

Alfred Döblin

MOUNTAINS OCEANS GIANTS

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PART EIGHT: THE GIANTS

PART NINE: VENASKA

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PART 8: THE GIANTS

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MONSTERS COME ASHORE

TOWARDS THE year's end, monsters appeared on the west coast of Scandinavia. A little later they were in British waters, turned up off Jutland and Brittany. The townzones, still in the hands of powerful senates, had closed the northern and western borders when the great expeditionary fleet came fleeing back. Only a mangled remnant of the expeditionary corps reached the coast of Europe, at Boknafjord north of Stavanger; it was swiftly secured. The main body sped south to the old gathering grounds in the Faroes and Shetland. Already that autumn British commissars had set up a defensive line against the suspect fleet, from Oban to the Moray Firth south of the Caledonian Canal. Reconnaissance vessels dotted the North Sea and the entrance to the Irish Sea. Unhindered, utterly unexpected, the Greenland monsters burst in, extravagant horrific beings, creatures misbegotten by the immense forces unleashed on Greenland by the dreadful webs of fire.

Hordes of panting snorting beasts swam flew over the ocean, reptiles long as a street, black-bellied, some with glittering scales, some piebald with wide blunt snouts, some armoured like crocodiles. Bird-beasts with double rows of long sharp teeth. They drew near in packs, singly like fortresses or ships, on them a mass of rocks trees creatures. They swarmed, half-hidden beneath the jungle on their backs; claws swiped at mosses and horsetails growing down over the eyes. Now and then flying lizards dived into the waves to put out the flames licking at necks, backs. They sped on, as harried as any hunted game. Between their toes, on their flapping vein-webbed flight membranes, battles were fought with the creatures they carried with them. These clung to the monsters' claws, hung in rows chains garlands from swelling dewlaps. When a monster dived, most of the passengers were swept free, swam to the surface, struggled to regain a foothold on the re-emerging monster. Diving into the sea the migrant monsters washed off rotting carcasses. But carcasses came with them, under them.

When two monsters made contact they fought, coiled tore at one another. The farther they came from Greenland the greater the peril. They fought amid waves, hungry, often could not tear free of the defeated adversary clinging to their trunk bristles horny plates. They lurched on, bound to an oozing cadaver already sending filaments into them. As the monsters crossed open sea no longer lit by Greenland's rosy light, as cold seeped into them, they became uncertain. Swooped high and low between sea and sky, fled from waves into clouds no longer warming. Their eyes were weak under the sun's dim light. Some turned back in confusion.

But new flocks hurtled into them, forced them on south. Greenland flung out endless living masses like a blossoming tree its sun-dust. They crashed onto Scandinavia, the first land they encountered. Fjords, granite gorges, not much grass, snowpeaks in the background. Hunger fear drove the monsters harder day by day. They scrambled up cliffs, swamped little human settlements. Many spattered onto land like waves of the sea. Survivors began to bite chew gulp at the ground the cliffs. Tore their gums, teeth broke. Moaning menacing they flapped up from their stony prey, lashed out with their claws; nostrils flaring they snapped at scree, rocky rubble, trampled one another, stuffed themselves with ferns. Stones scraped gouged the intestines raw. They turned about, spewed.

A flock of birdlike lizards came to Bergen, humped like dromedaries, long-necked two-legged winged monsters, emitted shrill cries as they approached: it sounded like giggling. They demolished streets and installations. Along with rubble from buildings, they stuffed humans into their jaws. Fires broke out around them. Now and then the jungle of ferns and club-mosses on a monster's back was caught by the flames. Burning creatures danced a swathe of destruction through the town.

At the same time a curious sort of fish emerged from the sea at Bergen, creatures of extraordinary length, longer even than the lizards. They were overgrown wormlike narrow things with a backbone, skull ribs vertebrae showing clearly on a fleshless body. They seemed maddened by hunger, were half-blind. They struggled like snakes silently up cliffs out of the sea; there was no end to the body. Their breathing laboured as they adapted to air. But many came too quickly from the water; the lanky body swelled suddenly, twitched, hung limp on the cliff, innards spilling through the snout. Bird-lizards fed on them.

None of the monsters came far inland. Flew a while, sank to the ground. Contact with the cold stony Earth seemed to drain their last reserves of energy. Though hunted by no one, none of the Scandinavian creatures reached below the 60th parallel by land. They ate trees clods of soil. Then lay prostrate. Hauled themselves up, ran as if preparing to fly, died. They had long since devoured every unburnt jungle garden bird mollusc. The Greenland monsters chewed into the ground as they died. Then grew strangely in their graves. They lay still, the soil they had swallowed heaved in their mouths, out between their bird-jaws, from the gullet, intestines, permeated soft parts with long sharp crystals, absorbed the soft parts. And the ground quaked around the carcasses in their shallow graves, sprouted bundles of fine crystals so that the giant carcasses lay in jagged nests. The bodies of the monsters themselves were merely curious hummocks in the ground, stretching away like recumbent cattle over mountain slopes, cultivated land, attended by glinting rocks.

The monsters that made it farther south – coming ashore at Jutland, turning up near Hamburg – were jellyfish and medusas, with arms that fused to form powerful paddles. The huge strong gelatinous beings danced in a wild thronging quivering confusion over the lowlands, the sandy coast. Under the light of Greenland their bodies had bloomed transparent; now in the cold of the sea they had taken on the yellow of egg-yolk, threaded with bloody swollen veins. They rolled on hissing, contracted in a spasm, leapt flew on. They sprayed slime around them, began to shrivel. They loitered at rivers, sucked water in. But this water was but a memory of the water in which once they had thrived: this heavy cold unloving water. They sucked it in, spat it swirling out. Their arms felt for stones in the road, mouth-openings choked. The stones were uncrushable; they tumbled through the convolutions of the gut. The ghostly beings sank onto the land. Blood trickled brown and violet from them; like huge spider-webs they dropped onto the plains of Jutland.

Anyone who touched the web, anything caught by the spray of steaming frothing blood, at once was changed. Flocks of sheep licked spray-drenched at the blood. The tongue swelled through the teeth, flopped to the grass, spreading blanketing. Sheep stood tugging at the dreadful organ as it swiftly choked them. They pulled back glistening bleating from the mass of red flesh swelling endlessly from the mouth; gums and jaws too swelled in contact with the fluid. They expanded, arched high. Giant skulls far exceeding the body in size and weight were borne on necks too weak to hold them. The sheep stretched out along the ground, little remnant rumps twitched. Quickly other animals arrived, lapped greedily at the medusa-blood; within hours the body ribs spine were burst apart by swelling entrails.

The first major human casualties occurred near Hamburg. Settlers and city-dwellers were caught up. Houses were spattered by arcs of blood and slime from expiring monsters. People touched by the spray on head or limbs at once lost consciousness, suffocated by their own rampant organs. Indoors, when a hand was spattered, the whole body was absorbed by the proliferating fleshy mass; the hand filled the room, arms legs torso squeezed smaller smaller behind it. Heart no longer beating, the person lay pale and dead, no bigger than a fist, or an apple, a paper bag shrinking away beneath the steaming giant hand, its erect hairs like spears snagged and bending against unyielding walls.

That crazy episode in the Settler hamlet, when a woman had caught the rooster and was taking it to the henhouse. The crowing bird's head, its spattered feet swelling suddenly clung tight to the woman's arms and skirt. She was tumbled over by the load; the bird's claws grew through the arms of the screaming yelling threshing soon unconscious woman. The creature lay on her, swelled bigger than a human. The head and feet grew. The body was still alive, just

barely, for the feet had taken root in the sturdy plump woman. Organs sucked their substance from her. The woman sank into her clothing. Was already long dead, the head vanished into the collar, below the neckline. The sleeves empty husks, the calcium in the bones sucked away. Some hours later the dreadful bird stopped growing. Itself already dead, devoured by its organs. You might see a pig's ears, a cow's muzzle grow through the rafters of a shed roof; they bellowed piteously, then fell silent. Everywhere senseless dying beings seized by the rampancy.

Along Hamburg's western border, on the coast, the migrating monsters laid waste to entire urban districts. Powerful defences installed by the Senate proved useless: they merely sealed the townzone's doom. The monsters were torn apart by burning projectiles, rays, but their body parts, spurting fluids, dragged the expiring body along with other spraying beings down streets, past gardens.

The most ghastly mutant forms appeared. Charred trees, their tops sprouting long locks of human hair, human heads rearing above them, horrible dead house-high faces of men and women. The tail fins of a sea creature that collapsed in a settlement outside the city gathered piles of dead material about it, harrows wagons ploughs planks. The mobile spraying steaming mass swallowed up potato fields, fleeing dogs, people. It bubbled like cake dough, swelled high, wobbled across the cultivated plain, advanced like a slow deadly lava stream. And everywhere tree trunks grew from the pulsing ever more bulbous mass, each leaf as big as a house wall. Arms legs poking from the dark glistening substance were made of flesh and bone, often clad in black bark, toes and fingers spread like leaf-fans. Long manes of hair spilled across the surface of the mollusc-like being, the steaming devouring slug; weeds and house-beams were tangled in the hair. Across the vales and ridges of the seething mass raced horses and carts, leaping people. They ran tore loose until they sank stuck fast, horses with their carts, people tumbling alongside. The horses were overwhelmed, grew swelling from the hind hooves, appeared to be shying but were being pushed rigidly erect. The whinnying drooling ceased, the eyes, frightened bloodshot orbs, rolled back. Forelegs scrabbled. Was it a tree trunk? Was it eating the leaves the stalks the bushes growing from its mouth? Planks from the cart swelled through its ribs. The carter swelled out from his seat, carried by relentless tree trunks, melted into them. Then everything carried by the primal being softened, spread out, contracted, formed a smooth blanket.

Isolated monsters, still vigorous, pushed across the mudflats behind the Frisian Islands. They surged maddened against the fires hurled at them across Jade Bight. The big leaping reptile would emerge through the flames with a volcanic roar. The green fire it emitted seemed to damp down human fires. It would reach dry land, crumple the devices and chew on

them. But would be already shattered; would rage drag itself for miles inland. Then out of the black bulky vainly struggling body, out of eyes nostrils, between the scales of the skin, there would erupt sheaves of stiff green flame. These roared the creature's strength away, it would snap twitch. Parts would break away from the burning chugging carcass as it writhed and twisted. Amid the flames, toes claws teeth scales scraps of skin flew sprayed from the corpse; wings broke apart. The body parts rolled across the land, along the Weser, mingled with grass birch fir. Now giant trees were on the move; the soil beneath grew with them, swelled liquid, gelatinous, foamed high around them. The tree would pull its roots from the earth, stride forward, lurch, turn about, zigzag on, incorporate nearby trees into itself, drag them along. The tree would snort from many pores. Slow its pace, stand lame, the crown feebly swaying.

DELVIL'S NEW PLAN

THE ASSAULT of the Greenland monsters lasted all winter. People fled from the coasts in panic. The Baltic was thronged with shipping. In a few eastern cities the senate lost its leading role. The lords of the great western townzones strengthened their position. The throngs of Settlers streaming through raised accusing cries against the cities, shaken to the foundations by the horror of the Greenland creatures. Large parts of the populace were paralysed, as were their leaders. And along with their fear, people seethed with a vague sombre sense of guilt. Even the most knowledgeable could not free themselves of it amid the horrors.

In London, senatorial power was in the hands of Delvil and Pember. With six other men and women they formed a dictatorship. From Brussels the stocky Belgian leader Ten Keir called them over. The Belgian townzones remained stable. But the dreadful swarm of monsters kept coming; the northern and western outskirts of Brussels were reduced to rubble. To the rage that united people here was quickly added hatred of the Settlers who had agitated for the Greenland venture, and of the English leaders.

Incandescent Ten Keir received frail Delvil in his underground office. He meant to let loose on him with ire and vitriol, as the door opened shouted mockingly:

"Victory! Victory! Greenland is melted! We are liberated! Let's load people onto ships."

"Victory!" Delvil countered. "We've won. Who has not won?"

"What does victory look like, Delvil? You dared to cross the Channel. You weren't eaten. Congratulations on your great victory."

Delvil slammed the door. He sat down cool and calm.

“Those who kept their nerve have won. As you see, I have flown across the Channel. I saw drooling creatures. I spat on them.”

“Congratulations, hero! Take a look at Ghent. Did you see Courtrai? You must have seen it. Destroyed ten days ago.”

“Ten Keir, we seem to have changed places. That’s all right with me.”

“And what will you do?”

“I am Delvil. A man. You think because I’m frail I am no man? Let the creatures come. For now I can’t defeat them, not at this moment. We were not prepared. Wait a day, five days.”

“You think so, Delvil? These are no ordinary creatures.”

“They are animals. Animals, nothing more. Other challenges have confronted humanity, and we have prevailed.” Delvil stood up; he was pale, his face pinched: “I am a man. You will not persuade me to the contrary. I came here with Pember to ask you, Ten Keir, where you stand. If you’re giving up, tell me. I must know what I’m dealing with.”

“I really don’t need your questions. If you are bitter and we are horrified and our cities are already half destroyed, you know who’s to blame.”

“I want to know what I’m dealing with. This is not a lawcourt. I did not summon the creatures.”

“It’s Greenland. It’s the migration of Settlers to a new continent. Our liberation. Salvation from ruin.”

“It is our salvation from ruin. I did not want this. But OK. We know where we stand. Say you agree, Ten Keir. I’m waiting.”

“Better not speak. Open your ears to what’s happening. No one knows what is happening.”

“Tell me, yes or no. I am fifty years old. Millennia have toiled for us, thought for us. You made it all clear to me once. Now I see it. I am human, I’ll never stop believing this. And you?”

“Neither shall I.”

“Then give me your hand. Now you will become as angry grim hot cold as I am. Here. You’ll soon feel it. Now you won’t sleep at night any more than I do, for rage and despair. You’ll gasp and groan in the dark. Listen, Ten Keir! You will know rage and shame. You will curse yourself, as I do, that these creatures can do this, destroy towns, our towns, attack our installations so that Settlers laugh in our faces. I curse myself. But not for long.”

Delvil pulled back his hand, shook it as if it was too heavy, glanced at Ten Keir, stepped back to the wall where the light-eye shone out.

“What are you people planning. What is your plan, Delvil?”

“You felt my touch. You know. Only two things matter: the creatures, and ourselves. I don’t want the creatures.” Delvil’s breathing was heavy. “I say to you from the bottom of my heart: I don’t want them. Already they are not here. They’re gone. Already destroyed, by me, because I want it. I only pretend to flee from them, to strengthen myself. They no longer live, Ten Keir. We have defeated them. Give them a few days grace, a couple of weeks: grant them that. Let them take a look around the world. Our world. Then it’s all over for them. Over! Delvil says so. He’s had enough. The table swept bare. Smooth. Empty. Like a mirror. Like a breath. Not a speck of dust!”

Ten Keir in the cone of light; the squinting man’s front all white: “I’d like to believe it.”

The man from Brussels tried to detain the powerful Englishman in the town. But he crossed the Channel back to the British Isles. People poured into underground spaces. They saw how dangerous the soft earth, the open air had become. Heavy concrete slabs, caves dug into massive bedrock were impervious to the creatures. Hordes fled to the interior of the island. Delvil watched in scorn and rage. His first act on returning from Brussels was to plant heavy weapons along the western edge of the London zone. He trained flames and rays on the chaotic mob. His megaphone screamed at them: he was the dragon, the dragon was coming. And already the hot breath was on them: not from the mouths of giant amphibians, but from his devices; they were scorched broiled burned. Delvil turned them to charcoal. He directed his loathing at the Settlers singing their victory over the cities: what had the western senates achieved in Greenland, where was the new continent, what wastes had been created; worse than the Urals War. And how it was rebounding now on the cities: no new land, and even old land is being laid waste.

Delvil’s rage cracked over them like a whip. They had to flee the dragons, and flee from Delvil. He pulled together a band of men and women, fanatical followers, loyal to the cause of the cities. They called themselves Rescuers. Around the towns of Britain they drove people into cellars and caves, forced senates everywhere to excavate the ground, construct concrete blockhouses into which people could scurry.

In open country, in the Scottish Highlands, they proceeded with redoubled fervour. Delvil had drummed into them: “These beasts, these monstrous amphibians and dragons are a calamity. We did not summon them. People forced us to go to Greenland. We had no way out.

Our land was reverting to barbarism. We were on our last legs. Now the reptiles have come, the monsters, to our ruin. Vengeance on those who brought them forth! Vengeance on the criminals. Kill them! Cleanse our land!" Laughing, his diaphragm heaving, he watched them fall in great piles, the instigators, the arrogant teachers of new wisdom, these "rescuers" of mankind. Now there were genuine Rescuers. Delvil's view went out to the Continent and America: we must seize the moment to shake from our necks this rabble that has made our lives so hard. We must view the Greenland expedition in the right light. It has turned out well. It enables us to place western mankind on a secure footing, sweep away all the parasites that cling to it. We wanted elbow room: now we have it.

Meanwhile he and his friends looked around for weapons to use against the monsters. They were moved by cold loathing. The creatures broke through every kind of ray. It was no use blowing them to pieces: body parts wreaked more havoc than the animal intact. Who could come to grips with these beings and do away with them. The shame felt by Delvil and his comrades was profound, unbearable: they were like some primitive tribe, Bushmen, face to face with a tiger and no way out.

Not Delvil, but a nameless man from Oslo found a way. Following his rescue from a reptile attack in which he lost his right arm and shoulder, he discovered something surprising. He had been buried under an expiring beast already stiffening in death. His arm, sprayed by hot blood, began to grow. He felt no pain, only a curious surging and twitching in his whole body, a flash of lights before the eyes, in particular a pink glow that enveloped him in languor and sweetness and rendered him almost defenceless. But the surging and jolting in his body, his spine, in the knees and hip joints suddenly took on a dreadful insistent urgency. He said: a woman must feel like this giving birth, lying in childbed while the baby tears her body apart. Under the dull dreadful pain, already dreaming, he surrendered to the buoyant sweetness, his body remained attached, suspended on a ghastly stalk: it was his arm, a giant arm, a white bloated mass of flesh. Revolted, he took his knife, cut into it where he could with his other arm. Dug away to separate himself from the disgusting fleshy mass. The stabbing and cutting caused no pain, it was like cutting into a different body, close in to the shoulder. And suddenly he collapsed unconscious. This man from a Meki-factory was found two days later by a rescue team; he was still breathing, so they carried him back to Oslo. Where with every possible precaution his shoulder was removed; for following his self-amputation it had swelled to a sack-like tumour. The man had shrunk to the size of a child, limbs soft as rubber; after the self-amputation the parasitic stump had continued to drain nourishment from him. It was a challenge to feed him, to put the right substances into him; the man, his skin brown-yellow

and blackish seemed to have a completely altered blood. Even his eyes: the irises of his once blue eyes had taken on a grey-black hue. However much he wolfed down in his ravenous hunger, however much he drank he failed to thrive, lay freezing in his bed, this miracle of a being that monsters could not kill.

Then he told his story, for his wits were still intact, though always in a daze: of the lightning that had surged through him, of the surging and jolting in his body when the monster touched him, the stretching and tugging and tearing in finger and knee joints, in the vertebrae. That was all gone now. He had felt it still while the stump was sucking on him. The dreaming man, wrestling with the ghost of the monster, said: something is missing. He didn't want to eat, it was useless. They must give him what the monsters had, then he would recover. He kept insisting, half unconscious. The doctors, working with electricity and many kinds of ray, could not improve his condition. As the man kept pressing and begging them to take him to Greenland, to the pink light the ships spoke of, it occurred to someone to investigate the mineral shrouds prepared by the western senates for the expedition. A total silence now surrounded this topic. They had been buried in giant underground vaults along Belgium's North Sea coast and under Welsh hills, completely unattended.

The Scandinavian flew across the North Sea accompanied by two adventurous men. Giant amphibians hissed at them from the Flanders Bank. The Scandinavian, close to death, already breathed more easily. And when they set down on the Flanders coast near a tunnel leading to the Tourmaline vaults, his look changed; he smiled, tried to sit up. The two men hurriedly pushed him to the tunnel entrance with some food supplies; they themselves dared not go in, but whirled away east ahead of approaching reptiles.

Two weeks later the Scandinavian was brought to the Belgian Senate, with him a swarm of people enticed from their cellars. He preached the miracle of the Tourmaline webs. In them was hidden the soul of the living. He was almost as big as a normal man his age, but unsteady, over-excited, his gaze bold; the formerly blackish skin was now pale and transparent, the coursing blood beneath almost visible. The skin was peeling, the hair was blond, overlong, spilled over the shoulders. In the cellar of the Brussels Town Hall, Ten Keir listened only a short while to the strange raving one-armed Scandinavian, gave orders for him to be sent home. In a flash he had linked together the dreadful monsters and the webs: could they use them as a weapon against the beasts. That very day his report was in Delvil's hands.

Delvil was back in London following his extermination campaign against the Settlers. That evening both men were in accord: the Tourmaline vaults must be placed under strict

guard; no one is to be granted access; the outside world must not know of the power of Tourmaline, or that the webs are still effective. That night Ten Keir had the Scandinavian seized and locked up. Already there were rumours of the remarkable recovery of a man almost killed by a monster: he allowed these to spread as absurd fantasies.

A commission of physicists and chemists, Delvil among them, tested the Welsh webs. A fierce notion burned in him: these webs contain powers we can deploy against the monsters, and not only them! He was completely hooked. He hated this world, the Earth that had done this to him, the fantastic stupid fearless power that stood in his way and flung him about like a wild bull. It was not to suffer this that they had learned to despise ploughed fields, had thrown away the grain yielded by soil, cattle that reproduced themselves. The Earth's revenge lay hidden behind this, but it must be denied her. How proud had Iceland's mountains stood, its volcanoes clothed in thunder and streams of lava; yet humans had torn them open; humans had handled them like proud fliers free to soar aloft, and then you remove the air from under them – what use now the big strong aeroplane; and like ships that suddenly can't move because there's no sea there. What material for a sailor's tales, a flier's tales.

Delvil had Tourmaline webs brought to his underground laboratory. He forced the physicists, though members of the ruling clans, to undertake this dangerous work under threat of death; he had a monopoly of violence. These men and women, having escaped the fate of annihilation by monsters on the surface, could only acquiesce, approach close to these webs that had engendered the calamity. Delvil, within a few weeks turned quite grey, his face gaunt, summoned them every day to report to him. All shared his loathing for the monsters; but he too horrified them. They did not know that the daily summons was for him to observe, to check if they had found anything by which they might exercise power over him. He spoke only of his rage against the creatures, of the need to protect cities installations people. He said not a word of his drive for revenge and extermination. If he could only do what the Scandinavian Kylin had done to the mountains: shake them, make them swell until they burst. Tear Greenland apart from root to crown, lengthways sideways. Once, a Persian king whipped the sea because it broke his bridge. How well he understood that king.

At intervals that were sinister and unpredictable, monsters came down from the north. Their carcasses polluted the sea. Delvil and his helpers toiled in London in their subterranean lair. They needed animals and humans for experiments. Delvil was happy when they made enough progress to miniaturise the webs, cut out little pieces circles, leaves that could be stuck onto living things. He roared: "The monsters! Cretaceous! The whole Cretaceous! So what. Let them come. The more the merrier. They'll feel it."

Ten Keir risked a Channel crossing. Delvil received him among the physicists, embraced him effusively, whispered: "I'm no longer ashamed. The crisis is passing. God, what a time that was. I haven't lived, Ten Keir. Look at me, my face: twenty years in two months. They'll pay for it. I'm recovering, feel better than ever."

"You've made good progress, Delvil?"

"Let us be brothers." He pulled the Belgian aside; they strolled down the street-like subterranean passage. "I remember so well. Do you recall, Ten Keir, how you treated me when I came to you before the Greenland expedition? No, it's OK, you treated me well. I was still cosyng up to the Settlers. You jolted me out of it. Good, I won't forget it. I was about to lose myself, about to join those dogs. How I'd have been howling now about reptiles and lizards. I no longer need to feel ashamed. Nor you, Ten Keir, my brother. Let us be brothers. The day has come. I'm so glad I've been spared to see it. Greenland is on my conscience, Iceland. I want to have more on my conscience. I'll make them fear me."

"Good, Delvil."

"No, not good. That's your word, not mine. What happened to me -." Delvil's eyes stared. Ten Keir recalled his words in Brussels: "*I don't want them. I say to you from the bottom of my heart: I don't want them. Already they are not there.*" Delvil coerces phenomena. He hates them. The thought flashed through Ten Keir's head: this man has something in him of those grey gruesome monsters. His face really has changed since I last saw him: features rigid, deeply incised; skin the ashy colour of the concrete in which he spends his days; movements slow and insistent, no twitching; even his voice lacks modulation.

"It will not be enough for me, Ten Keir, to triumph over the reptiles. We shall see what the experiments yield. I shall seek them out at the place where they arose. I shall sally forth against them. They shall not survive. The ground that bore them shall not survive."

Ten Keir tried to look into his eyes. Delvil went on: "We shall see. Our arms will be free again, brother Ten Keir. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." He did not notice how the Belgian stood motionless there, arms folded.

TOWER-HUMANS

AS THE WAVE of Greenland monsters abated during the summer, Delvil's assistants achieved their first success. New weapons were put in place along the southern tip of Scandinavia, Jutland, over the North Sea, on Scottish peaks south of the Moray Firth. They were the

strangest most terrible things the Earth had ever seen. On huge platforms in the sea, on Scottish hills – Cairn Gorm three thousand feet high, Sgorr Dhonuill, Creag Meagaidh – tall tower-like structures were erected. From a distance they were slender columns of rock with irregular protrusions. But anyone observing for a while would see the outline change, grow broader here than there, a protrusion now lay higher than before, or sank. Dark structures like flecked porphyry; some parts gleamed like wrinkled skin, others reflected light, shone like fur.

These monstrosities were erected on floating hulks, the peaks of Scottish hills, with the aid of Tourmaline shrouds. Rocks and tree trunks were piled together and allowed to marry. When they began to grow under the radiant heat and before they fires died away, layers of animal bodies plants grasses were strewn on the glimmering coals. Finally, humans were added to this base. Biologists and physicists of the Meki-factories were familiar with techniques to do with living organisms; they had quickly seen that radiation from the webs provided an unlimited and at first uncontrollable stimulus to living substances. The motive energy and growth force that lay confined in the animal-plant-rock body, the source of maturation in the animal body and then its ageing and death, streamed massively like a cataract from the vessels of Tourmaline crystal, endlessly. These primal entities that held the fire of the Earth and the stars were now fully in human hands. The nutrient and stimulant solutions that Glossing and Marduk had used for their work on plants and trees could now be dispensed with. Experiments made clear the terrible destructiveness of this force: it exploded every relationship, boosted body parts at the expense of the organism. It was like a flame seeking indiscriminately whatever moves, is at rest, hard or soft. In experiments on plants and animals they succeeded in targeting the stimulus stream onto the glands and fibre systems that the organism brings into growth from within. The organism's juvenile period was prolonged. The body was not destroyed. Settlers were seized and used for human experiments. The people who were now planted on top of the base layer of rock and timber were supporters of the Senate. Delvil himself had volunteered; they held him back. Enough came forward from his followers in the campaign to exterminate the Settlers in Britain.

Scaffolding was set up on the hulks and mountaintops, towers built of living substances. For the first time people stood on scaffolding galleries platforms over the base layer, directing, applying doses of webbing to steam blend coax animal and plant life out of the material. Such delight: engineers biologists physicists watched Delvil, who as always went about observing in high excitement. He had asked the Scandinavian survivor whether he would hold his tongue about the vaults on the Flanders coast. The man said no, and was taken to Sgorr Dhonuill in Scotland to be baked into the lowest layer of rocks and timber.

“Not a problem for you,” Delvil smiled at the man when they brought him to the scaffolding; “you’ve already lain under one of those reptiles. There’ll be no surprises for you. It’s only thanks to the webs that you are alive. You’ll serve a useful purpose.” The longhaired Scandinavian howled in horror as he gazed down on the heaving dough, into which mosses soil logs were being thrown.

“This is happening, my friend, so that the others above you, our men and women, can nourish themselves on you. Will you hold your tongue.”

The man’s features were twisted in torment, but still radiantly fresh: “When I see your tower, Delvil, I praise the power of the Earth. You will never conquer it. I praise the great power. I feel I am with her. There is no boundary between me and her. I am not afraid. You want to dissolve me. Hands off. I go willingly.”

And as he was caught up, naked, by a big crystal grab under his ribs that hoisted him over the dough, he sang his trilling fading hymn to the Earth. Then his dangling hands and feet, caught by the heaving mass, scrabbled clumsily in the dough. The grab opened. He fell onto his hands. Crouched as if to spring high, free of the Earth. But already vertebral processes were jutting from his back; his ribcage bulged like a barrel. His head sank into the mass; jostling timbers, branches incorporated him into their matrix.

The structure went up stage by stage. Then the tower was loaded with the chosen human, supporter of the Senate. The planting lasted weeks, weeks to embed a single human. They were dropped onto the deadly nutritive and support material, these little naked wretched male and female bodies, onto the eager popping stew. Projections and prongs of the lower tower, continually moderated by the controllers, slowly penetrated the legs and arms of the human bodies. The more vines and shoots from the lower tower curled around the body, the more feverishly the willing sacrifice was fed into the mix. There was communication with them: the speech of the sacrifices became thicker more babbling as the tongue swelled, they had to wait for the body the skull the jaws to catch up. Huge megaphones were strapped to the mouth; it became clear these were not needed. The sacrifices, fearing the megaphones would grow into them, tore them free. Their voices droned deep, sounded far away unclear distorted.

The builders of the living towers did all they could to keep the sacrifice alert. The bone-swelling brain-widening growth, even though it proceeded slowly with remissions and pauses, endangered the tower-human’s consciousness. They often felt like surrendering their soul and their human nature, to sink into mere proliferation and rampancy. Until their voice was heard again, the eyes whose swollen lids had fallen shut opened, a sad questioning gaze was directed

at the galleries where the little people controlling the experiment stood and signalled – with gaudy flags, later with signal-lamps: the tower-people could not focus on nearby objects. Each eyeball was bigger than a living human; the breath a hurricane from the mouth, which often hung open as if in a scream. The jaw was at first too heavy, and sagged. Little food and only at long intervals splashed into the mouth, over the sagging jaws. The giant beings, laboriously gurgling and slurping, twisted in the animal-plant matrix. The legs from the hip joint and pelvis down were knobbly and stiff; planted wide, extended massively down until they dissolved in strands, all fleshy character lost, down into the matrix. From there, fluids and nutrients flowed into the body.

Treetrunks and animal carcasses swelled through the skin of the belly, into the entrails, spread through the soft organs, invaded the intestines, melded with them. They pumped animal blood, plant sap into the intestines, which slowly rose and fell, contracted and stretched like worms. This was the movement spied by people halfway up the human tower: the slow to and fro of intestines, stiffening rising then relaxing and sinking back. Always they dragged up with them the loose wobbling slope, the climbing forest, animal bodies sprouting elongated out of the forest: oversized horses upright, forelegs buried in the animal-human's body, neck twisting out of the body to chew insensibly on leaves and soft branches. Cattle that seemed to leap from the human giant's belly, scrabbling greedily and apparently lustily at the grass of the forest floor below; but their bodies reared high behind them; what they ate was not for them; their hips and rumps were no longer visible, had vanished into the tower-human's belly, blended with it. Cattle chewing, and a giant mouth opened over them, a funnel sucking. A man's testicles merged with treetops and flowers; they streamed fluids into the organ to which they were attached like berries. Often the giant bent over with an excess of fluids, groaned and spurted semen.

The controllers continually moderated dangerous dreamy movements. Over the bare skin of the torso, in danger of stiffening, they hurled chickens, swans. Sheep with thick fleeces were spread over the arms. On a Scandinavian island they risked releasing two live lions, captured on the coast of North Africa, out of their cages onto the shoulders of a tower-human. As the giant – it was Quick Baker, son of White Baker, the Settler woman – blinked at them, they bit and clawed at his throat. This was the spot that needed covering. Now their teeth could not pull back from the bleeding skin. Their claws dangled, the tawny bodies hung slack at the crimson trickling neck; the hides clung to the giant; the legs were mere bumps on human skin. Above them throbbed the yard-high head of the giant with its long swaying bushy hair.

Doltish almost dumb beings these, immobile air-snorting. Movements endlessly sluggish. The mouth the nose the ears were formed on the human model, but botched as if built of wood and stone. The blood of rocks and plants surged through them. Once the towers were complete, scaffolding cleared away, it was necessary on the hulks – really just anchored rafts – to pump seawater through the lowest layers of the stony mass, from time to time shovel more heaps of soil and plant material over the feet of the tower. Then the giant human could be left to the wind the rain, heat and cold. Those on the Scottish peaks were watered from springs.

A number of towers were destroyed by monsters as they were being built. Construction continued at concealed locations along the Irish Sea coast. Almost a hundred were planted there, then another two hundred. They were towed north along the Scottish coast. Behind these, protected by them, the mountaintop towers were brought to completion. A defensive line of giants was laid from Sognefjord southward around the Jutland coast, across the North Sea to the British Isles. Human towers stood in the sea, on mountain peaks. Their arms hung slack. At the breast, which was armoured, they wore loose white shrouds down to the navel: scraps of Tourmaline webbing.

And when amphibians, giant birds with toothed jaws, swimming dragons, migrating jellyfish came near, they felt drawn to the tower-humans. Bliss radiated from the webs. Any harried expiring Greenland fauna that still moved in the vicinity thronged to them, licked at the hulk, pushed snapping slurping at the tower-human's breast. The human construct's arms jerked faster and faster. The sad eyes above blinked, the forehead creased in a sombre frown. Now the arms seized the amphibian bird jellyfish medusa. The tower-thing was always hungry. It emitted a dull groan. Crushed the clambering beast with the edge of its elbow. The mouth closed. The head bent down. Fingers tore plucked at the yelping creature, hands grubbed in the soggy mess, stuffed dripping lumps far back into the steaming maw. And the lips cheeks dewlaps of the giant, the human tree, quivered as if it were about to laugh. The eyes blinked, opened closed several times.

The tower on the mountaintop crushed the reptile, the ravening dragon into the ground. The ground beneath it grew, new juices flowed up; it blinked, water dripped from its mouth. The thing roared a dull sad roar.

UNDERGROUND

PEOPLE IN the zones clung tightly together under this calamity. Senates, already wary during the Greenland expedition and almost ready to form leagues, no longer bothered to care for the

people. They were indifferent to the townzones. Concern for the emptying of the cities, for Settlers, was childish. Senates no longer feared the populace. They were armed to the teeth, only they could construct the devices. Installations, their significance, the servicing of delicate apparatus – element-transmuters, power transformers, power storage devices – all this was reserved to men and women of their own circle. They could bring the Meki-factories to a standstill and let everyone starve. And now these tower-humans looming over everything!

Senates were guided by the demonic hate-driven Delvil. In London Brussels Paris Lyon Hamburg Oslo Copenhagen: “Let the townzones rot. Make room for us.” The Greenland events acted like a sieve on the senates; now the last few waverers dropped through. The senates called themselves Security Conventions. The words they used were old: “Salvation of the townzones”; but now they were not, as before the Greenland expedition, simply passive defenders of their cause. Escoyez in Barcelona said: “We are autonomous. Nobody’s servant. Nobody’s custodian. If anyone wants to rest in our shadow, good. If not, then not. Who has power has freedom. We have freedom. We know who we answer to. No one can force us to serve causes other than our own. A curse on anyone who has other plans for us.”

As many centuries before, members of the senates went about veiled and invisible among the people of the zones. What Delvil had undertaken on a large scale north of London – hunting down and eliminating bands of Settlers – was practised everywhere on a small scale. Individual men and women in the senates became savage, hasty. There were tensions among them; it was known that some stood with Ten Keir, who was being pushed to the wall by Delvil; Ten Keir, who wanted to follow the old path of extending the townzones. But the new revolutionary stratum among the ruling clans would not let him come up.

The masses of the western townzones were driven from the surface down under the ground; underground, the rulers could impose their total monopoly power. After refugees had set up simple temporary subterranean dwellings, the rulers in arrogant glee established factories devices weapons underground. Meki-factories in Hamburg and Oslo were destroyed by monsters: this provided the excuse to move all facilities away from the surface. Jubilation among the rulers where this occurred. Now we’ll show them what we are.

Masses of humanity dug themselves in against the rampaging monsters, were trodden down by these arrogant men and scarcely less masculine women. Like a tree, a forest with roots pointing upward, the cities grew down into the depths. Thick slabs of concrete and rock covered the locations of former plazas and streets, or else these lay desolate. When centuries ago the Meki-factories appeared, people abandoned ploughland and forest, let them revert to

uninhabited wilderness, concentrated in city-states. They clung to their devices like flies to a honey-stick. Now they abandoned even the old townzone sites. People lived as best they could, not like an anthill aimed up at the surface. They dug into the Earth, made what they needed piece by piece, by their own hands. Nestled in the Earth like a family of beetles deep beneath the bark of a tree; dug themselves in deeper and deeper.

Some months after the first stunning assaults, under Delvil's vengeful drive those parts of London along the Channel, the districts of Colchester and Ipswich, later the southern suburbs Hastings Ramsgate Dover, had all vanished from the face of the Earth where they had stood for so many centuries. Streets of ruined buildings were invaded by wilderness and forest. The concrete slabs were left open to the air; mosses and patches of greenery soon covered them. Concealed openings had been built into the slabs for ventilation and the delivery of raw materials. Shafts as in a mine were driven between different rock strata. They were building a coral reef. They proceeded from many places at once, and converged in the depths. They pushed through sand, alluvial and diluvial rubble; forced back deep groundwater, cut into layers of impermeable clay. Calmly implacably they spread abyssally deep into the Earth, these new cities with their people, the life of London Oxford Reading Colchester Hastings Ramsgate Luton Hertford Aldershot. They sank into the beds of old forgotten seas, between marl and chalk, rummaged among the silent remains of thin-shelled mussels from distant epochs, fragments of cephalopods from millennia before. They pushed walls of earth apart where once at high tide myriads of conches, generation on generation, had played, crystal clear beings with strong paddle-feet that moved up and down like wings through the foaming tide.

As storey after storey was dug into clay, as ever bigger caverns were excavated, and spoil – loose earth, blasted rock – was heaped up in the ruined streets of the surface, everyone lost their sense of fear. They were not fleeing the monsters, but were on a grand new expedition. The senates called: "Away from the Earth," and they dug merrily down; the miracle of human capability felt by the Greenland expeditionaries they now could experience for themselves.

Once more the western townzones of Europe exercised an enormous attractive pull. The actions of the westerners, initiated by fear and fired by vengeful feelings, fascinated neighbouring populations. People had stopped thinking of vengeance on the Settlers, the great polar expedition having achieved nothing. Now hatred of the Settlers was revived to lure them to this new venture. From north and west people were on the run before the migrating dying hordes of monsters, the lava-stream of creatures extruded by the Greenland volcano. At the same time, masses of people swarmed from south and east towards the coasts, filled with hate and hot joy at the ruin of the proud townzones, eager for air and a view of battle.

But at last they were deceived, were themselves caught up. The giant cities they approached were riven by fire and earthquake. Terrible animal remains looming growing over them: monster carcasses housebeams forests people, rotting suburbs, collapsing swamps of decay that trickled a green-black brew, ammonia-sulphur-reeking desolation down empty streets. Black swarms of ravens, strong swollen creatures, squatted atop these dingy miles-long househigh swamps that subsided, merged like glaciers, emptied their ponds. Approaching you could hear from afar the noise of nesting birds. People coming from the south thought it was gas, smoke; when they came nearer it was sated birds whirling aloft. The monsters, lying and collapsing on the townzones of the North Sea coast, the Baltic, western France and Germany, had dragged an oozing greenbrown blanket of swamp over houses parks squares. As they threshed grew disintegrated, they ground together houses soil and living things; the Earth was being resurfaced, already winds were breathing on it, wild animals edging towards it. A wave of oriental people pushed across the German plain; they moved through southern Germany, came into contact with the strongly defended Marchland, drew people in from marauding bands. Among them were Asiatics, mixed-race people from the Russian steppe. They settled in the ruins of the old towns. Ventured into the shafts.

First the Meki-factories had gone underground, to join the great laboratories pushed into the Earth long decades before. Devices and factories followed. Finally came the mass of the population that had hidden a while in temporary concrete caves, or had fled east.

They were separated from the sky. There was no day or night in these warm extensive regions under the Earth's skin. No birds sang, grass plants trees could not grow. They had no snow, no hail rain wind. The seasons did not change. Concrete slabs at the sides and above held back the encroaching Earth. In bays and vaults, miles and miles of passages, everywhere houses factories plazas avenues. Shafts and caves were burned into the Earth. They made oxygen for the air from machines, pumped it into passages and caverns that were like blisters in the Earth. Londoners diverted the waters of the Thames into their grotto; they let the flood surge down their avenues, built bridges over it. The river wound in great meanders through the concrete town, in the bed prepared for it. At the end they let it pile up; it burst through a concrete wall into an unsheathed shaft. It soaked into this mass of concrete and chalk unable to return; its foaming rumbling remnant was led in a circle around the town until it sank into sand and gravel.

Sunlight could not penetrate. But the powerful Londoners brought it in. There was the glowing ball of gas, astonishingly far away, the yellow-white sea of flame that fought with the ether's chill; the scornful people of the British Isles caught its light in mirrors, cast it into the

depths over the laughing sauntering masses. It was thin, pale, bloodless as moonlight by day; died next to the white shining colour-spreading lights on the vaulted ceilings.

In deep rocky lairs near the sea, on the south coast under the Downs, wide halls were opened for purposes of pleasure. In these rocky caverns there grew up Brass Town, so called from all the decorated houses and theatres. Large parts of this town lay in darkness; they were illuminated by giant spotlights. The place had its own police force to deal with the huge numbers of daily crimes. Masses came flooding in. The place was notorious, especially among Settlers, for leading people astray. But even the Senate, as unconcerned as it was with the fate of individuals, felt obliged to allocate some of its weapons to the Brass Town police, for here chaos threatened.

The people of the western races who streamed into the subterranean cities were soon of an unprecedented volatility. They no longer lay idly about; the wildness and tension in the senates seemed to flow into them too. The influx of eager foreigners enhanced their excitability. In the pleasure-houses and vaults where men and women mingled, violence bubbled up. The pleasures the people offered themselves were not enough; fighting was the next step. Men of the Senate had to intervene; they stabbed little electric sticks at hands foreheads ears in the mêlée, stunned the brawlers. Or made way for themselves with their silver rings: a sharp pressure on the balled fist caused a tongue-like point no bigger than a fingernail to shoot out of the finger-ring. The point was a hollow tube, a cannula. As they struggled with someone they shoved it at some suitable spot on the body, chest thigh throat, stunned with the drops that emptied the cannula. If they failed to extract the point quickly enough, the victim died at once; otherwise would wake up days later, but never regain full use of the limbs; the stabbed arm remained lame, the stabbed chest short of breath. The police were feared more than senators, who turned up now and then invisibly, never joined the action, just observed. People said that these men and women of the Senate appeared in Brass Town only to arouse passions, place their police in danger and enjoy the brawls.

Brass Town hosted the great London Arena, where bullfights and lion fights were staged. Now and then unseen hands threw people into the arena over the heads of the crowd, to the delight of the spectators. These were said to be criminals or plotters against the Senate; nothing certain was ever known, because no one left the Arena alive. Animal fights always took place in total darkness. Bulls were driven in darkness into the arena, where now and then a light darted. But the powerful beast was itself dazzling. It rushed dazzling, creating its own light, into the black space. Head neck legs had been painted with a special light mixture, a substance used by actors that attracted admiring comments. The substance, different from the

light mixture that produced the colourful illumination of walls and the whole underground town, was easily transferred; it stuck to fingers, clothing. The spectators sat in nervous silence. The animated lights ran glowing around the space, which phosphoresced under their hooves. A memory of tales that were told awoke in the masses. They had heard of a Belgian, a former Settler named Ibis, who allowed himself to be enticed to Britain's underground London.

He came with a young woman, Laponie, whom he had taken from another. Like him, she was delighted to come to the subterranean zone, had heard about the light mixture used by actors on the stage. Acquired some for herself. Unlike the actors from whom she wheedled it, she painted it not on her face and hands, but on her nipples and private parts. Wanted to beguile her man. And when night came and he tried to approach her in the dark bedroom, she evaded him and was so pleased when she saw and heard and felt his delight. How it was not her he chased or saw, but only the glow of breasts and the glimmer of pudenda. She kept him somewhat at bay, so that his face would not pick up any of the light mixture. Then they lay together, and afterwards slept a gloriously pleasant happy sleep. But Ibis now had the substance on his own organ of pleasure.

He was a handsome blond Fleming, who could not enjoy his new trick enough. Had to show it to other women, without letting on where he had acquired it. They visited dear Laponie, said nothing about Ibis, but of course let out the secret. Now Laponie was plagued by jealousy. She tried to clean the stuff from her labia, her breasts, but could not, however desperately she scrubbed and wiped. And when Ibis approached her at night she tried to cover herself, hide away. But he could see her, see her private parts and breasts. She ran from the room, into the dark street. And people saw them running, man and woman, but not man and woman, one behind the other, now far apart, now closing in: only a woman's shimmering vulva and a man's rod and tackle, wobbling, running in circles. Laponie could see Ibis only when she turned, heedless of her shame; he saw only her and was heedless of his shame. She fled back home, wanted to scold him. But as they stood there in the dark she laughed; she couldn't be cross with him. He noticed only her laugh. They fell into each other's arms.

Yet something was lodged still in tender Laponie's soul. She no longer liked her glimmering makeup, could not rest until she had obtained from the actor from whom she acquired it – she had traded ten kisses – some of the lotion that would remove it. Proudly she gave jaunty Ibis the come-on in the dark room; he turned in confusion, where was she. But she giggled, tapped his glowing privates with a little stick, made him yelp. And she ran around him like an imp, thwacked him. He tried to catch her, squeeze her to him, tonight and many following nights. But she kept her nerve, made him feel her jealousy with every stroke. Until

the actor, to whom she went gladly and told her worries, gave her good advice and in the course of the conversation painted her again with the light.

Only when she got home did she notice how the room made her sad; spent the whole day thinking of what she had done. Too late to run back and beg the naughty actor for the green salty lotion; Ibis was already home. So she flung herself on the bed, let shine whatever would shine. Ibis banged around outside, opened the door. She lay stiff, held her breath; now he'd see it. And he saw. Stood in the doorway, clapped his hands. "There you are, Laponie. At last I see you again."

"I'm not here for you."

"For who then, sweet Laponie? Why this time only your little clamshell, not the nipples?"

"It's not for you. I have – had my revenge."

"Revenge! Laponie, you're glowing. When you thwack me, it's not nice." And at once he seized the struggling figure. For a moment she flung herself sulkily on her side because he refused to be angry with her, but soon they came together in passion.

And she was unable to stay serious when she saw him glowing in the dark. Yes, she remarked, they were becoming happier and happier every day. They hid from each other. Ibis said to Laponie: "We are too much in love. We must part for a little while."

They managed it only a couple of days. They did not see that the light mixture was stimulating them to ever more merriment. A heavenly joy filled them both. And the same with the women whom Ibis had touched, who had not washed with the green lotion. Five months later he was no longer alive and she was no longer alive. And all the many people who had failed to distance themselves from the light mixture – girls actors drug-takers – were all gone. The shimmer glimmer glow of the painted organs faded, the excitement persisted.

And as people grew sallow and unsure, they became boisterous, played tricks all day long. They succumbed to dance mania and erotic frenzy. And when these people – everyone knew it – began to dance and could not abide a chair beneath them, the end was near. Quite literally they danced themselves into the grave, a grave that often in their hilarity they dug and kitted out themselves. At that time the dead were ejected from the subterranean town onto the surface among the piles of debris. But the dancers aroused such peculiar emotions that a special place was set aside for them underground; this happened almost as a game. They seemed by their dancing to be using up the last traces of light mixture. After an hour's frenzy, alone or coupled – that is how Ibis and Laponie ended up – they threw themselves in with

screams of joy, and at once lay quite still, colourless and almost without flesh. And the people standing around were astonished at the nullity in which all this wild tumult ended. In a few cases the glow did not fade entirely. Above those graves a gentle glimmer could be seen in the pitch dark. This happened especially with those who died very early. A scent of lilac always accompanied the glimmer; even the dead still spread jollity around them.

At the circus, people in the completely darkened arena saw bulls charging, men and women fighting them. Blood spurted from the beast's neck, its flanks. It was a firework, a blazing beam of light. You saw the light mixture penetrating the body, mingling intimately with the blood. Those fighting tried to escape the beam, stay in the dark. If the bull sprayed them or slobbered on them, they were finished and could only be helped by others. No use digging in the sand: they only glowed brighter than ever. Were themselves dazzled, stumbled around in a flood of sunshine. They became objects of mirth, transformed from fighters to clowns. And it was entirely up to the other gladiators how the game would play out. Whatever happened, those who were spattered were finished. And so they played out their game in the dark with the bull and the glowing man, the glowing woman. They used their skill to prolong the game with all sorts of funny and exciting variations, ending it on a whim with the humans run down or (the circus roaring laughter) the bull speared just before it reached its goal. And now came the teasing of the radiant surviving glowworms; they were confused, teetered between grief and the merriment already bubbling up.

Not a performance went by without a parade of jolly glowworms left from previous fights. Later, when all fear had been laid aside, they were subjected to crazy and inhuman treatment; the glowworms let it happen. There came a time in London's Brass Town when the way to the circus and the circus itself were lit not by giant spotlights: glowing men and women, living lamps, were prodded to twitch and dance; the whole circus was lit up by them as if by candles.

Among the masses streaming into the strata of clay-chalk-marl under the British Isles, the memory of the Greenland expedition had not faded. But there was in them no sense of a defeat. When the monsters fell on them they were terrified. Then icy Delvil whirled among them; they were driven underground, freed of every sense of weakness as tower-people were constructed before their eyes, the fleet of tower-people extended along the Channel from the South Coast up to the north. Never had the Settlers been so despised. Delvil spoke truly to Ten Keir: the cause of Marduk and the Settlers had been dealt with, brutally.

What began with London continued in Brussels Hamburg. City after city took its installations underground; people followed. Small colonies remained on the surface. Engineers

were driven by boundless arrogance; in boundless arrogance people dived into the depths. To drive new tunnels and shafts, more workers were needed than on the surface. Machines for oxygen production and air purification, for lighting the ever-growing underground districts, required a huge workforce. But they were rewarded with many pleasures. Installations for physicists technologists biologists proliferated in discreet locations nearest the surface, rapidly as extensive in area as a small townzone. Prouder and more irascible than ever, these men and women of science. They had laid aside all shame. The masses knew, but acquiesced in everything these lordly beings offered them.

In London, where the glowworms first appeared, men and women of various races began to offer themselves to the lordly beings as slaves, bondmen and women. The senates needed people for the Meki-factories and research facilities, always snatching them invisibly from settlements or towns. But now people gave up any claim to dispose of their own persons. They were in the same driven state of ecstatic arousal as most of those in the subterranean strata. All they wanted was a profounder ecstasy; had no idea what to do with themselves. At the same time listless meek beings turned up at the doors of senators. They used the same words as the others, but you could see: they had drifted here, had taken part in many things, declined to take further part, were hurrying to the slaughterhouse. These strange people seemed helpless, especially white people from the Continent. The men in the installations heard them out, had them chained at the ankles and led away. They were vicious, you could see; they offered themselves to slavery only out of despair and disgust at their impotence. Like the epidemic of suicides after the Urals War, now came a craze for serfdom. In plazas of the subterranean townzones, little clusters of people gathered every day at certain spots which soon became known. The men and women offering themselves for sale even roped these places off. They themselves decided who should take them. Some specified a particular present that should be given them, regardless of the purchaser. The Senate took away a crowd of these every week to build new tower-people, and to serve as feed for those already in place. Many were used in experiments and ongoing work in the technology town. Many were sent to the machines as substitutes by lazy people with a work obligation.

TIME OF TRUE HUMANITY

THE MASSES who poured like foaming water into the abyss of the mega-cities had no idea what was planned for them by the strong men and women whose work this all was, from whose hand they lived. Delvil was totally immersed in his sinister monstrous vengeful

thoughts, his ideas for battling the violence unleashed by the primeval creatures; he took little part in meetings of the Senate. Ten Keir, the burly Belgian, had retreated to the background; shaken by his conversations with Delvil. The brave sane man was repelled by Delvil's anger. He had only reluctantly witnessed a start on the construction of a giant human, and then turned away. He never flew again to London. When people mentioned the success of the tower-giants, bile rose into his throat; he would hear no more. It seemed he preferred the onslaught of the monsters to this defensive measure.

Ten Keir braced himself, as in Brussels too the urge grew to be buried in the Earth. But he could not stop it. Succeeded only in preventing the ecstatic masses who poured back out of the subterranean shafts from destroying buildings on the surface. He, together with a small number of people, stayed on the surface in an obscure state of grief. He said it was to keep an eye on the Settlers.

In London's technology and research town, provocatively called the Greenlandium, suspended over the heads of the teeming masses in strata of clay and marl, the most powerful brains among the ruling class came together and gathered about them every kind of raw material. Here in the district of Carthagon, working on plant energy, sat Atkinson, a cold gloomy man, said to be a eunuch by his own volition, a misogynist. In Oceana, working with water, the Spanish Berber Escoyez, the water-creature who at the start of the Greenland campaign had advocated diverting the Gulf Stream and creating new sources of salinity under the sea. The heat of flames was studied by Nadeya, a shemale from Atkinson's stable. In the district of Tel el-Habs, the Hill of the Prison, sat several senatorial personages who could only with difficulty be termed human. These were men and women who had taken part in the construction of the tower-humans and, like animals who had once licked blood, could not free their thoughts from what they had seen and experimented with. They returned reluctantly from the hulks and Scottish peaks to the sober paltry realm of humans – those two-legged whinging bare-skinned obsolete creatures.

Atkinson had become a eunuch out of misogyny, out of misanthropy too. The men and women of Tel el-Habs, having seen the tower-people no longer wanted to be embodied in human organs. Experiments on slaves in their prison they tried on themselves as well. Tribord, returning from the summit of Glas Maol, gave up his old name, called himself Mentusi. He stopped eating, spread animals and plants over himself. Mentusi said to the shemale Kuraggara, who had once been Mrs Macfarlane: "Meki and his generation did well to abandon fields and forests to the wild. What we can make of ourselves we shall make. They built great factories, facilities. We've dragged these facilities around with us for centuries. They require

space and supervision. How proud we are of these facilities. Now they are superfluous. We must reset the point of attack. I am all for ploughed fields and herds of cattle again. A dog can eat for me, as much as it wants, as long as it remains my dog. Did you not see the stones and oaks and herds of cattle thrown onto the towers. They had to eat for the towers. I'll be a dog myself, if I stuff myself much longer with what the factories brew up."

Polyps hung on the man of Tel el-Habs. His abdomen was bored through. He sent his colleagues out into abandoned forests; they brought back foxes otters African zebras, turtles. The age-old difficulty of marrying two species was overcome: Mentusi had worked it out while observing the construction of the towers. The radiant webs mixed all species together. Just as he had scorned Meki, he scorned Marduk who had made trees grow: "Kuraggara, they were yogis and fakirs. Jokers! Let them admit it. Until the Greenland expedition we were nothing. The man who plucked fire and rays from volcanoes is my man."

Kuraggara held her sides laughing: "I'll try to have a turtle baby."

"Why not. Who can stop you."

They did terrible things there on Tel el-Habs, the Hill of the Prison.

These Giants, lords of the western townzones, saw primal monsters wash over them and were not shattered. They were not besotted with the magic webs of Greenland, unlike those sailors who abandoned their vessels under the rosy light, stepped into boats, rocked naked – bliss upon bliss – on the water. The lords and ladies of the mega-zones sat cold and hateful behind their power. Like robbers concealed in a royal park, watching through a fence as elegant beauties stroll in the meadow, loose hair under bright shawls, buxom playgirls – they make their calculations, await their chance and pounce to seize and carry them off – just so did the untameable people of Tel el-Habs spy on the secret of the volcano, seize it and impose themselves on it.

On the Hill of the Prison, the people of Tel el-Habs worked with people from Basalt Town, which looked like a collapsed cone. Here they busied themselves with the entity called "rock". They took red rubies, violet apatite, blocks of glassy gypsum, infused them with the rays of Kylin that had burst asunder Iceland's volcanoes. They directed ruby-inducing ruby-forming energies not onto ruby, but onto the related corundum. Normally it stayed inert under the impact of this energy, which for it was no energy at all; each thing was set in motion by its own particular stimulus. But the basalt people had control of volcanic heat itself. They directed the heavy artillery of this energy onto some substance. Like cake dough when yeast is added, the mineral mass began to swell. The basalt people placed glass tubes around the

scraps of webbing; used gases to release and dampen the primordial energies. Now little by little over long long hours the ruby began to stir, like a linen sheet bleaching under the sun. And always the Kylin rays burned into it, with no effect on the mass, which merely fermented.

There existed a point, gradually ascertained by the basalt people after strenuous investigations with the help of attenuators dampers retardants: the point of indifference and change. This was the moment that meant everything in the life of the rock-being. It was the moment when its strongest and most resistant material ties were burst apart, the rock itself, although not glowing, was about to turn to dust, ready to be devoured and annexed by any nearby solid substance. The Kylin rays burned into the rock; the change was coming. The nearby substance must be held down. As a small crystal seed thrown into a supersaturated solution causes the whole mass to solidify, so the softened body stiffened, allowed itself to be directed to the entity designated by the Kylin rays. It was painstaking work. They learned to turn a granite block, formed of hard sprinkles of quartz, dark hornblende, mica, reddish feldspar, into a single homogenous block of white quartz.

While the people of Basalt Town were engaged on the transformation of primal substances – at every turn they saw themselves transformed – the lords of the Hill of the Prison took to themselves everything they needed. Animals formerly never found together, unless for example one was eating the other, were flung at each other; everything must be reduced to the mother substance, broken down to the elemental. Sequestered in their subterranean fortress they tried in angry fury to transform themselves into hares mice panthers beetles. For this they took endless people from the underworld and surface world, made use of the slave market, played havoc with humanity.

Mentusi and Kuraggara lived in a fever of expectation. How they laughed. Mentusi boasted: “When there were religions, a hundred or a thousand sensible people never believed in the Devil Satan Heaven God angels everlasting life. What did these sensible people do? For their whole life they did not believe. Not believing: that was their business. And there were some who gave their lives to fight against the existence of Satan Heaven or God. Drip, drip. Whoever has a crazy idea should be allowed his fun. I don’t care about primeval monsters, stupid lizards. They can’t reach us down here. What do you say, Kuraggara? All they can do is die, and there’s room enough for that up there. But – now! What do you say?”

“I too have no time for the reptiles.”

“We should build them an aquarium, so they don’t die too soon and we can feed them nicely. They should like it better here with us than in Greenland. I’ll go to Greenland and see

what's happened there. Maybe I'll take a dragon a lizard with wings and snout to be my steed and make it carry me there. Hallelujah, sweet land. Off to Jerusalem!"

"Aren't you being just as childish as those who fought against Heaven or Satan? Mentusi, why should I care about Greenland? Maybe I'll go there. Maybe Iceland would be better, the volcanoes. But if I go, I'll manage without any ship or dragon or plane. Be a bird, if I want. Be steam, if I want. Yes, I want this too, Mentusi. And be a fish! And fire. Not like that wretched tower-human I visited recently in Scotland. I flew up to its eyes, close to and then farther away until it recognised me. It did recognise me. It was an old friend. But what's that to me – it was grieving! Grieving a dark dreadful grief. As it blinked its eyes I had a feeling I should leave at once, it must forget me, I'm just a bad dream. It was a dull sleeping man who can't wake up. If I'd hovered around any longer it would have grabbed me like a Greenland creature and gobbled me down. Like a stupid child: grab fumble, into the mouth. But to be a fox from top to toe, live like a fox as long as you want, feel all foxy. Yes, Mentusi."

"We've been too long in our skin. We'll end up like those bleating sheep in London who give themselves to our factories and experiments. They still have human skin. They don't care what happens. Do you know," he roared laughter, "do you know what I shall do with them."

"I can guess."

"Yes, I'll turn them into sheep. We'll herd them into a meadow, chuck chuck chuck. We'll hide behind a tree chuck chuck. They come along, we put them in a sack, ask them: 'Do you really want to eat mutton?' 'Yes,' they say, 'mutton's lovely.' 'Fine,' I say, and tie up the sack. Chuck chuck chuck. Light here, some steam there. 'Are you all right?' 'Sure.' 'Are you nervous?' 'A little.' 'Don't be afraid, my little chickens. I'll soon give you mutton to eat. The sheep are just coming out of their stall.' I nearly said: the sack. More light here, two steamers. Patience, patience. 'And how are you now, my little chickens?' 'Baa baa.' 'What is that noise! You must already be eating mutton.' 'Baa baa.' Don't laugh, Kuraggara. Isn't that the way to do it?"

"That's the way, Mentusi! Baa baa!"

"My little chickens. Soon I'll open the stall. There'll be such a surprise. You'll have mutton soon enough. But what's this scrabbling in the sack? 'Baa baa.' What's this, I've made a mistake, Kuraggara. Sheep already in the sack! How is it possible!"

"I can't laugh any more, I'll choke if you don't stop, Mentusi."

"There! No, Kuraggara. Sheep! Bodies and legs and tails, large as life! Woolly sheep. Four of them, that's how many people I put in there. And where are my people – gone. The sheep

must have eaten them. I must have put sheep in by mistake, they've eaten the people. I was distracted. Man-eating sheep. What should I do now."

"Stop joking, Mentusi. If only we were that far on."

How the Giants despised the people of their townzones. They let machines factories devices hum away only so they could feel powerful. They needed the masses as something to vent their spleen on. How measured were the words uttered on Tel el-Habs, the thought once spoken by Ten Keir in London – the little Belgian's square ruddy face expressionless; he suppressed his horror at what he was witnessing in the research towns; his retinue had not betrayed how he vomited and wept at the sight of a dumb tower-human on a raft as they crossed the Channel. The cruel corrupt arrogant beings, men and shemales of the research towns, had spoken to him without reservation; said: the time of true humanity is coming at last; at least, we sense it.

Ten Keir had watched with horror the play of snake-like polyp arms on them; so this was the beginning of true humanity. Of the human creatures under their feet, townspeople and Settlers, they said nothing, unless with a lewd look and laughter. He saw what these Giants were capable of. One day they would clump together all this mass of people, just as the dragon-hordes had done. He said: people must be on their guard, lest one misuse his powers to the harm of others. It is good to keep an eye on the population: some foam and rage, while others have no idea what to do. Something must be done. An attempt must be made, as suggested by the old Wind and Water Theory: simplify the confused despondent creatures to the level of animals and plants. Perhaps reduce their numbers at the same time. We must try to achieve an enduring form of humanity. Uncomplicated forms of life that survive procreate die, pass on their external mode of life unchanged for centuries millennia. The burden of individuality, the terrible condition of possessing an individual soul, must be lifted from them.

The Giants of Tel el-Habs had laughed at him: let him see where that would lead. Maybe they'd do something of the sort as a sideline; it wasn't a very enticing task. Ten Keir, weighed down by suffocating grief and trepidation, had tried to gain access to Delvil. No one could come near him. Ghastly rumours circulated about what he was up to. For days on end, Ten Keir and his retinue walked the tunnels and streets of gleaming buried London. He had a room readied in some house where he could stop for a few hours. He sat in the dark, wept. And could not leave London. He pressed on again with his companions. They warned him not to exhaust himself, could see his misery. But he could not pull free of the zone. He tried three times to reach Delvil. He begged at Kuraggara's feet: find a way in to Delvil, he's a friend. She

marvelled at the man's passion, could do nothing. Twice Ten Keir went up to the surface, twice descended again into the shafts. To himself he said: "I have to weep. I have to weep. Weep much more than this. I must steep myself like a pigeon about to be plucked. I must see everything. I deserve it."

But when he had gone once more through the slave market the circus the working town, research zone, he came to the western edge where soil broke through into the tunnel, and picked up a handful of loose gravel. Shoved it in his pocket. As he went back up, eyes tight shut, he squeezed the gravel, whispered: "I shall remember."

On the surface his companions looked at him, thought he would order their return home. But they must take him to the coast. He sent his plane back. He crossed the Channel in a small boat to the Flanders coast. The gravel he took from the western edge of London was black and grey. During the crossing he kept looking at it in his palm, tears were in his eyes. Closed his fist when anyone seemed to be looking, stuffed his hand back in his pocket.

KYLIN'S CALL

THE LAST OF the Greenland and Iceland expeditionaries still lurked in Shetland and the Faroes. Even during the expedition the senates had feared the sailors would turn on them. But they never came, never stormed the zones. It was known that they had fled from the primeval monsters to their gathering grounds. Amid the catastrophe of the monstrous incursion, the frenzy of subterranean town-building, they were totally forgotten. When people thought of them later, they hoped they would appear and do battle. They never did.

It was a dumb suffering community that hid away on the rocky ground of these sea-howling islands, living off the remains of ship's stores, solitary. Sometimes scouts sneaked across to the Scottish hills. The primeval creatures had fallen on the western townzones as a soul-freezing horror. When the hideous creatures fell on the expeditionaries in the zone of pink light, when vessels people girders steel became transformed and their bliss evaporated all at once, the feeling clamoured through all the horror: "It's good! At last, at last!" Speeding over the water, entering the zone of daylight, half the great fleet had succumbed to the monsters. The survivors fleeing pell-mell across the sea had felt: "Now it's finished. Now we are redeemed." Were stranded on the stony islands, thought little, breathed towards the Earth.

The scouts returned: Scotland is sealed off to the south. Gloomy thought: "Against the Greenland creatures. And us. They're blockading themselves against us." Bitter comfort. The

expeditionaries tucked themselves deeper into the crevices of the islands. No one went to the ships. They spent an icy winter on the islands wanting only to sleep, kept mostly away from one another. Often a rushing chattering of monsters flew over the islands. The huddled cowering people shivered as if caught in a storm, hid their faces, lay brooding. Everything was so unreal. They looked at one another in their caves tents old cottages: so others are still here. They themselves were there, moving eating drinking. They thought and felt. Felt endlessly, better not to look. Felt in vain, could not reach themselves. What were they like? Like when a hurricane has caught you and blown you into a corner of a cave. You hang on there, a speck of dust on a spider's web, can't leave. They went around, sobbed, sought for a voice. Often a trepidation came over them, afflicting tautening the skin, pressing on chest and throat: oh what is happening with us. They sighed, let spittle drool.

One disappeared, then another. Into the water, to Scotland. On Mainland the junior officer Goodluck burned the nearest ships. Emaciated like the others he slunk about the cliffs, stuck his ginger head into caves, called, wanted people. Growled: "Who's there? Anyone there? Ha! It's Goodluck."

"What does Goodluck want?"

"Nothing. To look at you. Do you know what I've done?"

"You sound hoarse."

"The smoke. I set fire to the ships."

"Who cares."

"All gone. It was the right thing. Oh, what am I doing." He wandered the caves, sat by the sea. One day he went back to the cottages, his hoarse voice called to everyone he came across, urgently: "Quick. Come down to the water." He sat on the shore, took two big smooth stones between his knees, started to rub. He snarled at the people who came along: "Sit. Pick up stones. Do what I'm doing. Grind." Some did so. He snarled: "Grind, grind. Till it's all dust." Then he let the stones fall, chivvied them: "What shall we do now. Throw pebbles. Over the water." And began to throw. The others swore, withdrew glumly. He tugged at one, at another: "Don't leave me alone. Don't leave me. What should I do."

"Throw your stones." They ran off. "Stupid beast." Left him snarling gulping.

What started with Goodluck continued with others. Until bedraggled Kylin turned up on Mainland in a boat in St Magnus Bay, and brought together on a stony plain everyone amenable to his call. He went from one to the other, looked at the men and women, held

hands. "Supplies are almost gone. That crazy Goodluck burned the best stocked ships. No matter. Now we must make decisions."

A tormented voice mocked: did he want to lead them again, to Greenland maybe?

"No. I shall not speak the name of that land. Certainly not in the way that pious people of earlier times named a god they believed in. Nor do I want to lead you. Yes, I'm guilty. Not of the Tourmaline webs and the last calamity. But the one before. I did that. I burst open the volcanoes." He stood whispering beside a rock. "Do what you want with me."

They stood about. Kylin sat, covered his face, sobbed. No one touched him.

"What will happen now. I thought it all over so carefully, once I knew everything. You'll do nothing to me. Although in many a moment I'd prefer someone to do something. But I'm past that now. That's why I've come."

Some of them looked up.

"Perhaps we'll be here a month, two months more on these islands. But I want to go away. Dear friends, I am on my way and just wanted to let you know. Goodluck is crazy. Some of you will go crazy if you don't act decisively and if nothing happens. I'm going away. This I know."

"Why, Kylin. Where to."

"I can't tell you what's happened. If I stay much longer, there'll be no need for dragons to come and eat me. I don't want that. Shall I tell you? The cities are no longer my enemy."

They pressed closer about him.

"The zones had no need to throw up defences against us. For sure I won't do anything against them."

"Nor will we."

"Friends, you know what I'll do? I, Kylin? I shall go on my way. Why stay here, outside the zones, at their door? I shall go into the world. The Earth is big."

Now many of them whimpered mocked laughed. But Kylin stayed on the plain by St Magnus Bay. Unease drained from them. Hunger beset them. Swarms of monsters still rushed overhead; the old expeditionaries no longer looked up. They congregated on the last freighters. Climbed wearily aboard, sighing. Went in little groups down into the calm Irish Sea.

The Orkney and Shetland Isles, so long occupied by groups of humans, girt by the western fleets, were emptied, given back to waves and storms. As silently as they had quit

Iceland, the expeditionaries released Shetland and Orkney. Here oil clouds were created, Holyhead and Bou Jeloud, from here uncountable ships sailed laden with the devices and mind-power of the western cities. Thousands of human deaths ensued, Iceland torn apart. The icy continent with its glaciers emerged, overwhelmed by terrors. To all of those who voyaged: this had happened. They sailed away, but wanted to remember. Now hurl this last thing from them, the old anchoring places, leave the ships behind. And then to the Continent. Kylin, greatly aged, eyes glowing, had said to them: Live again. What would happen on the Continent. But they wanted to go. The cities were still there.

BY THE CAMPFIRE

THE SEA changed during the voyage. North Channel, Irish Sea. Waves crashed played lapped. Distant stars shining. The water mirrored the ship-bodies, silently mirrored the hulls. Threads of algae trailed soundlessly. Mild breezes played, buffeted, died away. They travelled slowly. Near the Scilly Isles they turned east. A dark line appeared over the white glittering arc of sea. There to the southeast, where sea melted into the shimmering white twilight of sky, was a broken line. The fragmented strokes showed blacker, chunkier. On the ships they shut their eyes, lay down by spars and rails. The Continent. The leaders increased speed. The sea hissed gently evenly beneath them. Soon they saw chalk cliffs, white jags, surf below. The ships exchanged signals. Slowed, heaved to on the open sea. Every ship stopped in sight of the continental coast. A silent hour passed. Snapping singing moaning wind.

The Continent began with raw cliffs of chalk, then fell smoothly away beyond. Once a mountain chain stretched from Cornwall and Ireland across to the Continent. The mountains sank, sea flooded over them; now the sea flowed around islands. To the south and east lay French landscapes embraced by Atlantic waters, stretching down to the glittering southern sea. Centuries and millennia of hollows basins plateaux mounds had formed this land. Ancient seas in the north flowed away. Volcanoes extinct: their ejecta lay on the high plains. Great rivers opened the breast of the land, swelled majestically seawards. There lay the land with its mountains fields river-plains vineyards, not resting until it could greet the sea. It brought forth meadows moors spates mountain tarns. Its ground engendered green deciduous forests, roots rising in black and silver trunks to unfold leaf-masses to the air-drenched sky. They absorbed light, wedded themselves to light. Plants looked about, green red yellow. Grasses stood side by side in dense clumps, played, let the wind hum against their edges. Ants ran on the forest floor, shelled beetles shimmering brown, they felt around blades stalks, turned them

over, searching dragging. Flies floated, droned thinly through the buoyant air. Big slow beasts snuffled at the soil of fields and meadows. Heavy-bellied cows chewed grass; they nipped and grubbed with muscular lips, gathered it on the wet rough tongue. Horses with lowered heads and big black eyes at the ploughs of Settlers; long tail lashing the hindquarters.

People walked the Earth, scratched and petted their livestock. Unlike cows and sheep their bodies had no fur; they had no scales, received the light of the distant sun on bare smooth skin. For the gases of the air they had delicate transparent openings at mouth and nose. The vault of the chest, framed by a bony arc of ribs, provided space for air. The chest rose and fell like a spinning wheel, pulled air in, let it out. People sucked tirelessly at air, soaked themselves in invisible powers. They let the juices of many plants and animals flow through their viscera, helped themselves to the powers that had settled in the Earth and let them burn inside them. Animals had climbed from water; humans could not escape water and it would not escape from them; it flowed through their substance and their skin. People flew light and trembling over meadows plains plateaux, drifted tirelessly towards those things that gave them life and prolonged their lives. They had knees that could bend with the body the neck, go down to streams, hunt game for the meat it gave. From calcium in the ground they developed hard bones that enabled them to push and tug, joints so they could curl up, hide away and protect their sweet life. They smacked and sucked at many things that tasted nice, bitter sour spicy. How good to have teeth to bite and crack. What they chewed went down the throat to the stomach, did the body good.

And always the eye was drawn to novelties, everything around them moving, birds treetops wind sand. The sun made colours glow, cast sharp shadows. People had eyes, the day's delight, this blessed marriage with light. The skin was sensitive; limbs that let themselves be moved carried the whole body: where to. To coolness, warmth, a cow for the milking, and to things human, skin, a shoulder, a soft lap. Man and woman joined. That's what feet and knees were for, to go, draw near to one another. Exchange glances, touch hands, mouth against mouth, and not only mouths. They had a body, oh the burrowing. What they felt and folded to them: that people are not water, not to be melted into it. That people endure, this comforting soothing: this staring and absorption in the fire's flames. That this one has breasts, heavy tresses, soft skin, the other hardness, roughness. Swelling bushy parts commingling: the exuberance of the sweetness they engender. Wings that transport you to another land. And it was suspended over the ground, person with person, seed streamed, they lay in shadow, in darkness, embraced in maternal light.

On cultivated land, in mountains, along river plains, in forests: people. To this country between the cold Atlantic waters and the southern sea came the Greenland expeditionaries. They detoured around the great cities. They saw Brussels – no longer Brussels but a waste of rubble where Ten Keir was enthroned, guarding over it. He was a bloodhound: the expeditionaries scattered to elude him. They headed north, meant to contact Marduk’s realm, of which now nothing was known. Then near Amiens they encountered some of old Ten Keir’s men, a little tribe making its way to the rubbleheap of Valenciennes. These men mingled with the expeditionaries, tried to sound them out. They kept mum. When they were among the ruins Ten Keir himself appeared. He said his name, looked attentively at the ragged men and women. Had they come by ship to Belgium, clad in leather as they were. A whole day with them left him uneasy. And suddenly he came upon Kylin, a man known to every senator in these regions. Kylin was sitting in a cart, handing out bread that Settlers had given him. He glanced without interest at the man standing in front of him. Now Ten Keir, deeply shocked, understood who these people were: Greenland expeditionaries, broken through the barricade. But the barricade had been allowed to decay. He called Kylin by name. Glaring into Ten Keir’s eyes he dropped a bread roll. Ten Keir bowed: “You are Kylin.”

“Ten Keir?”

“Yes.”

Kylin with his long greyblack beard retrieved the roll. “Don’t be afraid. If you are afraid.”

“Not afraid. Astonished, Kylin. You are Kylin.”

“Does my beard puzzle you? Your townzone hasn’t grown any younger.”

“Brussels is not the townzone. You can’t see it. It’s gone underground.”

“I know. I heard.”

“Why do you keep looking around, Kylin? Are you afraid of me?”

“The land is very pretty. We shall move on. I wish you the best of luck.”

“Where to, Kylin.”

“I don’t know. To the north. The east. Farewell, Ten Keir.”

Uneasy Kylin moved out at once. Ten Keir kept an eye on them; his agents were along the road, mingling. The Belgian concealed this encounter from the senate of his zone; but it perturbed him. What are the expeditionaries up to, what will they do. Felt agitated, could not put them from his mind. Were they Settlers? He was helpless. A few weeks later his agents

could tell him nothing more of the band: it had dissipated. Probably out of hunger, Ten Keir consoled himself, doubtfully. The Giants across the Channel strutted and busied themselves; he drifted pale-faced. Sat above the Brussels townzone. Gravel from the dreadful London of Kuraggara and Mentusi crunched in his pocket. He was harried, had no idea where to go.

The expeditionaries turned south into an ever more blooming landscape. They wandered in small groups, kept in contact. When the black hills of Argonne loomed and they began to go hungry in that desolate waste, Kylin waited a week until all the bands had turned up. In the valley of the Aire some three thousand people assembled, with carts barrows mules horses ox-teams. The firs of the forest had sprouted bright green needles. In a little grove of young conifers, Kylin spoke with a small group of assistant leaders.

“We must separate. We really must separate now. There’s no food if we stay together. We can be attacked all at once. Ten Keir of Brussels is on our tail.”

He went among the twenty men and women. Young Idatto, a gaunt man who had overcome the city-dwellers’ strange obsession with fat, held his arm: “What’s to become of us?”

“You’ll never be sick again, Idatto.”

“I know. So I won’t ever be sick again.”

“We must separate.”

“But I want to stay with you. I shall fall sick again, sicker than before.”

“You think so, Idatto?”

“We don’t want to separate, Kylin.”

“We shall stay together in small groups. That’s what I want as well. But we can’t keep moving as we have been. You know how many are going hungry.”

“I can go hungry and everyone would rather go hungry than lose each other. Ask Bersihand and Magin, anybody. All would rather go hungry than separate.”

Kylin dropped his hand, stood silent, looked down, his lips moved: “You can all speak.”

And one after the other, the men and women all repeated what sick Idatto had said. They surrounded Kylin, who kept stepping back. When Kylin opened his glittering eyes they had no idea as they started back in shock why he began to threaten and scream:

“So do what you want. Go hungry, let yourselves be attacked, stay together. I won’t stop you. I have no power to stop you. You have no power to stop me. I’m leaving.”

Idatto implored: "Why?"

"Yes, ask. Just asking is a bad sign. You are well now, Idatto: what's your good health for? I'm astonished what you all do with your good health. No, horrified. I have to say: I am ashamed of you." Kylin sank to the ground as if weary, stretched, head turned aside, pushed his hands into soft soil. Some seemed to understand this movement. Stocky curly-haired Damatile took hesitant Idatto by the arm, looked into his face: "Keep quiet now, little Idatto."

And as they stood in silence, Kylin climbed to his feet. Damatile took his hand. She wanted to speak. But Kylin raised both hands, looked at her and the others. Everyone knew: he's thinking of Greenland volcanoes glaciers monsters. The thought pulsed through them. Kylin chewed his thin lips. "We must part, Damatile, my friends. So that we are not destroyed."

Now they understood. Young gaunt Idatto wept at the Earth. Kylin listened quietly for a while. The only sound was the young man's weeping. "What else is there to say, my friends. Why upset yourselves. Tell the others out there. Explain clearly. But they will surely understand why we must stay alive."

They passed the rest of that day in the valley of the Aire. When a big campfire burned in Kylin's group near the little grove of firs, and the leaders gathered around Kylin, all the groups knew: it's over. Their sorrow and pain had not abated. At first the leaders sat by the huge roaring fire, leaned stiffly back on mossy ground in the living ruddy glow. Then Kylin stood, bowed towards the fire, and staring ahead threw jacket and belt into it. Kneeling, forehead to the ground, he paused a while. Stood up as the others watched in silence, passed his hands over the nearest fir tree, bowed to it. When he took his place again by the fire, his lips opened as he stared into the blaze: "I have to tell you –," the voice toneless, hands slack at his knees; "No, I have nothing to tell you. You can see it all for yourselves. This, this is fire." Head bowed to his chest: "I repent," he whispered, "I repent."

Uneasy shifting in the circle. Kylin whispered: "Don't hide from yourselves. I – am – strong. I won't let myself be broken. I look ahead. Into the future. I look it in the face. There. I stand up. I confront it. I look into its eyes, through them. Deeper, into its head. Deeper, into its throat. I see. I dare. I survive. I am on my knees. But I don't fall over. My eyes are steady. And if any should take up clubs, they'll never be able to drive me from it."

A bulky dark-skinned man stood up, shuffled heavily over to Kylin, knelt behind him, stared bitterly past his shoulder. He clenched his teeth, rubbed his forehead in the dirt. A woman's quiet whimpering; then she screamed, a sinewy thing with a warm sad face, fuzzy upper lip. She stretched out her arms: "Away with it all. Greenland, volcanoes. Monsters. Away."

Away with it.” Jumped up, ran off. Men drew back from the flames, angry, close to rage. They saw the fire, Iceland, of course they knew it already. How they forced themselves: they choked, vomited, bent their heads, eyes popped, they choked, let themselves fall back.

Kylin sat unmoving. His eyes bored into the fire with a desolate rage, were given to the fire: “Survive. Nobody touch me. Either I burn myself out, or I endure.”

Damatile, strong snubnosed woman, shouted across the flames at Kylin: “Our despoiler. You! We’ve come through it all, Tourmaline webs, the dragons. The worst comes last: Kylin. The worst is called Kylin. He ripped open the volcanoes and now it’s our turn. He won’t let us come to terms with it. Won’t let us recover. Kylin, monster, dragon.”

He groaned: “Ever onward. For myself. This is Greenland. This – is – Greenland.”

Amid the retching grumbling groaning of the men and women, young Idatto crept to the fire. His gaze was avid: “Lured away. Back again. I’m coming. You won’t get away from me. Here am I, Idatto. I am Idatto. You are fire. You are Greenland. I don’t grind my teeth. I am at your side. Just come, burn, rage, be my fire, swallow it down. Oh sweet heat. Down my throat. Sweet hot swirling air. Waft into me. I shall survive.”

Kylin: “You must survive, Idatto. It’s Greenland. It’s fire. You must not evade it.”

The black man on the ground groaned: “Kylin, you. I shall survive. How you torment us. Once we were well.”

“I’ve made no one well, no one sick. Idatto, support me, I’ll support you, be my friend. Say it with me: “This is fire, this is fire.””

“What should I say.”

“This is fire. So it won’t go out, Idatto.”

“Yes, I want to.” They held each other. The ruddy fire threw out its heat. Men and women covered their ears. The two men breathed: “Fire. This is Greenland. Fire. Greenland.”

And the others straightened, bowed their heads, stammered: “Yes, yes.” For Kylin and Idatto would not succumb. The people were weak from choking and retching. “Here’s my shawl, my belt,” someone muttered, threw the belt into the fire. The fire ate it, lifted it crackling in the flames, spat smoke. “It must happen. There is no salvation.” And some pushed close to Kylin and Idatto as they clung together; encouraged: “It’s good. You’re good. We thank you. Take me along. Kylin, you never allowed us to sink into sleep.”

“Fire. Greenland. Fire. Greenland.”

“I am weak. I am nothing. I pray to you.”

“Monstrous. Mighty. Ah, I am not up to it. Come what will.”

And some took off their jackets, fingers flying, kneaded them, their breath fled, they dropped the jackets into the fire, covered their ears as they crackled and flared, sobbed helplessly, bitterly. “Where is salvation.”

And always Kylin and Idatto, suspended in the firelight, called out: “Fire. Greenland.”

Wheedling, driven, some removed a shawl, a ribbon, anything loose that they wore, bowing fawning at the tender calm face threw it gently arcing towards the proud crackling flames. They stood in the enfolding darkness, emerged again into the ruddy light of the fire.

Idatto freed himself from Kylin with a melting smile. His knees loosened, he stepped around the fire. Crept around the flames. Crept in a wide arc around the flames. Held his arms high, mouth open in exultation, said not a word. The gaunt young man looked not at the fire but through air trembling with light, straight ahead at the needle-strewn forest floor. Bowed down every few steps. Circled the fire. And the people he passed stood up. His voice came: “Up! Stand up! All praise to the fire. Praise to Greenland. Praise to the volcanoes.” And the bent backs, slumped shoulders followed. Still sighing, shuddering sobbing in their fear; he kept circling. Kylin crouched in the dirt. As the groaning whispering procession passed by, he fainted, lay back in darkness.

Idatto moved away from the fire, ran shouting into the forest. People were climbing singly, in little groups, up from the valley of the Aire. Startled and frightened, they mingled with the circling line. Insistent questions. They knew they must separate. There was talk of Greenland. The fire blew hot; people pushed towards the flames, threw shawls and belts into them with prayers and appeals, redeemed themselves. How many sank to their knees, overcome by fear.

They pulled Kylin to his feet. He stared into the mêlée, listened to the muttering calling screaming. Idatto led him. Kylin’s smile was bleak: “Are you afraid of me? I’m the one who burst open Herðubreið and Krafla. You’re not afraid of me. You can see what we have made: this is fire. Great great fire. Do not fear. Do not flinch from it. Or from the volcanoes and Greenland. Otherwise they will be a prison guard, waiting to throw you in chains. No fear. You must look at the fire for as long as you can bear it. Look at the great fire. Look.”

“Closer closer. It does not rend us. Ah how it blooms. Salute it. Salute it. Salute Iceland. Our home. Bow down. Salute.”

Many fell down. Shouts rang through the forest.

Kylin stepped slowly towards the fire, its flames catching on new logs. The leaders around him fell silent, spellbound by the fire, ecstatic reverent. Kylin let it light his hard face: "There it burns. Warms. Burning flames of fire. It tore open the volcanoes of Iceland. Burst glaciers apart. It's like water, that sinks ships and keeps them afloat. A blessing that we did not shrivel up and die in Shetland. Fear has gone from us. I bow my head. You burn when we come close. Be propitiated. Have mercy on us. Have mercy on us all."

Idatto embraced Kylin.

"Now I ask you, Idatto, whether you will starve and die, or live. Do we have a right to die. The world a living being: what a tremendous thought. Is it possible to die, once we know this? Hark how they shout. They understand it as we do. All humanity understands it. It is no magic spell that we keep hidden. Idatto, young man. We shall soon part, go our separate ways. I must live, you too, these others. Praise the fire. And what we have seen. Now comes Life."

Damatile, strong black-haired woman facing them, stretched her arms out in blessing, smiled through the slits of her closed eyes. Her voice clucked and trilled like a bird's: "How could we ever have thought to stay together and let ourselves be killed. This is like a bath, a bliss I lie in. The bath just made ready for us, water poured in. We've just climbed in."

Little sallow Shashara called out behind her: "Damatile."

"Damatile is here, will not open her eyes."

"Ah, there you are. It's me."

"Who?"

"Shashara."

"Shashara you say."

"Damatile, I can explain it all. This is the fire we fetched in Iceland. I flew over Herðubreið. It had already broken open. These flames. It was these flames. I recognise them."

"Yes, Shashara. And close your eyes, say what you feel. Put your hands behind your head like me, hold your head up. Don't listen to the shouting. Just feel. Feel in your fingers, feel in your face, your mouth, feel in your body, down into your legs, your feet. Can you feel it. Ah, I cannot speak. Not through my lips. Ah Shashara, I can't express it. Here it is again. Have no fear, just feel. Stand still. So sweet gentle gentle wild strong. In my throat, my knees, over my back, in my eyes. Ah. Burning flowing. So. So. I myself am burning. No talking. No talking."

The other whispered, subdued: "No talking, Damatile."

Idatto had climbed an ancient dead beech tree. He clung to splinters of the stump high above, daydreamed at the bustle below, the ever fiercer flames: “Dried leaves. Air. I shall let myself fall. Oh help me someone, so I don’t disappear.”

That evening and night the leaders tore themselves free from the last frenzy. Kylin drew the leaders to him in the night: he wanted to give them something before they parted. It was a symbol they should guard safely. He had a little dagger. The bronze hilt showed in relief the outline of an opened mountain, a flame shooting from it. Kylin heated the hilt, pressed the symbol first into Idatto’s lower arm. Every leader received the symbol that night. They curled over as pain shot through them, closed their eyes, were quieter than before. As dawn broke the first small groups peeled away without farewells. When the fire died down towards noon, the little wood and the valley of the Aire were deserted.

PART 9:VENASKA

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SWEET WILDERNESS

IN THE southeast of the country stood an age-old range of eroded mountains. It formed a gentle arc, worn to its base by water and rain. In the west its surface dropped to broad flat basin landscapes. Volcanoes had broken through an ancient granitic mass: here was the upthrust Cevennes, high land of the Auvergne, Feurs, Lyons. Mountain spates broke through undulating plateaux, narrow rocky valleys, cones of basalt and trachyte, layers of slag and ash. A crater might drop a hundred meters. The Rhone flowed down from the glaciers of Gotthard; rushing streams fed into her. She raced through narrow passes, poured her muddy water into sickle-shaped Lake Geneva, emerged from that basin deep blue. And when she broke through the Jura, gentle Saône came from the north to meet her. She mingled their waters, rolled on south. Wider and wider the river flowed across lavender- and myrtle-scented plains. Nearby regions sent more waters to her. The Alpine crags that had given birth to her closed in once more. Then the valley opened out. Swampy banks. Pebbles in a shallow bed. Fields of gravel down to the sea strand, desolate delta country. The lazy waters drifted on, to perish in the sea.

Garonne, mighty stream, eddying west through bottomland and gentle hills and vineyards. In the south, shimmering, the line of the Pyrenees white blue pink. Along the Atlantic coast the wind had built a barrier, the Landes; took sand north from Spain's sea-nibbled coast to pile it here in dunes. Few townzones occupied these two broad southern river basins. On the coasts, radiant menacing Marseilles, Bordeaux. Toulouse on the Garonne blared its domination of the region. Like the northern zones, these cities went underground with most of their inhabitants. Onto the fertile surface land north of the Pyrenees – rubble deposited by ice-age glaciers – Settlers crept. They peopled the landscape of Provence with its palms and orange trees, settled along the banks of the great rivers.

Even before the struggle for Greenland ended, small bands of Settlers had left the British Isles, where extermination threatened. To the north and round about them, cities were sinking into the depths as migrants snaked their way down the sycamore-filled valley of the lower Garonne and its rich meadowlands. White Baker came with her band to this country once ruled by Melise, cruel queen of Bordeaux. They flowed into the basin bordered by the Pyrenees, the massif to the east, the ocean. Moved through the Charente's warm wetlands, beneath sweet chestnuts coming into leaf, dark elms, leafy crowns of nut trees, over meadows and vine-covered ridges. In forests, sunny clearings, endless farmland gone to wilderness they faded into the older communities of half-Spanish and African Settlers.

Freed from the zones they flourished in the Charente valley, along the broad bed of the Garonne. Migrating Snakes brought from Britain their arcane doctrine of immersion in erotic embraces, raptures. Around Perigueux and Bergerac, down to the mouth of the Gironde where they built ramparts reminiscent of Rome, these men and women swung between placidity and enthusiasm. Not here Britain's gloom, its mists, cold winds, frosts. The powers of the zones evaporated. Here only the Mistral was to be feared, and devastating thunderstorms in spring and summer, springtime floods running up from the mouth of mighty Gironde to cover the fields. Sleeping wilderness, gardens, golden broom, crumbling roadways. Now and then they flinched as lightning flashed. Planes and wagons of the townzones deep below scraped up piles of sand and stones, broke blocks from soft crags, carried them down to the Meki-factories. On the seashore you could see great air-freighters that daily brought salts acids loads of rock from the north. The migrants settled unobstructed on the fertile land. They settled in farmsteads beside verdant grassy vine-covered fields, age-old swamps and bottomlands, on bumps in the landscape thick with growth, under the tall trunks of cherry laurels, beside wild twiggy acacias that dangled their leafy thatch over little streams.

And as people went over the soft fragrant ground, breathing in the scent of vines and herbs, there came a profound urge to come together after such a long time of alienation. On the heels of White Baker's band of Snakes came group after group of fugitive Settlers, from Britain Flanders Franconia Jutland, who like them were captivated. Such a boundless Now, refreshing self-renewal. Every breath a stimulus to self-realisation, everything upended.

DIUVA

SERVADAK sat alone beneath a cherry laurel in full leaf, a young blond person still very pale; called across to Light-for-me, the woman who had settled near him on the bank of the Dordogne. Oh she should come to him. She had already gone many times with him to the thicket where a holy cabin stood, had embarked with him on the sweet voyage. He always called as if for the first time, Light-for-me liked this. He sat under the knotty laurel with its untidy tangle of branches. She laughed through peastalks: "Servadak, you're just like a root the way you sit there. Look up: it grows so green out of you."

"Light-for-me, you've toiled enough."

"See my arms, Servadak, how thick they are. They grow thicker every day. I expect they'll burst. I'm so happy."

“Who are you working for so hard?”

“And if I have children, Servadak, who will provide their food.”

“I’ll feed them. And the others.”

“I have arms, Servadak, they are my children. I don’t just sit under a tree. Look at my peas.”

“Come here, Light-for-me.”

“That’s what the peas say: come. And my hens. And the truffles.”

“Come, Light-for-me. Light of my eyes. My willow. I sit here just for you, to look on your garden, I’m happy when you walk by. Look at my peas. Are they nothing?”

She laughed. “They’re a mess. All those red weeds! I won’t help you, come picking time.”

“Come closer.”

“You want to go to the cabin? But I don’t want to.”

“I just want you closer.”

“What for, Servadak.”

“It helps me. It helps me if you come just one step closer.”

“Ah my friend, it makes me sad to see you so pale. How long is it since we left Bedford.”

“I’d been away a hundred years already. When I saw you by the chalk cliffs on that northern coast, the hundred years were up. That was yesterday. Or today. Today I saw you for the first time. Just now I saw you for the first time. Come, Light-for-me.”

“Same old song, Servadak. Whenever I come to my peas there you are, like the thrush.”

“But the other thrush responds.”

“I’m responding.”

“You’re not a thrush. You don’t respond to me.” He stretched an arm out to her. She lowered her head to the stalks, wept, fiddled with peasticks, came slowly then faster towards him, as he knelt before her let him kiss her, kissed him gently on the mouth, eyes. Next day he called to her again, and the next. She was always there, tender, brown-black curly hair, slim figure, always lively, a little tired, her attention lighting always first on trees earth people, more radiant and open every day than any fine lady. She wore the drab work-clothes of a British Settler, long grey-brown jacket, black trousers loose, tied at knee and ankle. As she tucked the bright headscarf behind her ears, he stood up beneath the laurel tree.

“Servadak, I brought you something. A nice jacket. Look, they all wear such bright jackets.”

“Who wear bright jackets?”

“Snakes. Men. Lots of them.”

“Light-for-me, I am not a Snake.”

She was shocked, came closer. “Don’t say that. All of us are.”

“You know I’m not.”

“No, don’t say it. I won’t listen. Don’t frighten me.”

“A jacket? If you want, if it’s from your hand, I’ll wear it.”

“Thank Heavens! Oh Servadak, stand up from under that tree. You won’t get better sitting there. So pale, you look as if you only just left London.”

“I left London a hundred years ago. I’m not still pale. I work, look at the vines, my Light.”

“I came to give you this pretty jacket.”

“Come here then!”

She was at his side. “Stop hugging me, Servadak. Take off your smock. Look, it’s green wool. Do you like it? It’s pretty. You’ll look good in it.”

“I’ll look good? Let’s see. How do I look?”

“Good, good, wonderful. You can see for yourself.”

“I’ll wear it always.”

“No, you are not to grab at me all the time. Let me look at you. Aren’t you fine. Would you like to come singing with me tomorrow?” And she led him gaily across his field, called to the rows of beans, showed him to the laurel tree. “Servadak’s betrayed you, laurel tree. He won’t sit under you now. He needs light. He wants to keep moving. He must strut around.”

She led him to her garden. “This is Servadak. How do you like his bright jacket. Isn’t it pretty, like my headscarf. Come, I’ll put a fresh garland of peashoots around your neck. Well, peashoots, what do you say to Servadak’s jacket?”

“Give me the garland.”

“No, leave it around your neck.”

“I want to hold it. It’s from you. You cared for it. And when it wilts I’ll squeeze it between my palms and its life, no, your life, will flow into my shoulders.” She turned aside, sighing.

“What’s up, my Light?”

“Call me something else.”

“But you are my Light.”

“Call me something else. I want to be called Crocus or Little Breeze or – I am Mayelle, as I always was.”

“You’re sad.”

“Yes. You don’t want my garland, Servadak, you don’t want anything. I’ll take it off.”

“My Light.”

“Say Mayelle to me. You don’t even like the light.”

“Oh!”

“Oh. Yes, oh, Servadak, my night-moth. Oh you are sick from London.”

“I’ve lost so many people, Mayelle. Now I have you. Don’t be cross.”

Tanned Mayelle kept herself to herself, said not a word at the great gathering in front of Diuva, the woman who led this group of Snakes. Servadak came often, invited her to the cabin; she embarked on the voyage with him in both joy and sadness. Waited to see if he would change. But after every voyage he came back to her still more wildly yearning. Her garden lay alongside Servadak’s; his eyes spent half the day gazing at her trees her ground her peapods artichokes herbs. Always she was waiting for him to see her herbs her fruit trees, whether he would delight in her hens. He did delight, but as his smile showed, only in her. Close by their gardens was a placid lake. She swam blissfully in the limpid water. Servadak whooped beside her; she let him kiss her embrace her in the water, saw his face contort with ardour. She ran to her hut, threw herself down: “Oh what what should I do! What should I do! He is not sick. I want to be good for him, he’s dreadful. He suffers. He’s devouring me. What should I do.”

She let herself be taken to gentle bright-eyed Diuva, who laughed: “I’ll tell you, Mayelle. You live alone out there, far from us all with your Servadak. If you lived nearer and came to us more often, you’d know already: this happens a thousand times. It’s nothing unusual for men and women. They are all so happy to have one another, after such a time of deprivation. And now they are too happy.”

“But I can’t help complaining about him, Diuva. He works, does what he has to, but he never sees anything. He eats without tasting. I saw when he sat beside me: it’s all the same to him if I give him gherkins or mustard or baked truffles. He gulps it down, laughs and is happy.”

“Because you are there.”

Mayelle cried: “Yes, because I’m there. But isn’t he crazy.”

“Oh child. Like many others.”

Mayelle cried: “Help me, Diuva. He’s a good man, Servadak. He suffered horribly in London. He knew nothing but machines and playing and lounging around. He told me. And then he came to us. How lovely it could be with us. But it isn’t.”

Diuva took young Mayelle on her lap, pondered: “There’s one thing I must tell you. When you came away from London, don’t believe you left all sorrow behind, Mayelle. Sorrow and misfortune are not just in London. They follow everywhere that people set their feet. Even here, where all is sweet as the Garden of Eden, even here on the Garonne.”

“I’m not afraid of sorrow.”

“You could kill Servadak quickly, Mayelle, when you’re on your voyage in the cabin. Is that what you want. Yes. Many have done so, girls and men. It’s no torment. Between a voyage with the beloved and dying, there’s barely a step. It is not he, friend Servadak, who dies. When he is transported, bends over your body, lets himself fall, gushes his essence, he does not then have the soul of Servadak. You simply spare him the return. Leave him on the other side. You’ve gone quiet.”

Mayelle was long silent on the leader’s lap, snuggled at her breast. Breathed: “I couldn’t.”

“I know. Because you yourself are voyaging with him at that moment.”

Mayelle, breathing at her breast: “He’s so gentle. My moth. I can’t hurt him.”

“We’ll think of something else.”

Mayelle put her arms around the woman’s neck: “You’re cross with me, Diuva.”

“Stop teasing, little butterfly. Will you leave your moth to me? Maybe I can tame him. Maybe he’s a Snake, a real one with poisonous fangs, and I must remove the ring from his foot.”

Later: “Servadak, Diuva has invited you to see her.”

“I don’t go to anyone else, Mayelle, my Light. Never again. Are you sending me away?”

“She wants to see you.”

“I can come to you now, I’ve sat long enough under this tree.” He was at her side. “I know you complained about me, Mayelle, you went to Diuva and asked her for help against me. I don’t care. You’ve complained to my face often enough. But I just can’t leave you. I have an

avowal to make, my hand my throat my curlyhead my planet my sun my Earth my night my day. I can only tell you the tenth part of what I feel for you. I wouldn't dare tell more. But I can't hold it in."

"Don't squeeze me so, Servadak, sweet Servadak."

"You're ashamed because you went to Diuva about me."

"What are you saying, Servadak, sweet Servadak. You're flying away."

"This very moment."

"Why have you shut your eyes, sweet Servadak."

He held tight to her on the bench, head to head: "Now – I won't open my eyes again. Ever."

"Oh go on, open them."

"Never."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. Agents of Diuva of the Snakes will come for me. They'll come one day and fetch me away. They've fetched others away. So I've heard."

"Let go of me."

"No, Mayelle. I am here. Here. With you. With your blue and green headscarf, come, I'll wind it around my neck. Now your skin lies against mine. They'll have to cut me away from you. I have you. Here my knee with yours, my head with yours."

"Let me go, Servadak. I'm choking."

"I'm not choking you."

"I'm falling." And she tumbled from the bench onto soft grassy earth.

"Mayelle, sweet life, I know what's coming. Maybe it's right, but I can't bear it. Aya, look at you there." He breathed heavily, grabbed at her.

She screamed. "What have I done to you, Servadak. I was always good to you. I helped you in your garden. How often did we go to the cabin together."

"When you were there it was good. When you weren't there it was over. Now it's good. I was burning with desire. I still feel it almost, when I hold you tight. I can't bear it any more. I can't. Be good and surrender to it, Mayelle, don't curse me."

"I shall die in your arms, Servadak. Don't embrace me here. Stop tearing my clothes."

He groaned suffered, was buried in rapture: "It's Servadak here beside you. Nothing will happen to him. You can kill him. Take my gardening knife, kill me. I won't leave this sweet throat again. I'll stay here forever. Forever."

"Help. Who will help me." But it was just a whimper. Then she sighed, lay limp, fainting.

After a while the aroused overwrought man noticed her silence. He climbed to his feet, slung her slight body over his shoulder, strolled to his garden, laid her on the bed in his wooden hut. How she sat up. How she looked about. He lay on the floor, smiling at her.

"What's going on? Where are you?"

"With you, Mayelle."

She jumped up, eyes darted about the room: "This is your hut."

"Yes."

"You were to go to Diuva."

"I was. And instead, Mayelle has come to me. You'll be with me forever, Mayelle. Forever."

"I'm going to my garden."

"You can. You will. It's my garden too. This hut is your hut and my hut. You live here now."

"No."

"For sure you live here now, Mayelle. I can't allow anything else. You can't force me to kill myself. I have you here. And shall keep you."

"You're sick."

"Maybe. I can't live without you. Mayelle, my life, you are part of my body. You are here now and will always be with me. We belong together like a tree and its shade; no one can pull them apart." He was trembling, one hand at her waist. She had no idea who he was. She was ready to cry in anguish. She turned to face him, took his head in her hands, pulled his face to her for a kiss, looked into it, implored protested shook him.

"Now, Servadak! You are still my friend. Still my sweet root under the laurel tree. Come, sit here. I'll sit at your side. You can look at me, hear my hens clucking, call to them. You can throw stones at the sparrows to keep them off my peas. The lime tree outside my hut is in flower. Servadak! You! It's all so delightful."

"Only you are delightful."

“Don’t say that. Listen to me. Oh, you frighten me so. But still, you are my joy.”

“You are my only joy.”

Now she squealed in dismay, so shrilly that he let her go, stood up. She rushed to the door, turned to him as he stood dispirited by the bed, ran back to him. He mumbled, looked like a poleaxed bullock: “Don’t go. Oh Mayelle. Don’t go.” But he made no move. She pulled away after laying him on the bed, he was quite passive.

“I’m going to my hut. I’ll be back soon.” She slipped away, quietly latched the door, stood listening, ran to her garden. On the grassy patch in front of her hut she flung herself down among flapping hens and doves, begged the pain to go away, wept sobbed until her chest hurt.

And then she had to put on her headscarf, her face was red and swollen. “Diuva, I have come to you. Alone. Servadak, my friend, didn’t want to. I don’t know what should happen. Make him better. Help us. Do with us what you want.”

“You’ve been crying. What do you want?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sit quite still. Don’t cry. No more tears, Mayelle, you feather, you scrap of silk. Don’t change. Do you know the sunset, Mayelle, at the seashore, across the Gironde towards Bordeaux. Such stupendous colours, everything swimming in gold and red, a roaring thundering confusion. And the sea can’t keep still; the whole surface quivers, and the air. Such a glow, purple. And then it grows quiet. Then suddenly from your little hill you see trees. Trees emerge from the ground, hidden black branches against the clear sky. Were there before, but you couldn’t see them. And as you look at them, how squiggly they are all around the thick trunk, all black – the sky turns pale. Becomes white and empty. But it only seems so at that first moment: it is not white. Delicate blue shades are there, streaks and misty patches, like breaths; reddish violet, already dissolved into white. I watch it evening after evening as it comes over us from the sea. Finally there you stand and the trees are fully present: fields and hills spread out before you. Darkness bending away into darkness, and sinking ever deeper with us into darkness. Mayelle, people always come to me like this, with this glow of purple and gold. There are no gardens, no trees, no truffles artichokes peas. Who knows anything of hens. Only the purple the thundering the sinking away, death. What do they do, Mayelle, your grass and your peas? I am Diuva. We are on the Garonne, driven out of London, of Britain.”

“I have to tell you, Diuva, I’m so upset, I feel so ashamed. I’ve been insulted and humiliated by Servadak. I just feel it, I don’t know how. Oh I must pull myself together.”

“Those hens in the field, what do they do? They should run away and die. You planted artichokes.”

“And my trees are good, and the animals are good, and the day is good. And everything would be good, even Servadak. No,” she whimpered suddenly, pressed herself to the woman, whose eyes opened wide, “he *was* good. Take him away from me. It must happen. I can’t tell you why. Take him away somewhere. I don’t want to hate. I’ll lose myself, and all of you.”

“Of course I’ll do it, Mayelle. This now is the purple or the violet, and the trees.”

“Away with him, Diuva. Take him, take my sweet friend. I can’t stop myself. Do it for me.”

Thrushes sang, as they had so often heard. Doves fluttered. Agents of the Snakes appeared at Servadak’s hut; he was waiting for them. “Don’t take off my ring,” he groaned, as they went for the Snake-symbol at his foot. They took him west to another settlement. He burned like a fire lit in a windy chimney. Spicy dark red Medoc flowed into him. Servadak leapt, his body stretched. Mayelle was far away, stayed far away.

A tremendous blood-red over Bordeaux, the lapping water all ablaze. Sky yellowing, air turning pale, great night rocking like a huge ship on the sea. Vineyards brooks human voices singing. And the wine flowed through Servadak. Stars gleamed. Chestnuts, fragrant roses, magnolias: there they were. Everything. Servadak curled up on his bed of straw. When would his crossing from London be completed. There was weeping in him: far away on the Garonne there is – who? Light-for-me. Mayelle. She walks in her garden, around the cherry laurel, curly hair, brown eyes open. Don’t think of her. Away with Mayelle.

MOON GODDESS

AROUND Toulouse, in a fair landscape of milk-white magnolias, yucca stems with yellow dangling bells, moved Venaska, a slender woman with light brown skin and thick black hair. She came from the south into this region of Snakes. The slant of her eyes, the shape of her face were more Malay than European. Some called her Moon Goddess. In the mild fertile lands of the young Garonne she soon achieved a similar status to Diuva further north. With the calm sure slow movements of her coolwarm body – delicate frame of bone, downy skin – she entered unobtrusively into the circles of the Snake Settlers. A slightly mocking smile played around full lips. The face was veiled in calm gravity, quite soulful, so soulful that those she encountered were smitten, at once abashed and joyous, readily led by her. With a small number of women and men she lived for a long time on the broad Canal du Midi, the little

Saune river. She went about unrecognised in a summery yellow Settler costume, which she wore even though she never toiled. People brought her lobsters from the fishing grounds, small tasty sardines, plump salmon. They vied to see who should bring her sweet small gherkins, aubergines from their fields. Anyone bringing wine drank with her.

She went about in loose yellow Settler trousers, a wide blouse with green and black ribbons at the throat, went arm in arm with men and women, watched with shepherds on lush meadowlands, went dreamily smiling amid the chatter of her companions along winding hill paths, played with her long coral earrings, waved her dusky hand at a peasant woman in a bright headscarf. As she went on, a last backward glance from her dark radiant eyes made the heart stand still. All who encountered her and spoke to her, especially women, were thrilled, spellbound. All longed for the cool firm hand always gently in motion. And when Venaska had passed by, they felt in the throat the chest that something had happened. They ran like the wind, clothes choked them, their eyes glowed. They had to speak, to babble; the heart beat fast, they could not be calmed.

Dusky Venaska gave out nothing that she did not feel. Often, standing with a woman she did not know, eye to eye across a fence, a hedge, reaching out a hand, she grew pale, bit her lip, turned away in confusion. What she gave from her weakened her. From Iceland across the Arctic Ocean, among the ships of the expeditionary fleet there had come sailing those great freighters, hangars filled with taut gently buzzing glimmering Tourmaline webbing. Fishes birds had drawn alongside the freighters as they sailed, seaweed algae had grown up from the sea floor: at night the ships glowed, reared up from the water's surface. Just so did people on the hills and along the banks of the Canal du Midi and the Saune turn from the land, the harrow, towards the slim erect figure who was like one of their own, whose glance whose voice caught at the heart with painful poignancy.

For this woman, who came from Marseille declaring that she had no wish to follow the city underground, they fashioned a low Settler cottage of beechwood under an old wall. Fig trees with loose dark crowns clung to the ancient stones, their brown twiggy branches reached across to the other side. Dark green the leaves, rough with hairs, the underside pale and soft-haired. Venaska often held the pearshaped purple fruit in her hands, rolled it, raised it to her chin. "This is a god, you know, a goddess. So smooth outside, it'll grow darker, brownblack. And inside is green flesh, red flesh, it tastes good. It holds the seeds. That's the fig, my goddess." In her black hair she fastened sprigs with young fruit, presented others with precious leaves that she had stroked and breathed on. Thus she went along the gently flowing Saune, slim and supple on long legs, belly arcing forward slightly. Whenever in passing she

laid an arm on someone's shoulder, grave and strangely remote, they felt as they glanced smitten into the smooth face: I've never known what a woman is. Or what a human is, really.

She never knew embarrassment. As if it constrained her, she often removed her light jacket, walked on, her bare dark smooth upper body swaying. And then, near to people, her arms became tendrils seeking something to wind around. Her breasts rose and fell gently evenly with her breathing, always joyful. Other human tendrils, male and female arms, twined with hers. Venaska, her gaze resting on the other, cooed, spoke lovingly, purred. She had no idea how strong was the impression she made. The other hanging on her shuddered in delight, no longer importuning, lips open in devotion; for swiftly vanishing seconds had an inclination to disengage, pull back. Venaska's eyes would begin to widen, to glow deep black in motherly distress. The one at her breast had surrendered.

She would stroke the shoulders, ears, back of the head, brush across the nose-ridge, her eyes flashing. The moment came when the other fell asleep in her arms, tolerated her comforting touch: what is this creature closing in on my body, touching my body as it glides away. Smooth arms slid over belly and thighs, sought with every part of the body to sink roots into the other. This jostling rolling in the dirt sliding around down up, nailing together pulling apart thrusting away. The masterful angry scolding cry as if with a being not present, splutter groan scold beg threaten rage. And again the shudders smiles soft whispering begging cajoling embracing. Bracing as if with dammed-up energy, body stiffened on extended toetips, curving fingers arms bent back as if unable to discharge. And then a groaning shattering blinding breakdown, clouds lightning thunder blazing. The entity in the body of dusky surging Venaska was moved, uplifted like a ship at sea, its life churned up. The body struggled to assert itself. All distinction between death and life disappeared, the sweetness gulped it down, drowned it in the storm. Twitched at tempestuous Venaska. The bodies surged into one another.

And as the other lay there steaming, maneshaking Venaska stood, leaned on a gatepost, breathed, deeper deeper. She swallowed air down like a drink, wandered into the yard, buried her hands in the fig tree's dark foliage, let twigs and leaves whip her. Reappeared as soft flowing Venaska, slender hips swaying as she walked, smooth-skinned dusky body, around her mouth a mocking smile. Even her toneless call was music; dread and yearning all about her. She wore her crimson blouse with the gold embroidery, sat in grass, a bright dormant volcano.

Toulouse had gone underground. Settlers took over the ruined streets parks forests. Venaska settled in Toulouse. She had her many followers clear away stones and streetcar rails from the huge roaring now buried city. She wanted to sit here in this plain, see the dark line of

the Pyrenees, the jagged white comb on the horizon, beside the glorious age-old basilica of Saint Sernin which the townzone had left untouched. The Snakes who came with her had no idea what drew her to this ruined city. Venaska liked to walk among the silent blasted walls, along dead streets, listening fearfully to her footfall. She crept curious around the rubble of factories, hid when the zone's freight-fliers appeared overhead. Rapt, hugging herself in delight, she stood by the cold stones of Saint Sernin; she loved this mighty structure straining out of the ground. She often said: this building, that's why I sit here, it's so wonderful. She was keeping watch so nothing would happen to it.

Snakes and foreign Settlers spread out across the realms of Diuva and Venaska. They flourished along the Garonne and the wide Rhone. Alongside the ruins of levelled factories stood Roman triumphal arches with inscriptions about mutinous Gauls. Banks of seats and steps rose up on hillsides: Roman amphitheatres built two or three thousand years before. At grey Avignon, Cathedral Rock abutted the blue Rhone; the thirty-nine sombre towers of the Papal Palace had crumbled, overgrown with pines oaks flowering shrubs. Settlers from noisy cramped European townzones laid their sick and recuperating bodies on the unexhausted land, to die or flame back into life. Venaska in her scarlet gold-embroidered blouse proceeded through the lush valley of the Garonne into regions where powerful Melise once ruled. She awoke the landscape. A melting all around Venaska. After she left, people ground their teeth in longing. Something blind and screaming was aroused in many who resisted; she elicited it.

Men went about intent on plunder, women too. They cared nothing for the secret doctrine of the Snakes, for the voyage and its sanctity. They took pleasure in bringing men and women down. In the region of the ancient bishopric of Perigueux a man calling himself Sivri, with the help of his mother, barricaded himself and six unwilling wives in his farmhouse. He had just recovered his health, was strong, not young; people said his mother put him up to it. He made the women toil for him. He took pleasure in tormenting other women. His every move showed that he considered women worthless. Snakes were powerless against him, since he was no longer one of their own.

Figures neither male nor female appeared in the landscapes of the Garonne, of various of the races that wandered this region. This was the highest rapture many could experience. White or tawny people with a soft rounding of the shoulders moved gracefully along paths beneath showers of acacia blossom, strolled across meadows, climbed into the forests. The zones had nourished all kinds of deformity; little attention was given to individual cases amid the epidemics and general decay. Now the land produced a lush crop of these beings, who had grown up as girls and went about as girls, wide hips gently swaying, some shy and reluctant to

reveal their secret, some in a raffish mix of clothing: man's cap and plume on the head, but a bulge of breasts evident under the tight blouse. They swarmed about girls who were strangers at first, playfully let themselves be hugged. And with tender importunity they allowed the peculiarity of their gender to be felt, sensed with hot shivers the shock and rapture of the girl, the woman, who knew not what she was enjoying embracing: girlfriend or male lover. They had never experienced such strong spice in an embrace. And young men were driven powerfully towards hybrids that they took for cheeky girls. A curious charm drew them on. They fell at the feet of these girls, were shocked and obscurely moved, speechless as this riddle, this girlish youth, wriggled in their arms importunate devouring.

What terrors confusions tears did red-haired Tika On arouse, she who came down from Auvergne dressed in violet and pink, shunned work, sang and unsettled even Venaska. A wild creature, this Tika On, she sang with a clear boyish voice, laughed. She herself was unsure of her gender, bestowed passionate kisses on men and women alike. A hug was enough to bring her to ecstasy. Mostly she broke away in disgust from any who demanded more of her. And any who tried to take her by force fled at once from her dreadful screams and cries, fled for hours in confusion. As if gender was for her a dreadful wound. She attached herself to Venaska, who was always gentle and sweet. In the end the lady of Toulouse had to tear herself away; for the first time the face of this brown tender teasing woman showed signs of fear. So distraught was she that she had to cry help to those who watched over her: keep that red creature Tika On away from me. The wooden hut beside the cathedral where Venaska lived during those weeks was besieged by the scolding creature. Venaska wept: "She senses who she is. She is on the brink of sensing it. Don't be cross with me, but I just can't help her. She's giving birth, I can't help her." For months Tika On pestered Venaska, then she vanished to the north.

King Charles of Valois, buried a thousand years in a northern landscape, galloped panting out of the forest, plunged into the maelstrom. Whooped and rampaged as of yore. The forests where he used to hunt were overgrown now. On the snowy peaks of Auvergne, on the Plomb du Cantal he chased wild boar; halloo'd along the Allier valley, picked fights. His noble nose had a drinker's glow. He struck the heads off donkeys.

Heated beings were cast out onto the landscape, thrown up by a seething humankind. Local spirits, driven centuries ago back into thickets and rocks, swarmed out like bees over a field of clover, darted, coiled, invaded hot pulsing human blood, flowed into black sleek shining hair, made themselves at home in leaping male knees, plump female breasts. A single person had never been enough for debauched la Mole, grown pale and thin under a rock, since the time when he first had bones and every Mass presented him with a pretty new conquest –

until the king cut off his head. He had skulked for centuries, almost wasted away. Now this cloudburst over the parched countryside. He aimed frantically for human bodies, occupied them. La Mole, whose head a man soon to die had once struck off, now ran about in six bodies. He controlled six bodies. He was a Cyclops; he could change bodies. He squatted in them, drove them like a cart, abandoned them like a broken machine part. Young Blaise de Montluc, the Gascon, clambered hatless from the waters of the Garonne where he had drowned centuries before. The waters could not wash him away. He scrambled up the treelined bank, strutted as a pert small-breasted girl across yellow fields among vineyards, tried to hitch a ride in the fleeing Tika On. Then one day in bright sunshine he jumped down the throat of a black stallion and went racing off. The droughty land steamed and shuddered. Venaska roamed from place to place, Diuva consoled on the Garonne.

PRECIPICE

IN THE Cevennes, on the herb-scented green-lawned hump of the Puy de Dôme, the first of the Iceland expeditionaries appeared, trickling down into the lowlands of Aquitaine. Small groups of leather-clad sombre dull-eyed yearning people. They trudged with their horses more slowly when they came under an ever more azure sky to this fertile region of weathered lava, miles of gardens on all sides, rose bushes flashing yellow red. Blooming Touraine. Wooded riverbanks, newly cleared fields. These men and women who had stood on oil clouds sniffed the new air, looked about, shook themselves. It burrowed so strangely into them. They went doubtfully through the glimmering landscape. Kylin, about to leaving the green Loire, stood on the cliff of Amboise, wandered through its caverns ravines corridors of rock. A multitude of prisoners had been executed here; they raged about him, drove him away. Rebels beheaded in sunny courtyards; blue-eyed blonde women had laughed. Idatto heaved a sigh: "Down there is the south. I don't want to be here, and I daren't go there."

"Idatto, have no fear of the fog. In the north there was fire and fog, we had to pass through it. And it's there in the south."

"I can see. But it calls to me. I don't want to be tempted."

"We must. Don't hold back. We made it through Iceland. Don't be afraid. There was fog there, there's fog here."

They trudged on through the landscape. They had never made it through to Marduk. On the Loire they were told about White Baker. She had strength enough to bring Settlers over

from Britain, then sank back into herself. Like a tree that has long flourished, and as it ages draws layer after layer of bark about itself, walls itself in, pulls a visor over its face, its roots lignify and petrify, White Baker buried herself on the warm Gironde, not far from Diuva. She dropped to the mossy ground like a beetle, and let soft blankets draw about her. White Baker busied herself by the river like the others, helped in fields and gardens. But her expression was blank, a simulacrum of gravity. Face red and unwrinkled. She sat for hours in Diuva's room, stared through the open door, let the breezes play on her. She wore brown Settler garb, her heavy plump hand rested on the little table with its knotted bunches of herbs and stalks, among them a scrap of silk tied with a leather thong. Rachenila's crow's beak dangled from it. On the wall, bulky quite undamaged, a brocade senatorial gown. Diuva guarded it well. It was the abode of befuddling spirits that only she could understand.

Near the former Montauban, red Tika On flounced into Kylin's group. "What bird is this that's been sent to us," wondered hard Kylin, astonished but letting her stay. There was already unease in his group, a sweet suffering oppression. Kylin saw how defensive they were. Tika On with her red hair was a thorn in their side. She had to cling to human limbs, test herself. When Kylin saw how she hugged women of the group, how Idatto knelt before her, he withdrew for half a day. Then he acted as if he desired her. She followed him purring squealing with excitement into bushes. There he strangled her.

Men searching him out that evening found him in a thicket among yellow broom and stinging nettles, beside the curled red body. They wanted to lift the corpse, take it away for burial. Kylin threatened: "Don't touch. Call the others. Where are the women."

He waited for the women and Idatto. "Who is this? Look! Tika On, and her red hair. Woman or man. Just look at her a moment. So. You've been caught red-handed. Into the bushes with her!" He himself rolled her body deeper into the thicket, came back pale: "I strangled her. Idatto, do you know why."

Idatto in tears, mouth quivering, bitter: "She was no criminal."

"That's it. I knew it. The fog. It's taken you. But we are not defenceless. I say its name, I see it, and it's gone."

Idatto bit his lip, wailed, hid his face in his hands. A little black-haired woman suddenly burst into sobs. Kylin glared at her. He roared: "Did you see what it was lying here? You didn't look close enough. Bring her back. Yes, here!" He pulled scrub away from the little corpse. "There she is. I strangled her. What do you say to that, Idatto? And you?"

“Cover her, Kylin, please.”

“I have sat by the corpse half the day; you haven’t looked enough.”

A bronzed bearded man stepped up to Kylin, pulled away his hand. “It’s not easy for Idatto and the others. We won’t argue. Who knows where our path leads. Give us time.”

Kylin stood still, crossed his arms: “The land demands sacrifices. It can never devour enough of us. It is good to have the brand on our arm, good to keep it in mind.”

Idatto, sobbing sullen on the bearded man’s shoulder: “Was Tika On a criminal? Was she not alive, a living thing, and I entitled to kneel before her?”

Kylin mumbled something, his eyes flickered. He hurried away. They wanted to burn the body before nightfall; Kylin screamed: “Fire? No fire! Into the Earth. Into the Earth, I say.”

Growing tension and coolness set in between Kylin and his group as they moved south. They wanted to settle here or there in the fertile landscape, but Kylin urged them coldly on without explanation. Many of the hardened people melted away as they spread across the land. They stayed behind in settlements, ploughed sang laughed with the strong the blessed on the Garonne, in Languedoc, on the banks of the Rhone. They felt redeemed. Now the primeval monsters lost their horror, Iceland let go of them.

Kylin had planted his murder of Tika On like a warning at the threshold of this land; it had no effect. He could count on only a few of those with him. It was obvious that he struggled and suffered like the rest, could not give voice to it, that he plunged ever deeper into the land in an angry mood. Long grey-blond whiskers grew on his cheeks and chin; he walked a little stooped. People seldom dared speak to him.

One day near Toulouse, word came that Venaska was nearby. The golden woman in her crimson shirt, gold-threaded trousers gave him her hand in a field of strawberries.

“Venaska, it’s you. I’ve been wandering around. I’ve long wanted to speak with you.”

“And now you’ve met me.”

“Do you know me?”

“No. I’ll give you a name.”

“Don’t. I’m Kylin. These with me are others from Greenland.”

“Greenland is far away. I’m glad to see you.” She stroked his shoulder; he shrank from her gentleness.

“Venaska, I want to tell you something. It has nothing to do with Greenland. Over near Montauban we encountered a red-haired woman, a strange creature, Tika On. I killed her.”

Her hand dropped from his shoulder; she bent her head: “Oh.” She looked at the dark ground, stood arms slack, tonelessly called a name. Two women stood up from the strawberry beds, ran to her. Venaska’s voice weak, accusing: “This man is called Kylin. He killed Tika On. Near Montauban.” The women angry confused. Venaska’s head hung.

Kylin: “I have nothing to say to these. I want to see you alone, Venaska.”

Her head did not move: “I can’t. You will kill me.”

“I am not a murderer.”

“You are. I sense it.” She took one of the women by the arm: “Come to the house with us. We’ll sit together.”

She kept the door and windows open, sat in a corner, for a while did not speak. “What do you want with me, Kylin? Your name is Kylin. You are Hoyet Sala, the Precipice.”

“I must know you. We voyaged to Greenland, we were sent there, Venaska. The zones that have now perished sent us. We were in Iceland, the island of volcanoes, on Greenland. I myself helped carry out the Senate’s plan. That’s the first point. The second: it has showered something dreadful over us, has jolted me and the others who are still alive. That’s the second point. Then we, then I took the bait. I wanted what was being showered upon us. I submitted. I can’t explain it any clearer. And because I did this, I put Tika On out of the way. There was nothing else to be done. I never sought her out, she came to us.”

“Hoyet Sala, I hear only the tone of your words. What do you want from me.”

The bearded man looked coolly at her: “You did not come, I had to seek you out. Come closer so I can feel you.”

“Do you know what you are asking.”

“Yes.”

The thought in him: this is the fog. I pray. If I am to die, then so be it. Then I’ll be useless, no one’s business.

She stood up in the corner: “Turn your back. Don’t look at me.”

He paused, thought: it’s nothing to do with me. But only for moments. Suddenly he relaxed; it’s decision time; I dared the test; either I come under her protection, or not. He

turned his back. Venaska was still in the corner. Her gentle voice: "It does me good to let me see you. I have done you an injustice. I am coming to you." Glided towards him, drew him to the window, smiled to the girl who stepped into the doorway: "Stay outside please." Standing in the middle of the room she pressed her face into his rumpled leather jacket, placed her hands about his head. "I listened to your tone, Hoyet Sala. Now I make the voyage to Greenland. There. Nothing will happen to me. The Precipice will not harm me. Listen out there! Our birds! Birds! No harm!"

She let go with a smile, took his hands in hers, hummed: "Still I am afraid of you, Hoyet Sala. But you will do nothing to me. Something in you is germinating for me. Let it not spoil."

"Where are you going?"

"To fetch milk." She drank, offered him the glass: "Do me this favour. So I am not afraid."

The thought in him: should I not have killed Tika On. I should have dealt with her like this. He drank from her glass.

"And will you go now, Hoyet Sala?"

"I thought I'd stay two days here. I had evil intentions, Venaska."

"And now?"

"Now I'll go back."

"And never come again?"

He smiled: "You are still afraid of me, Venaska. Your milk was good, and I drank from your glass. I shall tell my friends –"

"What?"

"I don't know yet. That you named me Precipice, Hoyet Sala. And –." He sat back in his chair, took out his dagger, closed his eyes. She regarded him a while. His eyes opened: "It's been good, with you. I don't need two days. I came here, Venaska, I confess, determined to show you no mercy. Tika On, there's no point talking about her, she had to go. I was afraid that you would – nullify what became of us in Greenland."

"And now? And again now? Do I not know you, Hoyet Sala? As soon as I saw you I wanted to give you this name." She wanted to fall at his feet.

"Kiss the dagger."

"Is this what you – ?"

“No. I used my hands. You must kiss the dagger.”

She hugged Kylin, wept to his face. He muttered darkly: “Stop, Venaska. Kiss the dagger.”

“Must I?” He shivered, shook her off, clenched his fists, eyes bleak: “Kiss the dagger.” He held out the hilt with the volcano sign. She lowered her head with its spray of fig leaves, drew the dagger towards her lips. He breathed heavily: “How can you dare.” Stayed still.

“Don’t leave like this, Kylin. What have I done.”

He went through the doorway, across the yard. Venaska at his heels: “Forgive me.” She stopped him at the foot of the mound where her house stood. He would not look at her.

“Why are you following me?” Then, calmer: “There’s nothing to discuss, Venaska.”

She grabbed his hand: “Give me the dagger.” A long kiss, ardent: “May every kiss do you good, dear dagger. My kiss will soon dry: but never forget it.”

Kylin regarded the dagger. “Dear dagger,” he mocked, hugged her. They were under an oleander. “Don’t tremble. I want your kisses for myself. Now I know again how sweet people are. You the sweetest of all. Be calm, Venaska.” She took the fig spray from her hair, gave it him. When she reached home she sat outside weeping, women held her. Kylin stepped slowly back to the oleander, fig spray at his breast: “Blessed spot.” Gently laid the spray on the ground, touched the Earth, walked away.

East of Toulouse, on the high ground of Sidobre, at a great reunion of Iceland expeditionaries came the first cases of self-immolation. Idatto was the first to offer himself to the flames. The tender man had long kept his distance from Kylin; soulful spirits had taken him over. He could not decide to part from Kylin for good; the mark on his arm kept looking at him. And when fire crackled on Sidobre, sweetly mysterious and austere, he knew his path.

Talk of the Iceland expeditionaries spread across the landscapes. Everywhere fires could be seen, austere subduing. Precipice, as Kylin was called, stayed on Sidobre with them. The Icelanders remained on Sidobre until they felt they had tamed the swarming spirits of the Earth. Then they looked up. The pure prostrating fires had already been carried far to the north. Settlers gathered around the glow; they subdued the dogged hard decisive people who had come from the sea and strutted so grandly.

Iceland expeditionaries spread all across the southern lands. When Kylin saw the fires heading north, saw Settlers consolidating, he left Sidobre. He hitched fresh horses to his cart, steeled his innermost being, steered for the city-realms buried in the Earth.

METAMORPHOSES

NEW BEINGS emerged from the subterranean galleries where Mentusi and Kuraggara lurked. The Giants congregated with their assistants, who had to help them open the doors to the research vaults. They came through the doors as weasels, little grey darting mice. Flitted through the streets always at risk of being squashed; scratched and squeaked again at the doors. Days later they flew as herons, big heads hanging heavy, across the plazas of the underground city, spread their wings, stretched their necks, flew up the shafts. In the laboratories they had to be turned back to humans. Then they stood there, shook themselves as if they'd been swimming, murmured, could not find their feet, readied themselves for another outing. They emerged from their metamorphoses duller, more aggressive. Their assistants were men and shemales like them. Often when they emerged from the baths fires energy fields of the metamorphosis, perhaps still in the grip of the animal they had been, the Giants assaulted the assistants, broke lab equipment. It was hard to bring the restored humans under control. The craving to be turned into animals abated among the Giants of London and Brussels, after several of them on returning had to be beaten and hacked to pieces as the only way to put an end to their rampaging.

The avid Giants of London seized people in ever larger numbers, to show their power. Their bull-mad brains retained a memory of the terrible forms generated by dying shattered monsters: yeasty ferment of people animals plants chairs doors. The voyage to Greenland and Iceland was not in vain, primordial powers are in our hands, we'll make use of them.

Within two weeks the shemale Kuraggara, transformed into a bat, accomplished a dreadful deed in London. She could drool like a Greenland dragon; a drop of spit would fall on the scrap of webbing she wore around her neck – she of course was immune. At once roofbeams would start growing under her, iron girders smoked and melted, human arms swelled horribly thick from windows, broke the frames. The building was encased in flesh. The underground galleries were a ferment of people houses carts, doughy masses merging. Humanity had fled underground from the Greenland monsters; now here they were, hanging like a coral colony beneath the Earth. And Kuraggara, on days when she reverted to human form, was jubilant. Her fever infected Mentusi, Kara Uyük, Shagito, Deyas Tessama. They fell on fleeing fear-crazed people in the deepest levels of London, with the hum of hummingbirds, the screams of golden pheasants jays hawk-eagles, let themselves be caught, dripped poison. The deepest part of London, Water Town, was buried beneath the onslaught of fake fluttering

creatures, stones and people iron all jumbled together. The ground collapsed, water flooded the crevices, the hollows that formed.

Delvil, most powerful of all, called a halt to the fluttering monsters, killed some, fought down others who had resumed their normal shape. He threatened: "It is necessary for me to strive on your behalf. It was necessary on your behalf to send people to Iceland. The web, for you! Take care. Four are no longer living."

What's he up to, they cried. Grimly he made claws at their faces: he didn't care if they knew what he was up to; they should have cleared their ideas with him earlier.

He persuaded Mentusi and Kuraggara – they were still alive – to come with him to Cornwall, Dartmoor Forest. They flew on creatures of their own creation, great flat beasts in whose chest they sat, like a heart. He broke the creatures' necks: "Kuraggara, that brown one was yours. And that was yours, Mentusi. They were your little joke. You dare to show yourselves like that before me."

Kuraggara, tall as a fir tree, had a human torso. In her last metamorphosis she had hopped about as a tree-kangaroo, her face was still brown and hairy, jaws and nose pointed to a snout, little pointed ears aiming forward from the back of her head. She squatted on plump hind legs with claws, the bushy tail curled in front. She listened drowsily to Delvil. Mentusi had the long rust-brown neck of a griffon vulture. He came down to the rocky ground by Delvil with a loud flapping of wings, raised his pointy human head, ruffled the feathers on his back, whispered, stretched his neck: "You only kill the casing. We can make ourselves anew."

"Unclean vermin! Look at that, on your feathered collar. Guts!"

"Well spotted. Horse guts, Delvil. People were not wrong back then, to eat animals that come from the bodies of other animals. They taste better to me than Meki-meals. I'll become a Settler yet."

Delvil flung stones at his head. Mentusi whirred back, aired his wings, circled Delvil twice with his neck drawn in, settled down squawking.

"You, Kuraggara, what are you up to." Delvil, human in form, loomed over her house-tall, grabbed her by the neck. "You're asleep. You saw the ones I killed back in London. D'you want the same. You only have to say. Turn yourself into an ant, or a louse, I'd feel more comfortable."

"You're jealous, Delvil. You won't allow us our pleasures."

"What pleasures."

Mentusi flapped high towards him: "Seems Delvil has become a defender of humanity at last. What do you care for humanity. I care just as much for ants and lice."

"I don't care for humanity, you carrion-eater." Delvil stumbled over the stony ground. "Humanity and me. Me caring for humanity. You take me for a prophet, a leader. I look like Marduk. That's all past, Mentusi. They no longer trouble me. They can be Settlers or build cities or eat bark or drink sulphuric acid. You lot are still scoundrels, you and Kuraggara, and Shagito and the others I killed. Play all you want. You go too far."

Kuraggara stood tall: "That's not true. You won't let us do anything."

Delvil kicked her. She sprawled into bushes under his hail of stones.

Delvil thought of growing into it. He seldom left the moors of Cornwall. He had a few devoted helpers. He sent Deyas Tessama to Ireland, a man like himself. They wanted never to forget Greenland and the monsters. The line of tower-humans still stood along the hills, in the sea. Delvil regarded them with fervour, with tears and loathing: "They were my friends. They stopped the monsters. We had to sacrifice them." He went to the gloomy sad creatures. He left them to rot, they were no longer needed. They shrivelled among the rocks and timbers; their dreadful groaning, weary animal bleating echoed for months over the lonely hills, the desolate watery wastes from Scotland to Scandinavia. The web-lures were buried with the shrivelling giants. Masses of rock over the remains of human and beast. And from rafts down into the sea.

Delvil thought only of growing. He stayed for weeks in Cornwall. He brought himself on very slowly; had no wish to be cemented to the ground like the tower-humans. Let boulders tumble about him, water, timbers. Often his consciousness dimmed, and a long pause was necessary to ensure that the spirits of the rock would not gain the upper hand. Delvil thrust himself at London as a gigantic humanoid entity. Feet toes knees of a human, dark brown pelt. His peeling body was covered in warts boils, fronted by breasts like bay-windows, domes. A bell-shaped creature dangled from his abdomen, waved its arms. Writhing black and grey snake-bodies sprouted from his entrails, open-eyed tubes that snuggled about his legs, ate and drank for him. The chest above swelled in a slow rhythm. The snake-bodies drank whole brooks dry: they flowed through Delvil's body. He saw Settlers running about below: "Grass-eaters. Humans. The end of humankind. The end! Eating grass! Humans!" His mournful eyes took in grass trees horses cattle. Breezes played about him. "The wind. That's something. Hills." He stomped in a detour around London, afraid the ground would collapse. He crossed the stormy Channel, braved the gale until it robbed him of breath. He sat down panting at Calais, made the cliffs shake. Ten Keir was hovering around Brussels; he saw the sky darken, the

cloud-high stumbling giant, the grunting gurgling watery sloshing snake-hissing could be heard for miles. He fled horrified underground.

Delvil, gloomily eager, crossed back over the Channel, felt his way down to Cornwall. He swallowed rock by the cartload. "Humans, grass-eaters. It's the end of them." His thoughts gloomy: must root in the earth, like a mountain. It'll happen. Chewed crunched, eyes closed.

The Giants went hunting. Kuraggara wanted to go to Greenland. "Let's cross the sea," she urged brooding Mentusi with a laugh. "You come too. I'll go hunting for marvels. You can sleep." Mentusi flapped up: "We'll see."

Two vultures crossed the ocean. They flew through storms, rounded up seagulls and devoured them. The sea heaved below, a black glittering sheet. They flew down, slashed holes in whales' heads. Storm cried: whee! They cried: whee! They broke through the wind. Icebergs, white coldness glittered below. Kuraggara swept merrily through the air: "Soon be there. Mentusi, we've done it. There are no dragons. They're all stuck in ice. We'll flush them out."

No rosy light shone about them now. A white twilight. Northern Lights flickering. Jan Mayen down there. Where was Mutumbo, who burned himself a hole in the sea, took his ships down to the sea floor. Raging waters had drowned him. The rosy light had bloomed in the sky, its steady blessing made lovers of little stones little branches little waves, big waves. Then black thunderclouds rolled in, cyclones; these still stomped around. And then the flickering gliding clouds of flying saurians, long-necked with bony dewlaps; foxes caught up in their feathers. A gushing spurting of creatures. The boom of bursting hulls; in a minute the vessels were engulfed by the mighty waters. Sea shimmered like oil over the vanished vessels. Jan Mayen left behind.

A chain of mountains appeared out of the sea. "There it is!" cried Mentusi, descending. It was a cluster of islands. Water foaming, a line of powerful surf. White peaks, flat hilly plains. The vultures cackled, pinions stretched taut unflexing, they came slowly down.

"Greenland, Mentusi."

"Kuraggara, this is Greenland."

Kuraggara screamed in delight: "Do you know what you forgot about, the whole flight? Hey? The dragons."

"The dragons."

"Yes, Mentusi. We shall take them on. Did you see one. I never saw one. Where are those sweet creatures that caused us such anguish? Where are they hiding, they're teasing us." She

strutted, danced in the snow, her beating wings stirred up snow. “Dead, dead! Done for! Caput! Finished! Wiped out! Dragon-dead. Come, let’s look around. I want to play with them.”

They swept down the mountain. Everywhere deep snow, sheets of ice. They swept on a whole day under harsh white light, the land was endless, stretched away immense and white. When the heavens spread their darkness and a blinding blizzard enveloped them, Kuraggara urged: “I see a crevice. We’ll spend the night there.” They sat tired under a cliff, slept, dreamed. They were sailing over the sea, high in the air, wings spread, not flexing, driven along.

They awoke to stabbing sunlight. Kuraggara wanted to fly on. Mentusi, ruffling his feathers, cooed: “Wait. I had a dream. I don’t want to go in snow. Where are the dragons. I dreamed they’re lying here.” At once he began to circle over the crevice. The other vulture behind him: “I see nothing.”

“They’re here. Under the snow.”

They clawed into the snow of the slope, beat their wings to blow it away, scabbled and dug. The snow lay loose, the ice was loose and crumbly, a firm, blue-white, only just formed. They pushed their warm bodies into the ice, it melted trickled away. When their claws grew tired they used their heads, bored and hammered. They spun like wheels until their talons recovered. Then suddenly ice and snow from higher up the slope slid down and buried them. They were swept a little way down the slope, almost suffocated. Then they were decanted to the side. They found each other in air. “That you, Kuraggara?” – “Still alive, Mentusi? I can’t go on. I can’t.” They sat an hour in the plain, caught their breath. Mentusi flew up, the other flapped hesitantly after him.

Mentusi screamed, was gone. The other, frightened, flew higher higher. Saw him, the giant vulture. He was clinging to a cliff, moving pecking up and down. Nervously she approached. Screamed like Mentusi. The cliff was black and brown. Snow trickled over it. Branches of a tree poked out. Sturdy branches of a broken tree lying aslant. The little avalanche had laid bare the whole face of the slope. Mentusi down there was running a strangely erratic course. Screaming and pecking. Kuraggara flew nearer.

“Look, Kuragarra. This lump here. Its not moving. Bones spine. Ribs there. Here’s the head, the eyeholes.”

“A dragon.”

“Not just one. It’s all dragons. They’re all here. It was too cold for them. They’re done for. Rained under, snowed under.”

They poked away at the slope. Once it was a forest of ground cedar, lay in a cold musty bed of leaves and mosses. Ribs and piles of splintered bone lay among scree stalks leaves, ice growing in the gaps, snow water earth trickling beneath. Kuraggara screamed, flew up, swooped over the crevice. "Dragons that wanted to destroy us! Dragons that laid waste to the townzones! Haha!"

Mentusi swooped beside her. "All across the land, Kuragarra. All across the land." Swept through snow flurries icy squalls. "The whole land our flag. Our victory banner. There they are, and there, and there. Thousands, millions! Everywhere there's white. The snow does nothing but bury them. As for us," Mentusi hurtled up, circled. Kuruggara laughing: "As for us, they brought us their lives. Ribs in Greenland. Us alive. Ha! Let's eat snow. Snow snow."

They gobbled the snow that was falling on the great new continent to bury forests up over the treetops, break branches, scrape them away, scatter any animal remains that lay among them. Even the scraps of carbonised giant Tourmaline webbing that once had mastered them.

Kurugarra shrill: "So, how have you enjoyed the trip, Mentusi? I'm filling my belly with snow; it's our friend. We'll head home now. I had my heart set on another kind of marvel, but this will do for me."

"And me. I wish we were home already. We have a lot to do, Kuruggara. I have an endless thirst to do things. Do, do."

"Come. We'll be home in a day or two."

Mountains and icefields behind them. Atlantic Ocean crossed, meridian after meridian. Limpid water, floppy swaying pelt of the black wet monster. Cliffs and white surf: Shetland Orkney Faroos. Lines of Scottish mountains, high moors. Little flocks of sheep: humans, Settlers. Do, more to do. The vultures screamed hurtled through the air. They swept on, heads tucked in, stared avidly ahead. Miles and miles of rubble fields coast to coast; growling sea to the south. That was London. A mildew of settlements encroaching at the edges. Down into the shafts and galleries the two vultures, heads stretched, talons tucked in. They crowed.

As there was no sign of Delvil they did as they pleased. They filled the galleries of the buried city with the howls of panthers. They multiplied themselves. Terrified people fleeing along the sloping shafts and side-galleries encountered trampling mammoths. Trunks swished up and down from side to side like clubs whips hammers slings. When the trunk was flung up over the flat skull to reveal the huge red cavern of a mouth, tusks like housebeams jutting white, the beast uttered a ringing yawning roar, the sound rolled like a breaker over the

seething crowd; they scattered. The greyblack mammoths danced. They entered the galleries. People fled up out of the underground city. There they found white light, misty sky, breezes blowing, and monsters like those from the Greenland time. Stunned, they retreated back into the Earth. Then the dreadful roaring behind them: the Giants were after them, the last that London had produced. Chaos. Where to flee. Shafts collapsing, access to Meki factories blocked by rubble. People poured from every opening. They ran at the howling monsters. Where the howling was there must be an opening. Mentusi and Kuragarra, constantly shape-shifting, roared like a storm, delight in their throats: "Tummm! Tumm tumm!"

Then they left the London tumult behind, the turmoil of scrabbling shuddering humanity. Thirsted for Cornwall, for Delvil. Five Giants were at their heels, the last produced by London. Two jumped like grasshoppers high as a man, rubbed the clear glassy parchment of their wings against their back legs to shrill as they leaped. They propelled themselves high with the sharp-angled hindmost pair of limbs, outspread wings, leaped over rubble heaps. The other three flew as clouds of yellow pollen. The clouds frayed and loosened sometimes, then gathered again, shot forward like a flung stone.

Delvil had left Cornwall, was wandering on Dartmoor. A yellow cloud, humming like a swarm of flies, hung soft before his big dark eyes. He waved a hand to drive it away. It thickened, smelled of lime flowers, covered his nose aiming for his mouth. The snakes at his belly lunged at a cloud that formed at his hips. Pine trees whipped as the snakes tore the tops, splintered branches. The approaching shrilling grasshoppers retreated from the hail of splinters, back through the dark forest. Delvil turned his back on the clouds, sneezed wiped his eyes with a hairy arm. As he took a deep breath coughed spat – the humming came from behind close to his ears, he lowered his head – the air was split by the laughter of Mentusi and Kuragarra. Their wingbeats whooshed over the pines. They cawed; rust-brown the nearly naked necks thrust eagerly ahead; the feathers fringing the necks were grey; they flapped through the air. Now Delvil recognised the Giants he was up against. He had been heading back to the Continent, a sad searching road. His fists brushed at his ears, his mouth, at the tickling clouds of pollen. He grabbed handfuls from the scattering cloud, crushed them in his fingers, threw them down, jabbed with his elbows at the cloud forming between his knees. It was trapped. The dust changed colour, became red, glowing. The humming now a stuttering hiss, like a steam valve. Snake-mouths spread in all directions snapping slurping at the seething cloud.

As the snake-bodies swelled turned rolled quivered flattened like worms, Delvil lifted his mane-heavy head, laid it against pine branches. Slowly he turned round. The two vultures,

white heads with slack hanging wings, shoulders hunched, cawed haughtily at him from the treetops. Delvil roared: "You, Kuraggara, Mentusi! It's you."

Mentusi laughed: "See my hooked beak. It can rip your skin."

Kuraggara: "I'm filthy today. It wasn't horse: it was human carrion."

Delvil gasped. His dark damp eyes stared. He said nothing for a while. Then he roared and cried: "You do this, do this. All for this. That awful war. Greenland. Dragons chased away."

Kuraggara stretched high on her blue-grey talons. "We're just back from Greenland. That's why we're so cheerful. We saw the dragons, under the ice. Now we are dragons."

"You, Kuraggara. And you, Mentusi. Dragons. And you eat horses. You eat people." Delvil wept. His body shook pitifully. The vultures flapped back. From Delvil's abdomen there emerged whimpering and gently wheezing the giant coral-red polyp, the purple rose: the fringes of the hundred predatory arms beat about; the arms curled back to the mouth. Suddenly, as the snakes hurled pulsing fountains of water high, rocks and chunks of wood were ejected from the choking maw of the vigorous glistening looming polyp; the arms quivered, a garland of blue warts flashed like eyes under the mouth-plate.

"I won't live with you," groaned Delvil. "I am not of your blood. I'm going to the Continent. Going to Marduk."

The vultures cawed: "Ha! To Marduk. You want to eat grass. We can use you, it'll be fun."

The forest crackled, rustled; Delvil was leaving already. "Must – to Marduk. To Marduk." He whimpered, stumbled doggedly on. The grasshoppers had gone. The pollen cloud thicker now, dancing twitching just above the ground. Kuraggara and Mentusi screamed, gathered their courage, flapped after Delvil, landed on his shoulders, struck at the spitting snakes.

Delvil crossed the stormy Channel. He appeared on the coast green-brown in clouds, stumbling, arousing horror. He stayed a whole day on the Rhine; his snakes needed this long to drink. Then he emptied his bladder in a lake. The Teutoburg Forest. He diverted around the Harz mountains. Came to the teeming Marchland – familiar country. Where was Marduk. The skyhigh droning monster stood all day on the Havel, west of Berlin. The vultures tried to bestir him. He guzzled and would not move. This was where Marduk lived once. Then for hours Delvil belched rumbled cried out, until the countryside was emptied of people. He dropped to his knees. Pressed his face to the Earth. He spotted the house where he had talked with Marduk – White Baker had been there, where was White Baker. He grasped one of the vultures by a talon: "Mentusi, Marduk is in there. His body. I must have it."

Reluctantly, mocked by Kuraggara, Mentusi obeyed. He flapped sluggishly back to Delvil, in his claws the dangling pale body of the man who had turned the Marchland into the bad conscience of the townzones. He had fallen to Zimbo's rays along the Havel; had found his way to the Earth.

The Giant, Delvil, crouched forward on his knees. Thunder and summer rain fell on him. He dug Marduk's frozen body into the muddy sand, pressed down on it with his chest, squeezed into it the primordial power of Iceland. All day he wheezed groaned at the body in the ground. Until it began to stir, sand trickled, lifted, thin lines appeared trickling towards the body. Like a plant the gaunt grey body of the Consul sprouted from the ground. Delvil rose to his knees. With both arms he heaped sand around the naked body as it grew; its head seemed fixed to its chest. Streams of soil pulsed towards the body from under Delvil's arms. Air swirled and flashed about him. Delvil's snakes spat water onto the ground. When the chest of the rising body began to lift arch expand – the ground around was now a deep hollow – when the fingers spread and the body tried to rise from bended knees, Delvil uttered grunts from deep within him, deep bass bleating, eyes rolling, drew back his arms, sat erect on his knees. Marduk, thin silvery legs scrabbling in sand, came up to his neck.

Delvil's whisper rumbled over the plain: "Marduk! Marduk!" He called out more urgently: "Marduk, Marduk." The Consul's chin came away from the chest, the skull lifted, nose, mouth appeared. Two dark eyes stared sightlessly at Delvil's throat. Delvil pumped the arms up and down, called. The legs scrabbled harder. "Ah" groaned the mouth as the head tried to turn. Devil waved a fist before the face, up and down. The head began to follow, up and down. Now Delvil pointed to his own mouth, his own eyes. The creature's gaze was now on Delvil's eyes; he brought them close to Marduk's, looked left and right. At the same time he insisted, one hand at Marduk's neck: "Here, you know me. Marduk, you know me. I am Delvil."

"Ah," the mouth groaned more deeply, the pale lower lip drooped. A flood of thick liquid drooled. Delvil's voice was anxious: "You are Marduk. Consul of the Marchland. You know me. I wanted to speak with you."

From the mouth of the creature, now following every move of Delvil's eyes and mouth, came a prolonged "Ah", then a resonant "What" as facial muscles quivered. Then a wheezing: "Who, who I." Delvil tender: "You are Marduk. I fetched you back."

"I?"

"Marduk. I fetched you back."

“Who – Marduk?”

“You. Consul of the Marchland. We talked here many years ago. You were in that house.”

The creature jerked its legs, looked down at the disturbed sand, groaned: “Leggo. My feet.”

“Look at me, Marduk. You’ll know who I am. I’ll wait.”

“I – look. I – look.”

“We sat over there. This is the Marchland, where you used to live. Now Zimbo is here. He killed you. The black man. Pay attention to what I say. You’ll remember. There was the Urals War, you succeeded Marke.”

Now the man’s grey pale face smoothed, the lips closed, pursed. Delvil shuddered: “After Marke you came. The people you led are still alive. They are like you. You’ll be so glad. Look around. No cities here.”

Sand scraped about Marduk, he looked down, back to Delvil’s great dark eyes, trilled: “I know. I remember.” Delvil jubilant: “You remember. The Marchland. No one could approach you. You were a great man.”

Marduk looked up at the clouds, muttered “I know, I know,” tugged at his legs. They were still knee deep in sand, rooted by veins nerves bone in sand. “Go. On. I must go on.”

Delvil laughed, grunted: “You’re stuck. Wait a moment, I’ll free you. I’m Delvil, I’m a Giant. You are too. Of all living things it’s you I want to talk to. I yearn for you. I have to hear your voice. You will answer me.”

“I am a giant. What is that?”

“I’ll take my hand away now. You understand what I say. Welcome back, Marduk, my friend, my own soul. Humans are so pitiful, useless, lacking in pride. We had to go to Greenland, Marduk, we didn’t know what to do. Now the fire is with us, Marduk, the fire.”

The other stood stock still, big pale grey body facing Delvil still on his knees, body erect, dark eye to dark eye.

Marduk’s eyes scanned Delvil’s desolate swaying frame: “Delvil’s face. I was here once. You said Marduk.”

“Keep talking, it is your voice. You remember Zimbo, you were caught by his rays. You couldn’t escape. You choked. Now you’re back.”

“This horrible body. My knees stuck in sand. In sand. I must go on.”

“Dead, Marduk. You’ve come through fire, like me. We fetched it from Iceland, no one can take it from us.”

Marduk’s chest rose, his eyes wandered to the side: “I – alive. Alive again.”

“No one can rob you of life. We have the fire, for all time, we have life for endless time. You can see it. Marduk, what should we do?”

Marduk stared at him, teeth grinding gurgling: “What is it, what are you saying?”

Delvil stood up, the snakes slurped at a pond. His head waggled in clouds, laughgrowled: “We possess fire. We possess it. That which makes flowers, makes animals and people. Makes the wind and clouds. Propels gases. We possess it. Marduk. Everything is in our hands. I’m not boasting; everything, I tell you. I brought you back. Meki is nothing; we don’t need Meki. We ourselves have the primal power.” His breath steamed in the sky.

As Delvil spoke, Marduk’s face filled out, tensed. The ground stopped its steady pulsing rolling towards Marduk, clumped, lay smooth, smacked against his limbs, Marduk breathed: “Speak on, Delvil. I have been so long not alive.”

“Not so long. We’ve made haste. Only a few decades have passed. Some dumb beasts can’t be mastered through violence or wisdom. Only through cunning and chance. We sought and wanted nothing, we ourselves were puny. Such stupidity all around. But our luck was bigger. Volcanoes burned on Iceland, we fetched fire from the volcanoes. Didn’t know what we had. Were proud to melt Greenland’s ice, bring the Settlers to heel. The ice melted. And then the monsters came, Marduk, hoho, monsters came upon us. You never saw them. Reptiles birds jellies every shape and form. The fire bred them. They destroyed our townzones. Crushed buildings trees people. Crushed them all, living and dead. Such mighty beings. And still we didn’t understand. All we did was be afraid. Afraid, Marduk, day in day out. We crept under the ground. Abandoned the coasts, because the calamity came from over the ocean. Until we saw the claws on the cat, Marduk. Do you know what we did with the claws? Did we cut them off? No, we left them on the cat and made new ones for ourselves, longer sharper. Look at me. Look at yourself.”

“I hear you, Delvil. I know you. Ah, the Marchland. Lakes there. The Havel. I choked to death here. Now my body lives again.”

The monster Delvil slowly cautiously knelt down again: “Now, think, what do I want with you here on the Havel, why have I come. See those flying around behind you?”

“Vultures.”

“Yes, vultures. Mentusi and Kuraggara. They’re pecking at your legs. They’d rather see you dead. They like their curved beaks. How they snigger at us. They are my companions. Giants like me, man and shemale. That’s what they do, for fun. And that – that is what’s become of us, Marduk! Of us lords of mankind! Who created the devices that steered humanity. They don’t know right from left. Storming off to Greenland. London in ruins. Brussels ruined. They have their fun. But I –” How Delvil gasped, how his arms implored Marduk’s thin feeble trembling body. He did not see how Marduk was weakening, how he tugged to free his feet from the soil; in the face the sharp features of the old first Marduk appeared, like a light, a fire behind a paper screen that tries to hide it.

“I am Delvil. A lord of mankind. What is in my grasp. I know. It came to me. Don’t think it’s my companions, I have none, Marduk! I have a duty. So do you. I don’t want vengeance.”

“Glad to hear it, Delvil.”

Delvil emitted a morose sob: “Don’t mistake me, Marduk. You look different now from when I came to you that time. You are not something born of woman. I have more than devices behind me. Look at you, at me. You can’t speak now as you used to in your Council House. We have a duty. The fire has come down to us.”

“Things have their will, and I have mine. Flee from your fire. Delvil, break the Earth apart.”

“I am no Kuraggara.”

“Break it apart. What else is there.”

“I don’t want to break the Earth apart.”

“Ah. Don’t want. Delvil comes to Marduk: he does not want what the devices and the powers want. Something has happened to Delvil. He woke Marduk up. Something happened. Did you know you were waking Marduk?”

“But this is you.”

“So you knew the answer Marduk would give you. Who says A must say B. You need me, Delvil. You are punier than I, you are done for. Helpless. Defeated by Marduk.”

Delvil’s groans grew louder: “Don’t misunderstand me. There are grass-eaters. People, Settlers who talk about you. You don’t mean it. Eat grass like calves, you didn’t intend this, you can’t want it now. What I have you have. You share the burden.”

“I feel no burden. Why do you crawl before me, dig me from my grave. You must have come from England, you and your groaning. How are you better than Kuraggara.”

“Yes, mock me, scold me.”

“You grab at me, fetch me back – you never dared while I lived. You failed. You’re failing now. Go away. Fetch dead people, Pharaohs, hyenas. Blow on your fire until it consumes you.”

Night came. Marduk’s body glowed. Light pale as moonlight radiated from his mouth, his eyes, his fingers, danced vertically around him. Delvil on hands and knees before him, touching him, crawling around him, made no comment on the light, was overwhelmed by longing terror bitterness. The snakes, unsettled, sprayed water on his hot body. The red chewing medusa squeezing crackling snapping, after a wheezing pause. Delvil grubbed fearfully at the ground, swept hillocks aside; pines crackled as they fell. His face, taut with a yearning realisation, came within Marduk’s glow. He was standing in a hollow that was now at rest. His legs still tugged at the soil, were free now to the ankles. He was breathing heavily, mouth wide open, head thrown back; his arms rowed the air. “So. I can. Earth air eyes; close my eyes. Someone fetched me. Marduk, refuse their call. It’s over. Scattering. Sweet bodies scattered. Set off now.”

Delvil tried to bring his steaming chest, girded round with its primordial powers, closer to Marduk, to place his hands on Marduk’s shoulders. Could not. His chest felt heavy, the hands were forced back. Hands paralysed. And the arms; as if poisoned.

Marduk shrilled, slurped air: “Not this guise. Marduk, off! Away, Marduk!”

The vultures flapped down crowing onto Delvil’s prostrate back. Gasping, groaning he dragged himself eagerly towards the moonglow figure that kept cooing softly: “Marduk Marduk”. Light streamed from it, spread in dotted lines across the landscape. Denser matter floated undulated from the figure, spread over Delvil’s face and back, touched trees and the black broken ground, wafted about the flapping vultures. “Marduk” the figure sang in a monotone, seethed sprayed began to spin, sparks flew. In rage and horror Delvil tried to grab at it, howled when the creature glided away with a high-pitched hum, slid across the ground. It was hardly human now, this gliding sliding thing, a lake a vapour spreading ever wider, at its core something human-like, dissolving.

Tumbling thundering after it, Delvil roared: “Here, you two! Mentusi, help me. Kuraggara, see him there. Grab his neck. The feet, get on with it.” Into black high air the vultures rose, talons extended, dropped blindly onto the creature on closed slack wings, tumbled through nothing, crashed into pines. “Grab him,” Delvil raged, standing now, lurching forward, grabbing, stumbling on heavy legs.

The figure was dissolving away, a sheen of silvery scales hard to spot in the pervasive white glow. The glow shone on dazed Mentusi and Kuraggara, bumping dropping from the splintered pinetops. Delvil's snakes dangled slack, the red medusa had climbed wobbling from his body, mouth gaping, its rubbery lining everted. Delvil felt a pain, his body was being torn apart. He went wheezing dazed into the white sea of mist. The vultures swayed dazed in the trees; the medusa tore at his entrails. He bent down, hauled the thing onto his arm, stumbled, stared from the mist back towards the west.

Screamed his rage at the black sky. Across the Havel he stopped, pulled himself together. What had happened was unthinkable. At his chest was the web that woke Marduk. He turned back to the east, his hips were failing, he lurched sideways. As the white glimmer came closer, the medusa stiffened on timid arms as if to seize something, coiled jerkily back. The milky white mist floated over the plain. Trees below swayed gently in the breeze, hidden birds set up a dreamy twittering. People asleep in houses huts barns. Adults stood, sleepwalked through an open warm landscape, lured by a pale apparition. Children in straw kept their eyes shut, mouth twitched, they laughed. Delvil himself, his entrails on fire with pain, felt a weariness as he lurched and snapped at air. Sweet paralysis. Distant thoughts played through the blood-swollen cloud-high head: people, summer strolls, a pond with goldfish. His knees were minded to fold. And as he struggled, head back, to drink in air, he collapsed. Unbearable lashing pain. It drove him to his feet again. West, west. He roused the vultures. Stormed through Hannover. On the Rhine he regained control of himself. Screamed for two days.

The vultures swept west, came back confused and angry. They perched on his head as he crossed the Channel. "Mentusi, Kuraggara, what use is my web, this power. Has it won?"

"It's fled away. We'll find it again."

"I don't want to. On to Cornwall! I'll assault the Earth. I will. Did you see him, how he ascended in light. I'll tear the Earth apart."

Kuraggara screaming: "The Earth, all of it. People too. And rocks and seas."

In Cornwall Delvil stood for weeks roaring, wept: "He was right. I'll tear the Earth apart."

The Giants learned from Mentusi what had happened. Delvil growled in despair: "Everything we have, here to me." And in a tumult of destruction the vultures and Delvil's helpers stormed into nearby continental cities they had not yet ravaged. Laid waste to Meki factories. Wherever they came across scraps of Tourmaline webbing they carried them away. Piled them around groaning Delvil on his moor.

Then they reverted to their original form. Cast off vulture feathers. On Dartmoor Delvil began to grow. To the west, on Bodmin Moor, Mentusi. North on the River Taw, Kuraggara. They formed a wide arc open to the north. There was room for the other Giants. Mountains of webbing piled around them. "Should I make a Greenland," scoffed Mentusi, "shall we hang the webs over the Earth and clot it all together. Shall I send the sea over Europe. Shall we bring the Poles to the Equator."

Delvil clunked: "Northward. All our power to the north. We're on our way. Keep the power close so you are not brought down."

Kuraggara, growing from a hill on the Taw: "And when the Earth is torn apart, I'll just sail through the air."

Delvil: "Grow! Suck up the Earth. Take what you can on the journey. To the north."

In bitter loathing the Giants directed north the dreadful force of all their power, to the sea from which the reptiles and webs had come. "I'm sending them all back," screamed Delvil.

LYON BURNING

ACROSS EVERY landscape, on every continent and island, among trees blooming and withering, among snuffling loping beasts hungering and sated, there moved dying humans. Felt their arms that still could grip, imbibed the juices that welled to them from the Earth. And then they shrivelled. Aged weakened, turned grey. Sinister forces were at work in them. They had known only proud insistent burgeoning forces; now they wept. Rivers flowed as always, mountains and their forests stood peaceful, the yellow sun came up with the day, the blue and black of the sky had not changed: only *they* were fading, were being brushed away.

Mutely they began to paint themselves. Grey lines were drawn around eyes, lips were made blue and pale. A chisel dug into the face, undercut the cheekbone, brought it forward over slack cheeks. Eyes gently sunken walled themselves in, retracted coldly.

Beneath the surface, activity pushed the nose askew, incised grooves across the nostrils. They ate and drank, but there was no stopping it. The slender noseridge became a broad path with stiff sides and holes that were dark damp gorges. Once downy skin was pulled thin as paper over the face, taut over the face, clung like a mask; people looked out miserably helplessly from a mask. They were undergoing demolition, a building razed to the ground. They felt it, remained mute. And jaws snapped, chewed bread, tore at meat, acted as if they knew nothing, and the body below was drying out, hardening. Thin gristly ears turned yellow,

sprouted clumps of stiff hair. The mouth was laid bare, lips horribly folded, lips, those pale red moist ribbons. Boils erupted from neck to chin, tightened with every move of the mouth. Hands bony, gnarled fingers shook. And the people sat listlessly, went listlessly, endured. Until the end came, brushed past hardly noticed, Death, over the liver, over the heart, the testicles, the cancer-ravaged womb. A hardened blood vessel burst in the dried-up brain. A twitch, eyes rolled, lay still; a human once.

People who had come through Iceland moved down from the heights of Sidobre near Toulouse. Among them Kylin, Hoyet Sala, the Precipice. From Toulouse, where once again she had marvelled at the Cathedral of Saint Sernin, dusky smooth-skinned Venaska came to meet them, asked if she might walk with them. On the path through a field of maze he stared hard at her: "You really want this, Venaska?"

"Let me come with you."

"I left your fig spray under the oleander tree."

"Hoyet Sala, here's another."

"I accepted your kisses under the oleander tree. I know how sweet people are."

"Take me. I want you to love me."

And as it travelled warmly through him, he hummed: I'll take her along. I'll go wandering with her. Looked dreamily at his hand, buried the thought.

They travelled by goat-cart through the blooming plain of the Garonne, headed east. Settlers and expeditionaries encountered them in fields of rye, in dense assemblages of trees, calm leaf-strewing beings newly greening. Any Iceland expeditionary was allowed to join them; Precipice looked away as Venaska as usual decked these men and women with young leaves. Every day they flinched from fires that burned in the fields. Venaska rose from their prayers dreamily, with sleepy little eyes. Precipice, ever hard and serious, pushed on east, to the Rhone; he wanted to go up the Rhone valley to Lyon, farther north. They climbed through empty rocky valleys, spates and waterfalls on every side. Across the great river lay a plain.

Now people from the north came in great numbers towards them. Precipice sent men to mingle with the migrant groups; they would not call a halt. People headed west, across the river. They searched around in the hills, asked about hideouts. And then the people around Kylin – they were quite close to the townzone of Lyon – heard crackling and screaming all day and night. Smoke from fires, dreadful flames above Lyon. Throngs of weeping exhausted people, pale and dark-skinned, came fleeing out of the din.

Three Giants had occupied Lyon, two shemales and a man – the other lords of mankind were dead. These planned to turn themselves into vapour-clouds and go to Delvil. Their rugged bodies, nourished on rocks and soil, withstood the flames. They had set the whole Rhone valley ablaze, were firing more forests. The townzone was burning from deep below. The woman-mountain Tafunda stood legs straddled over the flames licking at her feet, pissed into the fire, quivered at the others: come help me; but she was not consumed. One lay over the ancient outlying town of Macon like a blue silk mountain. His body no longer recognisable; fire gnawed at him, the Giant struggled with the flames that sought to destroy him, waft him away. He clung with all his might to his writhing streaking body; the fire broiled and roasted, he couldn't feel it; let the fire do what it will. He hardly breathed, had yielded up all his moisture; still the wind could not shift the blue bulk.

Then the third Giant, the shemale Kussussa, poked her head out of the incandescent burning pit that was Lyon: "We have time? Some fires these!" With a mad laugh she tore her Giant's armour, the Iceland webbing, from her chest, squeezed it, rubbed it on a cliff beside the river. Crack! Green jets of fire. Her body crackled away over the clouds. The blast of heat blew the Giant at Macon free of the ground to soar like a blue creature of the air. He stretched mollusc arms to Tafunda, who snapped and smouldered at him but could not burn. He dragged the writhing groaning monster along with him.

Kylin stood transfixed on Mount Pilate. They saw the Giant from Macon circle overhead with the black writhing figure and head off to the northwest. They wanted to go down into the valley; were deterred by repellent stinking smoke. The stream of humanity had suddenly come to a stop. And as they crossed the last hill to the east, the entire train of expeditionaries halted. The valley was now a wide swamp, Giants' footprints, hills levelled in the Giants' assault, mountains to the northwest had tumbled into the valley. Rubble of buildings all across the plain, smoking. People and animals trudging. The assault and the fires had overwhelmed every settlement. Fire had fallen on fleeing creatures like an erupting volcano. They lay, black-brown specks curled on the paths, in heaps where walls had blocked their way.

On the eastern hills, as smoke drifted up the slopes numerous expeditionaries flung themselves flat, howling trembling tried to hide in the ground; clapped hands over ears: the ghosts of Greenland and the volcanoes had followed them here. Most were stunned; trudged doggedly on. Kylin mingled with them, his face cold, laughed, sometimes burst out: "They caused their own destruction! The Giants, curse their faces. Curse the arms we helped to give them. If only I could tear them to pieces as easily as I made them." Sobbing yammering he raised his hands: "I can't take any more of this. Fire, I can think of you. Fires on Iceland, in the

sky, fire in my body, away with them all. Burn them to ashes, beat them down. No more punishment. See how we suffer.”

He wept aloud with the others. He led them down from the hills to the valley. They could not avoid the burned the mangled, the horribly crushed. “Let no one say,” lamented Kylin, “that a human is the same as a tree, a stick, a heap of sand. A human is not the same as air and stones. Stones have been shattered, the Giants have trodden the mountains down; the trees they trampled cry out to me. But to see this: these people. Look well: these were people. More than muscle and bone and skin. The Giants could not see it. I myself did not see it. They were alive. They are gone.”

Around him they wept. “We want to go from here. Must we pass through this vale of woe?”

“We must.” Precipice pale, red blotches on brow and cheeks. “There can never be too much of this. This is the fire that’s been prepared for us. Come behind me. Bend, melt, be shattered. It is no shame. Look back: what is it there, disappearing to the northwest? Crowing in triumph, soon it will rage. Well, well. Our shame. No harm if it shatters us. All of us.” Sobbed, clenched his fists, his eyes narrowed: “Destroy them, whoever they are. Fire, destroy, make them vanish in the air. Turn them to dust. Leave nothing behind.”

And on they went through the dreadful valley, until a raft came over from the eastern bank with a throng of distraught crazed dumbstruck people. Then they climbed aboard the raft, crossed the smoke-veiled river to the other shore. As they crossed, Kylin nagged them: “This is water. Look at it. There’s nothing to cry about. You can drown here. When you’ve done enough burning, you can drown. Be gone from the Earth.”

Horrors without end awaited them on the wide expanse of the eastern bank. Kylin shaken, insatiable to see more, show them more. He dragged them to the lip of the yawning crater of the buried Lyon townzone, out of which the ghastly laughing Giant had crawled. Kylin taunted cruelly: “Or you can jump down there. They couldn’t burn it to ashes, it’ll do for us.”

For days they failed to draw Kylin away from the dreadful plain of the dead. Several had already fallen sick. Hard Kylin glared at them in loathing and satisfaction. He heard with shining eyes that some had run away crazed with disgust, others unable to bear the load of torment. “We must stay, must see who’ll be last.”

They implored him: “You want to sacrifice us. We have other plans.”

“Nothing better for us than burning. We must do as the Giants did. Fly to London as a cloud.”

As they were casting about one evening for dogs, now their main source of food, Kylin came across Venaska, who had been going veiled and small to avoid him. He pulled her veil away: "Ah, Venaska. Good to see you. You've been hiding from me. Here with us on the Rhone, Venaska! I haven't thought of you."

"Hoyet Sala. I've been around. You let me come with you."

He kept hold of the veil. "Venaska, I can't believe it. Venaska from the Garonne, the Loire. You tie a veil around your face, your eyes twinkle. You should close your eyes, hold your nose."

"Hoyet Sala, what are you saying. Let go of my veil."

"No. For just this moment you should look and listen."

"I always look and listen. I was hiding. From the sight of you. You've grown so terrible."

"She's suffering. Venaska's suffering. Because of me. There's no need. Aren't you ashamed to talk so. Say sweet nothings to me; your handiwork can bloom here too. The oleanders the fig trees of Provence – don't you think, they're nothing compared to this. It's nice here. Down there by your foot, stinking, that's the body and bowels of a man, or a woman, I can't tell from here. And lying across it, the two legs of a child. But there's no child. Venaska, what can you say about this child. Isn't a child's nimbleness something to marvel at? The child's legs were too slow, but the child – is with who perhaps? Running with the Giants, body arms head, hurrah hurrah. Hupp! Now gazing from a Giant's toe down at the sea, maybe London already. A funny curious kid. A genius, and died so young! Why don't you interrupt me, Venaska, with exclamations of joy, or a song? You have the throat for it. Tears, tears. Onwards."

"Why do you rage at me? Why insult me?"

"To me you're just a speck of colour in the landscape. No, Venaska, it's right that you slink around, the veil is good. You are cursed, don't you see. Yes, you. You probably don't know what it means to be cursed. Look at that mess of guts, the child's legs stuck to it, they were people, they were me, me."

"Not me, I did not trample them. Stop, Hoyet Sala. Don't you see who you're speaking to."

"I speak so because I don't see you. You dare to be here. At the graveyard of all human dignity, you the song of triumph, dragging our shame before our eyes, feasting on our shame."

She pressed close, he sank to his knees under the force of her embrace. Her lips quivered, her eyes glowed. She tried to kiss his mouth. "Would I have followed you if what you say is true, Hoyet Sala?"

He groaned, offered no resistance. “Pooh! Embracing! More! Kissing, tumbling, your loins with mine. It’s good. You like it when I say I don’t know you? Show me what I am, all of it.”

“I weep with you. I do nothing to hurt you. Don’t bury yourself, Hoyet Sala.”

“Embrace me, Venaska. Nothing else can help.” He flung himself prostrate on the ground, cooed: “I had to kiss the muddy ground. I had to journey from Iceland to Lyon to be exposed by you. To see the entirety of my shame. Your lap, here. Our entire human shame.”

She tugged at his arm. He stood up, deathly pale, snarled: “Come with me, Venaska.” He hauled her along for two days through the ghastly valley, watched her suffer. Then he could stand it no longer. She had not changed, her eyes sat in almost green hollows, she was still gentle. Then he wandered around the crater of the smoking subterranean city, closer and closer. He seemed only slowly to understand what he wanted. He pulled her to one of the fissures venting gases of decomposition: “Smell it with me, Venaska. This is the bath we take before our wedding. What are you?”

She wrestled with him, distraught. “I am no different from you.” She trembled wailed.

“Don’t wail, Venaska. You are no different from me. Show me.”

“I will not do what you ask.”

“But you will, Venaska. You’re like me. You are my life. If only you weren’t so lovely, so sweet. Go away. Go down. What difference does it make. None of ours are there.”

“I won’t go.”

“Don’t upset me, Venaska. Don’t make me cross. Don’t mock me with love. I don’t need to atone. Atone forever and ever. I’ll die in this stink. An end to it.”

“You dragged me here. You want to throw me in.”

“No. You’ll do it yourself. You can do it. Do it, if your eyes are opened.”

“I will not. I’ll stay with you, Hoyet Sala. Now more than ever. You’ll feel remorse for me.”

“I don’t want you. Don’t speak to me. I know you. Ghastly. You – you are the same species as the Giants. You are the last. Yes, you too are a monster, flung out from Greenland. You live in me, horribly: my oblivion. Let oblivion take you. I am the Precipice.”

She whimpered: “I am ashamed. How you insult me. Sweet Earth, take me.”

Venaska fluttered in the smoke billowing from the fissure, stroked the ground in her gentle way. She crawled off out of sight of Hoyet Sala, left him seething behind her.

That same day the expeditionaries left the valley of the Rhone. Precipice was incandescent in front of the others: "Venaska is gone. I knew what she was. We are human. She wasn't. I knew her. She was the same as those reptiles and Giants."

When they lamented: "Groan, all of you. Bring on the sorrow. The sorrow. We need pitchers for it, gallons every day. For us humans only Hell will do. Without fire we'll just be stone. Hell is all we need. Sorrow is our soul, our god." And more softly: "You know, she went into the fire and was a part of me. Blessed, whoever grants humiliation."

IN CORNWALL

VENASKA, sweet female, fled west. Left behind her the smoke and stinking gases of the Lyon crater. She was frightened, alone. Often she wept. She was the delight of the horrified people she moved among, to whom she gave her dusky hands. Where am I going. Where do I want to go. I belong to the Greenland creatures, so Precipice said. She wanted to go to them, to Greenland. And then in the west she came among desperate starving often cannibal hordes fleeing Orleans and Paris. They spoke of the Giants gathering in Cornwall. To the Giants: this is my goal. A deep unconscious desire seized hold of her, enveloped her; she lusted for the Giants. Hoyet Sala had railed against them: they were of her blood. Suddenly she felt certain of it. She no longer understood the laments the howling of the hordes, the hoarse profanities directed at the rampaging Giants. Her own despair evaporated, like the night when rosy morning dawns. Why are they groaning and shouting. What are their names, those Giants so far away. They stand there in Cornwall, ghastly their deeds, horrible their bodies. But no one knows them. I alone know them in all their deeds and bodies: my blood, my brothers.

"My brothers, my dear brothers," sighed day and night in her. She gazed sweetly at the landscape of the Loire. "Here I am again, little streams, lovely birches, sweet grass. So long since I saw you last. I was under a spell." She stepped naked into a stream. "Lovely water, this is my body. It's all yours. I'm heading north. Help me to cross." She stood pale on the sloping bank, let the breeze dry her. "You're cold, lovely wind. This is my body, my breasts. Help me cross to England." Warm sunlight came: "Ah, sun. What need for eyes and ears. I feel you through my skin, on my back, my neck, my feet. You come with me on my wanderings."

She journeyed with people that she charmed, long days up to the Seine. Then no one wanted to come with her; fear of the Giants was too great. She laughed, went on, full of longing: "Go then. They're not your Giants." She went down the Seine, across meadows, through scrub. She was happy and full of longing. The landscape clung to her. The faster she

moved, the more the beings of the landscape held her tight. Grass tangled in her shoes. She had to take the shoes off and go barefoot. At night, trees she slept among moved to block her path. On, on she went. Scrub, grass went with her. Chestnut trees, limes in their summer bloom perked up at her approach. They huffed clouds of pollen dust, then lowered their tops, branches tried to snag her hair. She giggled, cooed at them: "Oh you! I still have to reach Cornwall. Leave my hair alone. Help me come to Cornwall, I must come to the Giants, my brothers." No sea yet, still no sea. She fretted, cried. Thick grass hemmed her in. Venaska was happy in her love, and sobbed with longing. As she wearied, one foot in front of the other, enclosed by the land, she stretched her arms out to the north. Tears started in her eyes. The tears sped ahead of Venaska, landed on the Giants' shoulders.

There they stood in Cornwall, dumb mountains, Giants in an arc from Bodmin Moor to Exmoor further north. They had hollowed out the Earth nearby, sucked in huge quantities of soil and water. They grubbed with prisms of ore in deep gabbro bedrock. Their feet were criss-crossed with little green veins of hornblende, black-brown olivine streaked with iron climbed up to the chest, a stony overcoat. At the chest they wore the radiating webs. Each impassive green-black fissured water-ravaged face pointed northwest towards the sea, to rip out the sea, melt its floor, let flaming lava pour forth and shake the land. Their jubilant savagery was gone. The currents of the mountains surged through them. The Earth lamed them, tried to overcome them. They had to fight with all their soul's strength not to yield.

The seas, those green water-folk, had long since flooded from Cardigan Bay over Wales, raged into the Bristol Channel, foamed to the feet of stony Kuraggara. The huge whipped-up furious surge rolled in day and night from the Atlantic. Ireland was inundated from coast to coast. The flood loomed raging down from the north, drove a miles-wide path roofed with thunderstorms, crashed against Cornwall. Beyond the Hebrides the waves dissolved, released yawning clouds of vapour. New masses came, boiled filled the gaps. Week by week the surf-crashing battle-line grew brighter from some invisible source. Lightning flashed continuously through glimmer and shadow. Endless goutts of rain, rumbling thunder.

In Cornwall, drawing the Earth into their bodies, sucking in whole rivers, the Giants struggled to remain conscious. They merged their basso grunting wheezing with the rumbling thunder. Consciousness tried to slip away. When one groaned the others joined in, to rouse it with their noise. Delvil, all the forests of Dartmoor on his back, could move only his eyelids. Trunks of fir and pine washing loose through his veins poked through the smoke-black skin. To the rocks floating in him he was a hopper; they rose clogging to his throat. They pushed their edges out at his shoulders, chest; were slopes, clefts where gushing water collected.

And in the storm, as he stood there – what did he think about, want to remember – a pain burned his neck. He paid it no heed, his forested pond-heavy head sank lower. Then his finger twitched, the arm bent, a burning in the neck; such pain. He felt around. Something calling. From where. He mumbled. Venaska’s tears smacked into his shoulders, his throat. A call: Delvil Delvil Delvil. The thought came over him: it’s calling my name. Delvil Delvil. The call and the tears were linked. His fingers felt: they’re hot. Through the storm the cry came to his shoulder: “Denvil. Help me. I’m tangled in grass. I want to come to you.” She calls me by name. Always the name. The name. It’s like when Marduk vanished. He pondered, alert now, groaned: “I must keep hold of the webs.” Tears gathered tickling burning behind his ears. This calling: the others don’t hear it. Arms up to his mouth. Arms over his eyes. He pulled his head back gasping; fear stabbed through him.

“Denvil, I can’t come to you. Why do you stand there. Pick me up, dear brother.”

“Oh!” he braced himself, gave a hollow grunt: “Go away,” and groaned along with the others: “It’s the stones, stones and the brooks. They’re taking away my consciousness.” The thunderstorm rattled, blackness, sudden glare. He squeezed the webbing.

“My arms are holding you. They are glad to be with you. I shall come soon, nothing can hold me back. You are my blood. I yearn for you. Yearn, Denvil.”

It licked twitching through his brain. It induced him to tug at his legs. What is this hanging at my chest; what dead corpses are these my legs. “You won’t befuddle me. The sea is coming. We’re tearing the Earth apart.”

“My blood, you; you yearn for me. I know you, though you deny me. My mouth is with you. There. My dead brother, behold the sea, so beautiful. You feel me, feel everything. You are forest mountain river. See the sweet life in you. Our sweet life, forest river mountains. Let them come to you. Just let them come.”

Consciousness slipping from him: “I must groan. They must groan with me. They must waken me.”

“My heart is coming to you. It’s there now. Dead brother, look around. Now you can live.”

His head jerked violently back. Through the blackness, the flashes, a bleeding dripping figure was approaching. Glowing, veins pulsing, Venaska’s heart came slowly silently on. Sank into the mountain: for seconds warmth streamed in. Soft darkness bubbled ground-deep into Denvil.

“Why not, Denvil. Why not.” His head was no longer there, the raging sea was dimmed.

“Dead brother, now we are both well. Now I have you. Stretch out. You have legs, sink down. Down, down. We are sinking. Ah so good to sink down.” It was no longer Delvil stretched out there in mountain lake forest, flowing apart. No longer Delvil.

And Venaska swelled towards the other Giants, from Bodmin Moor to Exmoor on the Bristol Channel. Embedded in masses of syenite they struggled with green seeping veins of augite coursing through it, sandstone scattering on their heads, swathes of stony rubble piling up in their veins. Forest brooks welled cool against them, springs gushed through them. They twitched, their lips tried to pout. Pleading singing behind the ear. Touchings at throat and fingers. In their astonishment, as they began to wheeze, to rouse themselves, they felt the most profound bliss, the mouth hung open. Thoughts fled like smoke. A dream flared blinding bright: they were being called by name, Kuraggara, Tafunda, Mentusi. Tears dripping down the neck, voice cooing. Who is it. Warm. Dripping. Shockingly gentle sweet voice: Kuraggara, Tafunda, Mentusi. Is this Death. Ah the things the world holds.

They were no longer Giants, disintegrating into forests mountains. The thundering rearing sea sprayed high, washed these crags away: they tumbled, loose tree trunks, little stones; the webs. Webs rubbed against rocks, blew them to smithereens. Then the black coursing sea retreated. The thousand-armed waters sank back into Cardigan Bay. The mist over the sea cleared. Ireland rose again, water pouring from its back. The Giants’ stony heads and arms rolled crashing onto Cornwall.

AFTER THE STORM

FROM HOLES and lairs in the devastated cities they crept, traumatised. They had no food; loathing and cannibalism ruled. Tight-knit hordes came from the rumbling British Isles, remnants from the Irish flood, they swept killing plundering through western Europe. Meki factories lay ruined; fields tended by Settlers were few. Like a cloudburst, a calamitous hailstorm, people who had been spared the Giants’ trampling stormed across the land. They rampaged for months, left corpse-littered landscapes behind them. Anything strong enough dug itself in among desolate forests, fields, some alone, most in bands ready to fight. They ate whatever came to them, were hard as bone, hunted game. The first wave in this emptying and inundation of the European continent, this monstrous calamity, was over in a year. For a lot longer the masses continued to be pushed and pulled, forced here and there, more inundations, more emptyings.

The Iceland expeditionaries were best able to resist the first wave. They met the terrible hordes with no lesser ferocity. Toiled as if harvesting volcanoes. Held back brutish bands, fragmented them, forced others on. Turned up armed and maintaining good contact in Belgian lands, on the Seine, the middle Loire, the Rhone. They had to erect a formidable barrier to save from destruction the happy landscapes south of the Garonne. They smuggled to Calais Le Havre Antwerp, to the mouth of the Gironde vessels from the Greenland venture that lay rusting in northern harbours, sent masses away in them to the wide forgotten landscapes of Africa, to North and South America.

As in the Urals War, when colliding fire-lines drove hordes down to the Caspian Sea, the destruction of the Danish and Scandinavian townzones sent floods of terrified starving dying people around the Baltic. The southern coastline, to Lithuania in the east down to the Rhine in the west, had been settled by Marchers in a fertile well-tended landscape. Now the black Consul Zimbo met his end, when he tried to use the moment to extend Marcher power by attacks to the north and west. Sturdy armed farmers struck him down at a meeting in Berlin, opened the borders, took in hordes of refugees. Marcher aid workers crossed the Rhine. The later western population owed its perpetuation mostly to them. They guided throngs of northern refugees through their own region, across the Warthe, the Vistula. They entered the Russian Plain, now smoothed and calm again after the war of flames. The mingled remnants of the zones were taken over by Mongol and Siberian nomads. In the whole of Europe, of those who had been enticed and tricked to live in the zones there remained only the descendants of the older harder white- and dark-skinned people. Survivors from later influxes ebbed back south. It was now thinly settled, this land that had grown the mighty townzones, mothers of the Giants. Most were descendants of mixed-race people with Amerindian ancestry, and recently immigrated sturdy Mestizos; only scattered remnants of Whites.

Then the hurricane abated. On the European continent, humans toiled urgently with furious energy to regain the land. America had thrown up no figures like Delvil Tafunda Kuraggara. Earlier than in Europe its townzones had dissolved, its senates disappeared, devices and science decayed. When the eastern components of the former Communal League splintered and fell apart, a multitude of small contented townships endured in the ruins of the monstrous old cities of the Americas, now reclaimed by mountain and grassy plain. In Europe people came together in village communities, often located close to the ruins of the old townzones. Not long after, there came raids by robber bands from Africa, for whom the northern continent had not lost its allure. The raids led to counter-measures, to the firming of tribal and group identities, expansion across the Mediterranean.

The events in Cornwall sent dust clouds across northern Europe, as if from a volcanic eruption. Rain poured down for weeks. Amid the calamities and deadly fury of those days it went unremarked. And anyone still alive who thought of the Giants had no fear of them; had now no fear of anything. Only when the struggle was over did people remember the raging Giants. And they saw the hard leather-clad expeditionaries, riding through the land at the head of little bands of purposeful migrants, repairing footpaths, clearing main roads, splitting up any too-big migrant hordes. In Belgium and on the Rhine rumours arose: these are men and women of the old ruling clans, they rebelled against the senates, made themselves masters of monstrous powers in Iceland and Greenland, on the British Isles they fought Giants to the death. They are men and women like Marduk and White Baker, only stronger. They beat the Giants with their own weapons. The expeditionaries had no way to counter these rumours. They were too reticent, you could see their volcano brand and how humble they were in the presence of fire. That must be the power; it held even them down. Would they try to lord it over everyone like the old rulers. And though still on their guard, people began to emulate the expeditionaries, to worship fire so as be on the same footing as them and, of course, so as not to affront a great unknown power. To the expeditionaries themselves who settled among them they showed respect, knelt before Hoyet Sala.

Austere Marcher customs spread west and south, now that the time of isolation was over. At the same time, like winged seeds there spread among former zone-dwellers in the fields, among the ruins, a grave loving reverential ethos of the south. People felt their way anew into thunder, into rain, the soil, the motion of sun and stars. They drew near to tender plants, to animals. Like the metal bulls after the Urals War, the fires of the Icelanders dotted the landscape as memorials to the catastrophe. But people prayed joyfully and with an easy breath before their flickering light, the great powers that had saved everyone and now gave new life to them all. In many regions symbols of animals, carved idols appeared. People worshipped them, placed themselves under their protection. Every moment was rife with mysterious powers; there was a very lively belief in ghosts.

MEMORIALS

HOYET SALA was caught in a bad dream: he was wandering by the Seine; someone had come before him across these wide levels, past these swaying trees: Venaska. He had to go on, had to find her. A thicket came. He tried to go in, go through. Could not. He tried and tried. And as he charged at the thicket he was suddenly lifted up, up and over the dense scrub. Over the

broad sweet yearning longed-for levels he flew. He twisted about, he was flying. Had to fly across the roaring sea, the Channel, high in the high black air. He opened his mouth: "Soon be there." And there was the black desolation: Cornwall. His arms flapped like ribbons before him. He descended onto rocky Dartmoor. Sank onto clattering stone. His body became rooted in the hill, he was a Giant, a big dead crag.

Hoyet Sala awoke from the dream trembling from head to foot. He roamed around the landscapes being opened up by settlers who let the breath of pine-beings and green beech trees wash over them. He went north, to the plain where Brussels had once stood above ground. Ten Keir sat there.

"Ten Keir, I'm looking for you. Come down from the ruins. All you have left is skin and bones. Join us. We came from Iceland and Greenland, you know it. We were all saved."

"Why do you speak to me, why come to me, Hoyet Sala. Enough have been burned by you. Why do you bother me. Aren't you afraid I'll burn you and you'll bear my symbol?"

"What symbol?"

"Ah, you think you've won and I shall die in my empty crushed city. But there's nothing about me to be saved. I shall not be bowed. There is no god and no power whose symbol I accept. I am a man. And you, Hoyet Sala, are not."

"Really, Ten Keir?"

"Really. Or else you'd be sitting like me. You'd be mourning for the long-gone Giants."

"The Giants. A good thing for us that they're gone."

"What are you saying, you pious believer, you saint. They are gone. Died a monstrous death. I've no idea what it was that did for them. Not you, don't give yourself airs. You were Kylin. And now you're a Precipice. The Precipice. Defeated, you have no life, nor do the others. You all fled from Greenland. You couldn't measure up to your status, like me, like all of us. I sit here, I'm ashamed and mourn the Giants. And you too cast your eyes down."

"My folly, Ten Keir, has abated. I'm no weaker for that."

"Your folly. There's a trembling in you. You lot are sinking, I don't know why. Only Delvil remained strong. You know it. Else why would you come here. I curse myself and beat myself up for seeing it only now. So that I may lash about me, I have anchored myself to these ruins. And feast on the view they have bequeathed me. That's what they were, the Giants. They rampaged, they were horrible, they snorted vengeance. But they were rightfully above you and

me. In all their rampaging they were in the right, over me and over you, Hoyet Sala. You lot are pitiful, ridiculous. Unworthy of the things humanity has made. All ruined. Go ahead, crow.”

“Ten Keir, why do you torment me. Oh how you torment me. What brought down the Giants? They were driven to annihilate themselves.”

“That does not absolve you, or me. They did not want to annihilate themselves, I assure you. Some error, some mistake, a weakness must have laid them low in Cornwall. They overreached. I assure you of this: look at me, admit it. You belonged to us, yes, and to them. Remember what you did, Kylin, think of yourself. I regret I did not remain Delvil’s friend, but let him die. We both regret it. You too. Help what can still be helped. No man ever died more despairing than I, if I must now die, seeing no salvation. Think, Kylin, what we had in our hands. No one measured up to it. Just because it fell into the hands of thieves, hands that abused it, does not make it less astounding. Less great. Less ours. The Giants had the web; they employed it in vengeful fury. They built upon themselves, I was afraid, but now I see it was the proudest most human thing that has ever happened. Gone now, trampled into the ground. But maybe, Kylin, maybe it’s not too late. They couldn’t master it, it came too fast, no learning comes for free. Ah, Kylin, we sent you to Greenland to make a new continent. Meki was a new continent: we made it. And you. Now you weep.”

“Not for the Giants. Come down from the rubble.”

“I don’t want to see your people. I sit here because I am ashamed of them.”

“Come down, Ten Keir. You are no coward. Stop crawling over broken concrete, around twisted steel, stop going hungry in all the cement dust. Are you still Ten Keir? I’d better give you a name: you are Taushan-dagh, the Hill of the Hare.”

“I shall die.”

“You think contact with me will kill you? Come.”

The withered little body clambered swaying in the sunlight down among trickling clattering stones. “Here I am.”

“Stay with me.”

“Come, Kylin, let me lead you.” They went for a day, a second, a third northward, through scrub and settlements. Ten Keir whimpered at night, wept for the Giants. He never looked about as they walked. A great grey-green water came: the North Sea. “Here we part. There is no salvation. Not even for you. I wanted to come here. Goodbye, Kylin.”

Hoyet Sala stood silent, head bowed, as the stumbling man went from him, trudging through windswept sand. He stood before the crashing breakers. Stood. Stood. Suddenly Ten Keir fell onto the sand, lay on his side. After some time the other touched his shoulder, breathed: "You. Ten Keir."

"Don't touch me. Go away."

Hoyet Sala dragged his heavy feet over the dunes until the other man was out of sight. An hour later he trudged back to the slowly heaving sea, now violet and black-blue. Ten Keir was lying in the sand, a little black heap. Hoyet Sala squatted silently beside him. After a while the little man lifted his head, sat up, put hands to his face, said nothing. "You called me a coward, Hoyet Sala. I'm pitiful. I can't go in. It was this water that devoured them. This is what devoured the Giants."

"Come away, Ten Keir. You insisted on coming here. I sympathise. Give me your blessing too. Don't stay too long." Whimpering, often collapsing, fists often pressed to his eyes, mostly slouching, the emaciated hollow-eyed little man followed bearded Hoyet Sala.

They meandered back through a region of northern settlers. In a wood that was being cleared there lay fir trunks, stripped of branches and bark. They sat side by side. Hoyet Sala's face was turned to the ground, clouded, closed. Late in the afternoon he called to settlers nearby; they knew him. They were to pile stones in the clearing. He helped to carry heavy boulders, some white some dark. Ten Keir looked on a while. When their eyes met, Hoyet Sala nodded: "Yes. Come and help." And the ragged man felt moved to stand, pull stones from the ground, roll them. And he realised what they were doing: erecting a symbol of the Giants. Towards evening the high wide pile was finished. The settlers left. For two days Hoyet Sala and Ten Keir camped in the clearing. Then the bearded man took the other by the hand: "Let's go on, Ten Keir."

They headed for Brussels. Outside the wasteland of rubble the Iceland expeditionary placed a hand on the other's shoulder: "This is Brussels, Ten Keir."

The other gripped his hand. "Not Ten Keir. Taushan-Dagh you said. Don't leave me alone. Let's walk around the city." They embraced.

Gentle shining-eyed Diuva rode in an open oxcart that winter through a landscape of snow flurries, looking for Hoyet Sala in the Paris region. Wanted to thank him for preserving the southern settlements; she was also pining for Venaska, driven away by him at Lyon. But the buxom woman with the full head of red hair could not be angry with him. Hoyet Sala

walked at her side across snowy fields. He stood by children, laughed with them, snapped dry branches, gazed dreamily at crows, lifted his arms in play as if he meant to fly away with them. In his little hut he often sang hymns in the morning, like the British settlers.

Once he took Diuva's cold hands in his as they walked: what did she hold against him – that he set little store by sorrow? that he tormented no one, sent no one to the fire? "I have not forgotten sorrow. The Giants are in our thoughts. Stone monuments have been erected everywhere to remember them. Celebrate them. They were mighty humans. And we have fire. Nothing has slipped away from us. We hold on to it all. Diuva, the land accepts us, but we are something in the land. It does not ensnare us. We have no fear of air or ground. Do you know Ten Keir? You know him. He has calmed down. He knows we have power, true knowledge, and humility. He is my friend. He took our symbol and swore not to abandon me. Why? He sees how we have grown strong and prosperous. We are the true Giants. It is we who came through the Urals War and Greenland. And we, we are not defeated, Diuva. You can tell them what I said, on the Garonne and along the Rhone. Soon we shall be known all across the Earth."

He lowered his gaze, sat on a boulder, pulled his lambskin around him. He praised Venaska; she was gone yet not gone. Passing through those thickets by the Seine he knew where she had headed. Everything would be preserved. Hoyet Sala's hand reached into the clear icy air: it seemed to him that the great primal Power they worshipped had swept the Giants away in Cornwall, making use of Venaska. For it is no dead Power, but a luxuriant conscious profound Being. Diuva, gentle female, brushed loose hair back from her forehead. She looked at the bearded man, how he sat there so upright, so serious, stared so earnestly at her; she smiled. She was heartened: there was something of Venaska in him.

On the wide newly opened farmlands heavy with crops, from the Belgian seacoast across the Seine to the Loire, Hoyet Sala bestowed the name Venaska.

Blooming fading human beings of flesh and blood dwelled in the rumpled southern lands of Europe, on western ground with its massifs, young lowlands, on the Russian tableland's level black blanket. The Earth shifted mountains highlands depressions under and around them. Great rivers drained clear water, filled lake basins. Brown and green plant-beings sprang from the ground. Forests and thickets grew along the Danube, along the Dnepr and the Don. Dense forest and swamp from the Atlantic coast to southern shores. Wildflowers grasses, birds cooing sobbing dying in them. Animals crawled swam with bodies naked scaled furred over the levels, forever grasping swallowing emptying themselves. Until the ground, the water eager for transformations, the gnawing air had them all again. Hordes of humans in peace and

death, wooing and bride-winning, through volcanic eruptions and floods. Holding fast to one another, fading away with tears, generation after generation, mother and child mother and child, lover and his beloved. And always the gases of the air yearning for the lung, the tiny cells, the nuclei, the soft protoplasm, forever inhaled and breathed out again. And when the heart stilled, cells separated and dissolved, they were new souls, decomposed Protein Ammonia Amino acids Carbon dioxide Water, water transformed to vapour. Greedy for sorrows and pleasures, always inclined to wander, soul-unions in snowy landscapes, on the vast heaving sea, in the roaring storm, stone-folk lifting the ground to make mountains.

Black the ether overhead, with its little balls of sun, sparkling heaps of sintering stars. Breast to breast the blackness lay with these humans; from them light gleamed.

THE END