be no bad thing. As I was thinking these dark thoughts, the gates opened again and in rode Irra on a beast that stumbled and struggled to bear up under his weight. He leapt down from his mount and the beast straightened. It was a woman! She was naked as a child, but leather straps had been lashed about her so that her arms were bound tight to her sides. A saddle was strapped to her

back, and there was a bit in her mouth.

For a second I thought it was Silili and my heart leapt up with anger and joy. I rose to my feet. Then I recognized her and my heart fell again.

“Mylitta,” I said sadly. “You were captured too.”

“She cannot understand you,” Irra said. “Have you forgotten?”

I had. Now, however, I moved one foot like an ox pawing the ground: Hello.

Mylitta did not respond. Her eyes were dull and lifeless, and so I knew that she had, like so many other captives, given up all hope and sunk down into a less-than-animal state. Either she had been captured in an Igigi raid or—more likely, it seemed to me—she had slipped away to look for her lover. And, finding him, been treated thus.

I do not think I have ever hated another human being as in that instant I hated Irra.

“Stop staring at the beast!” Irra commanded. “Nimrod broods upon the mountaintop. Our King and Queen believe he contemplates some sorcery so mighty that even he fears its consequences. They feel his growing resolve upon the night winds. So he must be stopped. It is their command that you kill him.”

“Me?” I struggled against the urge to sink back to the ground. “I can barely stand. I’d laugh if I had the strength for it.”

“You shall have all the strength you need.” Irra drew a peeled willow wand from his tunic and with it struck me between the shoulder blades. I grunted and bent over double as enormous wings of bone and leather erupted from my back. When I straightened, I saw that Irra had given himself bat-wings as well.

“Follow!” he cried, and leapt into the air.

Involuntarily, I surged after him. Below me, poor Mylitta dwindled into an unmoving speck and was lost among the other captive slaves. That was the last that ever I saw her.

We flew.

\* \* \* \*

Under other circumstances, it would have been a glorious experience. Flying was easier than swimming. My muscles worked surely and strongly, and the wind felt silky-smooth under my wings. But the lands we flew over were ugly and defiled. Pits and trenches had been gouged into them for no purpose whatsoever. A constellation of trash-fires that had once been our crofts smoldered under us. The very clouds overhead were lit a sullen orange by them.

“Look upon your work,” I said bitterly.

Irra swooped downward, drawing me involuntarily after him, so that we skimmed low over the mud-flats of the half-drained lake. They were littered with corpses. “Behold *yours*,” he said. “And tell me—whose creation is the more monstrous?”

To this I had no response.

We flew in a wide circle around Ararat, in order to approach the redoubt from its less defended side. For hours we flew. From my lofty vantage I could see the multitudes of invaders infesting and defiling the land below. Their numbers took my breath away. It is scant exaggeration to declare that there was a nation of monsters for each one of the People. I did not see how we could possibly prevail. But at last, in the long gray hour of false dawn, we alit in the steep and disputed mountainside between the People’s final fortress and the Igigi encampments. There, at a touch of Irra’s wand, my wings folded themselves back into my body. Without dismissing his own wings, he proceeded to take a long and leisurely leak against a nearby boulder.

Finally, I spoke. “Mylitta *loved* you! How could you treat her so?”

Irra smiled over his shoulder. “You want reasons. But there are none. Even this stone is wiser than you are.” He turned, still pissing. I had to jump backward, almost spraining an ankle, to avoid being sprayed. “You see? The stone knows that the world is what it is, and so it endures what it must. You hope for better, and so you suffer.” Done, he tucked himself in and said, “Wait here.” Then he threw himself into the air again, soaring higher and higher until he was no larger than a flea. Up he went and down he came. Yet as he drew closer he dwindled in size, so that he grew no larger to the eye. When he reached his starting place, he was as small as a midge. Three times he buzzed around my head.

Then he flew into my ear.

With a dreadful itching sensation that made me claw desperately at my head, Irra burrowed deep into my brain. Coming at last to rest, he said, "Climb upward. When you reach the redoubt, its defenders will recognize you and let you in. If your actions displease me, I will treat you *thus*."

I screamed as every bone in my body shattered and blood exploded from all my orifices.

Then, as quickly as it had come, the pain was gone. I was still standing, and unhurt. Everything but the pain had been an illusion. "That was but a warning," Irra said. "If you disobey or displease me in the least way, I will visit such torments upon you that you will remember the Igigi Queen's ministrations with fond nostalgia. Do you understand?"

Abjectly, I nodded my head.

"Then go!"

Like a mouse, I crept up the mountain's flank, using its trees and bushes for cover when I could and furtively clinging to the bare rock when I could not. Once, I caught a glimpse of Nimrod's gigantic figure as he stood at the topmost peak, back to me, contemplating the war below. His power was a palpable thing, and in that instant I felt sure that Irra's cause was hopeless, for his merest glance, were it to fall upon me, would have burnt me to ashes. Simultaneously, I experienced an involuntary lifting of my spirits, for the upper slopes of Ararat were untouched by the Igigi and the scent of the pines was clean and invigorating. I began to hope and, hoping, began to scheme. The redoubt, when we reached it, was less a thing than a congeries of defenses—here a wall, there a scarp at the top of which defenders stood with piles of stones. If the mountain had been taller and steeper, the People could have held it forever. But I had seen the Igigis' swarming millions and knew that inevitably Ararat must fall. Nevertheless, when I came strolling up King Nimrod's path, whistling and swinging my arms as Irra had directed me to do, I was waved on upward by the guards after the most cursory of examinations.

I was home again.

Despite everything, it felt wonderful.

The People were everywhere working urgently. Shelters were being built and defenses strengthened. Sparks flew upward from the smithies and



baskets of apples and cattail roots were hustled away into newly dug caves. Most astonishing of all, the oxen were People once more! I saw them carrying long-knives and spears and huddled over plans for the defenses, arguing in grunts and snorts. They were clapped on the shoulder in passing by others who clearly could not understand them, and there were even those—I noticed them, though Irra did not seem to—who could speak both tongues. One tall woman strode by with a war-trident over her shoulder, singing words that sounded like nothing I had ever heard before. Clearly, the oxen-speech had evolved.

I was but newly arrived when my old friend Namtar rushed up and, dropping an armful of long-knives on the ground, hugged me.

I pawed the ground with one foot: Hello.

Namtar made a cage of one hand and whistled frantically like a captive bird. Then, opening the hand, he trilled like that same bird escaping. Finally, he said, “Eh?” Meaning: How had I escaped?

I slammed one fist into the other. Holding my hands out as if throttling a monster’s neck, I twisted them. “Snap!” I lied: I fought my way free.

Namtar grinned appreciatively. Then he made a noise—”Shhhweeoo, shhhweeoo!”—like the hurrying wind and pointing first to me and then to the swords, made a carrying gesture. He lifted his voice in a sweet, clear note, which could only refer to she who had invented song: He had to hurry. Would I bring these things to Aruru?

I snorted assent, and he was gone.

“That was well done,” Irra said from within my ear. “Walk briskly. Wait until nobody is watching. Then get rid of this junk.”

I dumped the long-knives on a dung heap, and threw an armload of hay over them so that no one would know. Soon after, somebody called me to her and gave me another chore. So went my day. I worked my way up the slope, smiling cheerfully (for Irra punished me if I was anything less than upbeat), accepting whatever work was given me and then abandoning it when I could and performing it with apparent enthusiasm when I could not. Three steps forward, two steps back. By degrees, I pushed toward Ararat’s summit.

At midday I ate a meager lunch of two taro-cakes and an apple while sitting at the top of a short cliff. It was not far to its bottom, I reflected, only

five body-lengths or so, yet the fall would certainly be enough to kill me.

Though he could not read them, Irra was able to intuit my thoughts. “Cast yourself off,” he suggested mockingly. “If you die, so will I and Their Anarchic Majesties’ plans will come to nothing.”

I shivered involuntarily at the awfulness of his suggestion. For, wretched as I was, I did not wish to die. Nobody truly knows what death is, and so we fear it above all things. Moreover, my dread was all the greater for the idea of death being so new to me.

And yet—was it an altogether ignoble idea?

Irra, I reasoned, taunted me because he thought that I would not—that I *could* not—kill myself, and surely this was an understandable thing to assume since nobody had ever done so before. But after all I had seen and experienced, nothing seemed impossible to me anymore. I went to the very brink of the precipice and looked down. I thought of the People and how much I loved them. I thought of Nimrod, their bulwark and strength. I thought of my joyless existence. But mostly I thought of Silili, lost to me forever. Then I did the bravest thing I had ever done in all my life.

Light and giddy with relief and fear, I stepped off.

Or, rather, I tried to.

My feet would not obey me. Will it though I might, I could not take that one crucial step forward. Deep within my ear, Irra laughed and laughed. “You see? I can control your actions. Never forget that.”

All this time I had been thinking, and the more I thought, the less plausible it seemed that when I finally stood face to face with King Nimrod, I would defeat him in combat. A hundred such as I could not have done so. It did not matter what magics and powers Irra might have. The very idea was absurd.

Now I was angry enough to say so.

Irra was unmoved. “Humbaba invented death,” he said complacently. “Between them, the Igigi and the People invented war. Great works come in threes. You and I, Gil, will create a third and final novelty, and in some ways it will be the greatest of all, for where the others are universal and impersonal, this will be singular and intimate.”

“Will we?”

“Oh, yes, I call it *murder*.”

Irre explained his intent. I was unimpressed. “How does this differ from simply killing somebody?”

“By its treachery. You will approach Nimrod with smiles and salaams. You will oil and braid his hair for him, all the while praising his wisdom and his strength. Then, with his back turned and he unsuspecting, you will pick up a rock and smash it down upon his head with all your might.”

The picture he drew sickened me for I could imagine it all too well: The weight of the rock in my hands. The unsuspecting king. The sound of that great skull splitting. And afterward, his blood gushing. I would give anything not to have this crime on my hands. But Irre had already taught me that pain could render me helpless before it. I sobbed wordlessly.

“Come. We have mighty deeds to accomplish.”

Irre walked me away from the cliff.

\* \* \* \*

The sun was sinking in the west by the time I found myself standing outside a line of new-dug storage caves near the top of the redoubt. Only a steep and stony path separated me from the summit of Ararat, where King Nimrod stood thinking his dark thoughts alone. I put down the basket of bread I had carried hither. From one of the caves I retrieved a jug of oil.

Nobody was looking. I carried the oil and a loaf of bread upward.

Though Nimrod was king and mage, the crest of Ararat was stony and bare. No advisors waited upon him, nor was there any furniture of any sort. He sat brooding upon a rock outcrop, his bow and quiver at his feet. A goatskin of water rested in his shadow, along with a shallow clay bowl for him to drink from. And that was all.

“I remember you, little one,” the king rumbled, glancing down at me. “Whatever became of your lover, your woman-to-me?”

Irre whispered: “He wills comprehension upon you. You may reply.”

I made a bird of my hands and flew it off into the sky. “Chree!” I said,

in imitation of its cry. Gone.

King Nimrod looked sad at that. He reached out one tremendous hand, closed it lightly on my shoulder, and squeezed gently. I thought he would say something consoling, then, and the very thought of him doing so when I had come to kill him nauseated me. But he said only, "Why are you here?"

I proffered the bread.

King Nimrod accepted it. The loaf was large enough to feed three ordinary men, but it looked small in his hand. He began to eat, staring moodily into the distance. Though the invaders had destroyed the trees and rushes, they could not make the waters go away, and so the setting sun filled the land with reflected oranges and reds, rendering it briefly beautiful again.

After a long silence Nimrod spoke to me as one might to a beloved dog—affectionately, but expecting neither comprehension nor response. He was speaking to himself, really, sorting out his thoughts and feelings. "Behold the world," he said. "For a time it was our garden. No more. When Humbaba introduced death, I thought it an evil that might be endured and later undone. For though I cannot negate its effects and those who have died will never return to us, yet I have power to put an end to death. It would drain me completely to do so. But afterward, nobody would ever die again.

"Alas, the world is become a wasteland and there is no way back into the garden. Our choice now is enslavement or death. There is no third way."

I thought that Irra would make his play then, while Nimrod was distracted. But he was cannier than that. Perhaps he noticed some lingering trace of vigilance in the king. Perhaps, knowing that he would have but one opportunity, he was taking no chances. In any event, he waited.

"Ah, child! I am contemplating a great and terrible crime. Would you forgive me for it, if you understood its cost? For henceforth, every man and woman must grow old and die. Is slavery truly worse than that? Yet so great is my hatred for the Igigi that I would rather you and I and everyone else die and turn to dust than that we should submit to them again."

I could not bear to look at the king, knowing what I was about to do. So I stared down at the ground instead. There was the slightest motion in the gloom as a small and torpid animal shifted itself slightly.

It was a toad.

In that instant, a plan flashed into my mind. Casually, so as not to alert Irra, I squatted and picked up a stone. Then I cleared my throat: Watch.

King Nimrod glanced incuriously at me.

Forgive me, little brother, I thought, and I smashed the toad with the stone.

Beaming, I said, "Squirp!" In imitation of the sound it made.

Nimrod's face was a wall of granite. "Never do that again," he said. And, when I flung out an arm indicating all the lands below, infested with demons and suffering and death, "Yes, the world is full of cruelty. Let us not add to it."

He turned away.

Irra was furious. But in Nimrod's presence, he dared not punish me. "This is no time for playing games!" he cried. "After we have done our great deed, I promise you that there will be suffering enough for everyone and that if you want to be among the tormentors, that honor will be yours. But for now, you must think of nothing but our goal and how to reach it. Pick up the oil."

I did.

Standing before the king, I held up the jug in one hand and a comb which I had stolen earlier in the day in the other. I gestured toward his beard. Nimrod nodded abstractedly, so I poured oil into my hands and then, rubbing them together, applied it. I had to stand on tiptoe to do so. When his beard was fragrant and glossy, I began combing it out. Finally, I braided it in many strands, as befit a ruler of his dignity.

I had just finished when, with sudden resolution, King Nimrod stood. "I fear you will curse me every day of your short life for what I am about to do, little one," he said. His words were an almost physical force. I did not need Irra to tell me that he was willing comprehension upon me. "Yet I see no alternative. So it shall be done. This will take all my power and concentration, so I must ask that you not disturb me before it is finished."

At Irra's direction, I tugged my hair and made braiding gestures. "Eh?"

Nimrod laughed gently, as one might at the antics of a child. "If it makes you happy."

Closing his eyes, King Nimrod stretched out his arms to either side, palms upward. His fingers flexed, as if grasping for something in the air, and then clenched as if grasping that intangible thing. A low sound escaped from somewhere deep within his chest. It might have been the mountain talking. A shudder passed through his body, and then Nimrod stood as motionless as the moon before Humbaba had set it in the sky. His face was grim as granite.

After a few minutes, drops of blood appeared on his forehead.

"Go!" Irra whispered urgently.

I picked up a large rock and climbed to the top of the low crag behind the king. There, I set the rock down and, standing beside it, began to oil and comb his hair.

Thunder rolled in the distance, then fell silent. But there was an uneasiness to the silence. It was like unto a distant sound too vast and low to be heard that nevertheless can be felt in the pit of one's stomach and in the back of one's skull. Time passed. The sun touched the horizon and a thin line of liquid gold spread to either side faster than quicksilver.

"What is he doing?" Irra fretted. "What is he *doing*?"

I shrugged, and continued my work.

Never had the sun moved below the edge of the world so quickly. All the land beneath it was an oily darkness, as if something were moving there unseen. Perhaps, I thought, Nimrod was calling great armies of beasts to eat the Igigi. Perhaps he was turning the marshes to tar, to envelop and swallow up our enemies. If such was his contemplated crime—the death of billions—I did not care. Let it happen! Yet the tension in the air intensified as if somewhere, too far away to be heard, a giant were silently screaming.

Nimrod was a statue. The blood from his brow ran down his face and pooled at his feet.

Then the horizon *bulged*.

Deep in the fastness of my mind, Irra cried in a tone of mingled horror

and awe, "He is calling in the ocean! He is commanding it to come to Ararat."

I passed the comb through King Nimrod's hair over and over again, smoothing out the tangles. "So?"

"It will roll over the armies below. It will kill the King and Queen and all their servants!"

"Good. Then there will be a cleansing."

"There is still time!" I hopped down from the rock on which I stood, dropping the comb. I bent down to seize the rock in both hands. With a mighty effort, I raised it up to my chest. None of this had been my doing. Indeed, I tried desperately to resist it. But Irra had seized control of my body.

If Irra could control my body now, that meant he could always have done so. There had been no need for him to drive me with threats and pain. He had only done so in order to make me complicit in his guilt and thus increase my suffering, so that he might enjoy my revulsion and shame.

King Nimrod towered above me. With a jerk, Irra raised the stone up above my head. I gasped in pain.

*That* was the extraordinary thing. I had gasped in pain. Irra had not made me gasp. I had simply done so. Which meant that he controlled only those parts of my body he set his thoughts to controlling. All else was still mine.

I licked my lips to test my theory. And it worked. My mouth remained my own.

"*Squirp!*" I cried as loudly as I could.

Had Nimrod turned to see why I had made such an extraordinary noise, he would have died then and there, for already the stone was descending upon his head. But I had taught him the meaning of my new word, and so he instantly apprehended my warning. Using only a small fraction of his power, the mighty wizard caused tree branches to sprout from his head and shoulders and back. They burst through his skin and clothing. With dazzling swiftness, they divided and multiplied, the end of each branch and twig putting out a long, sharp thorn.

My stone crashed down into the tangled thorn-tree, snapping limbs but coming nowhere near King Nimrod's body, motionless at its center. Twisted black branches grew around me in a cage. The thorns grasped me tightly and I was flung high into the air.

A despairing wail escaped my lips. I did not know if it came from myself or from Irra.

Then, with a roar like the end of the world, I fell into darkness.

\* \* \* \*

When I came to, it was morning and Irra's body lay on the ground beside me. I sat up and touched his throat. It was stone cold. Irra was dead.

Sore and aching though I was, I could not help but feel glad.

The sunlight was brighter than I remembered ever seeing it, and the air smelled of salt. I stared down the slopes of Ararat and for the first time in my life I saw the ocean. It sparkled and danced. White gulls flew above it with shrill cries. To one side, fierce waves crashed against the mountainside with a thunder and boom that said they had come to stay. First Haven was a seaport now and its inhabitants would henceforth be fishermen and sailors as well as hunters and crofters.

The Igigi were nowhere to be seen.

King Nimrod sat hunched nearby, his head resting in his hands. But when I tried to hail him, nothing came from my mouth but a wordless cry. So by this token I knew that our first language—the one that Nimrod had invented to deliver us from Urdumheim—was gone forever, drowned with our demonic foes.

At the sound of my voice, Nimrod stood. To my surprise, when he saw me he grinned broadly. He pawed the ground with one foot, as might an ox. Meaning: Hello. Then he rubbed his hands together and snorted: Let's get to work.

Uncomprehendingly, I watched as Nimrod stooped to pick up a stone from the ground. He held it out toward me. "*Harri*," he said. "*Harri*."

Then, like the sun coming out from the clouds, I understood. He was creating a new language—not a makeshift thing like my oxen-speech, but



something solid and enduring.

“*Harri*,” I said.

The king clapped me approvingly on the shoulder.

Then he went down the mountain to teach the People language for a second time.

Thus began the Great Work. For shortly thereafter, Nimrod set us to work building upon the base of Ararat a tower so tall that it would reach to the sky, and so large that a hundred generations would not suffice to complete it. Indeed, our monarch explained, it was entirely possible that the tower never *would* reach completion. But this did not matter. For within the tower a thousand languages would bloom and those languages, through exposure to each other, would be in constant flux and variation, every profession creating its specialized argot and every new generation its own slang. Like the tower itself, each language would be a work forever in progress and never completed. So that if the Igigi returned, they could never again prevail over us, though they stuffed their stomachs so full of language that they burst. In token of which, we named the tower Babel—“Mountain of Words.”

Thus ends my story.

Except for one last thing.

One day, when I was working in the fields, Silili returned from the forest. She was scratched and bruised and filthy from living like an animal, and half-starved because unlike those who are born animals, she was not good at it. One of her fingers was crooked, for it had broken and not set well. She was naked.

I froze motionless.

Silili shivered with fear. She took a step into the field, and then retreated back to the shadow of the trees. Whether she remembered me at all, I could not say. But she was as wild and shy as any creature of the woods, and I knew that a sudden movement on my part would drive her away and I might never see her again. So slowly, very slowly, I crouched down and groped with a blind hand for the wicker basket in which I had brought my midday meal.

I opened its lid and reached within. Then I stood.

I held out a yam to her. "*Janari*," I said. This was our new word for food.

Timidly, she approached. Three times, she almost bolted and ran. But at last she snatched the yam from me and ravenously began eating it.

"*Janari*," I repeated insistently. "*Janari!*" And finally, "*Janari*," she replied.

It was a beginning.

All this happened long ago, when I was young and there was only one language and People did not die. All things were new in those days and the world was not at all like what it is today.