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In the Sky With Diamonds:

Baseball in the Ultimate Fantasy League

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

I really like writing stories with this particular cast of supporting characters. Well, this is only the second time I've used the ancient Mesopotamian pantheon in a story (the first was in "Downhill All the Way"), but they're just naturals for this sort of use. I just hope I can think up a good story for them again. They are very powerful supernatural beings and as a team they can do absolutely anything. The trick, as the main character in this story learns, is getting them to act as a team. The gods of the ancient pantheons were neither omnipotent nor omniscient. They also have a lot of interesting character flaws to work with, perfect people are boring, these guys are anything but.

However, it wasn't the Mesopot. Pantheon my writers group wanted to see again. They wanted Ratatosk, the wise-cracking, trouble-making squirrel from Yggdrasil. While I was at it, I threw in some cameo scenes for other characters from "Downhill," but just a few to tie the two stories together. Best of all I got to tell a baseball story and that was fun too. And here it is, in time for the playoffs! Hopefully you all will enjoy it too.

As with all the others, this book really is offered to you free. However, if after reading it you feel it was worth a dollar or two, rather than sending it to me, why not make a donation to the Jewish Federation of Greater New Bedford, 467 Hawthorn Street, North Dartmouth, MA 02747 email: <mailto:jfgnb@meganet.net> The Jewish Federation hosts and/or supports a wide variety of services and programs in the Greater New Bedford area and internationally including assistance in resettling families from the Former Soviet Union, their "Wheels in Motion" transportation service for the elderly, college scholarship programs, recruitment for local blood bank drives, a permanent Jewish video lending library, many educational programs and the allocations to other local agencies in the New Bedford, Mass. Area. For more information write or call them at (508) 997-7471. So far they do not have a website.

Jonathan E. Feinstein
Westport, Mass.
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PROLOGUE

Sometime in the Past

But not as long ago as you might like to believe...

A hot dry wind raged across the Plain of Megiddo. Here and there were pockets of glassy, fused sand where monumental amounts of heat and energy had been recently exchanged between opposing armies. The dry wadi course of the River Rishon meandered its way eastward to the ruins of Haifa. To the south lay Jerusalem and Tel Aviv and beyond them the lands of Egypt. To the north was Beirut and Damascus and to the east, Amman and Baghdad. In these cities and across the globe the scene was more of the same; desolation, upheaval, death.

The great Plain of Megiddo was littered with thousands of bodies, but there were no scavengers left to pick their bones. Indeed, it would be some time before there would be enough bacteria to allow the bodies to rot. And yet, while life had been crushed, it had not been completely destroyed. Even here, in the heart of the devastation, two figures stirred painfully, rose, and approached each other.

"Loki?" one of them grated. He was nearly naked. Massive burns all over his body, the result of the searing heat that had melted the bronze armor from his body, were already beginning to heal. Half of the proud, bushy, black beard that had covered his face had been burned away as well. "You still live?" There were no weapons left to either of them, save their hands.

"Of course, Ares," Loki replied. He was in a similar state, maybe worse, and only a few tufts of his white-blond hair remained on his body. "None of us can truly die. You know that. Your side won this time, if that's any consolation." Loki paused and surveyed the carnage around them. "We sure made a mess out of this cycle, didn't we?"

"I had a pretty good day before Ahriman's boys ran through my army," Ares grinned, still on guard.

"Get real, Mars!" Loki spat, but showed no other hostile signs. "We damned near tore the world in half this time. There's got to be a better way!"

"Aye," the Greek God of War agreed ruefully, relaxing his guard only slightly when it became apparent that his erstwhile foe was not about to renew hostilities just yet.

"You know," Loki continued, "maybe we've been going at this all wrong."

"What mean you, Trickster?" Ares asked suspiciously.

"I mean that every cycle has come to an end in the same sort of cataclysmic battle. The sides differ, of course. Sometimes it is Good versus Evil. This time it was Order against Chaos. Hell! Once it all came down when your pantheon squabbled over some small fishing town a few hundred miles to the northeast of here."

"I remember," Ares nodded. "The destruction of that one city brought about the end of a cycle. I think we did in the whole world this time."

"Again," Loki agreed. "Time to reset and start again. Depressing, isn't it?"

"Aye." They were both silent for a few minutes before Ares continued. "At least the mortals won't remember this."

"Not clearly, anyway," Loki modified. "They'll probably make a whole new religion out of it. They usually do."

"That's all we need," Ares shuddered, "yet another pantheon to deal with next time."

"Next time," the Norse Trickster echoed morosely. "Has it occurred to you that there could be an alternative? Some way we could vie with each other and not destroy the world in the process?"

Ares studied Loki for a moment, trying to determine what he might be up to. Finally he gave up and asked. "Such as?"

"I got some interesting ideas from the mortals this past cycle. In some ways they've surpassed us. They have this interesting discipline called psychology. It's sort of related to philosophy, I think."

"I've heard of that," Mars admitted. "Do you think it would really do much good to lie down on couches and talk about how we feel about our parents?"

"I tried that," Loki laughed ruefully, "several decades ago. I think I really shocked the poor man. If you think about it, you'll realize that none of us really has what the mortals would consider a normal and healthy family life. Hell! Your father killed your grandfather and then ate you and your siblings. He, in turn, was killed by your brother and the lot of you commit incest as easily as you breathe." Ares began to bristle and Loki quickly added, "I'm no better and maybe a lot worse, depending on how you view things."

The God of War nodded silently and Loki continued, "But that's psychiatry; the medical discipline that deals with mental disorders. Psychology is the study of mind and behavior. Closely related, but not precisely the same, if you follow." Ares shrugged noncommittally. He had dealt with silver-tongued Tricksters from a number of pantheons before and knew better than to agree too easily to anything they said no matter how reasonable it might seem. "Anyway, I looked into it and picked up an interesting idea called transference."

"What's that?"

"Look at it this way. We're a rather aggressive lot, right?"

"My specialty," Ares agreed sadly.

"Right. What we need to do is transfer our aggression into safer activities."

"Something that won't destroy the world?" Ares suggested.

"Exactly!" Loki nodded. "I mean, what good will it do to win the war only to find you've destroyed the prize? For that matter, these wars aren't over world conquest, they're over dominance and relative ranking between us."

Ares shook his head. "What other arena is appropriate to us? We're gods, dammit. We've always contended on a world-wide scale."

"Well," Loki continued, "perhaps we can take another interesting idea or two from the mortals. After all we created them in our own image, or maybe it was the other way around, so maybe they're our ideas anyway."

"Speak plainly, Loki," Ares retorted gruffly. "What have you in mind?"

"How hard can you swing a club?" Loki replied with a grin.

ONE

Off Season

"Bib-bing!" came the disgustingly cheerful, two-tone sound of the doorbell.

"Hawk" Wilton opened his eyes and growled. Sitting up, he looked at his bedside clock. One P.M. exactly. Yes, that was right. He had an appointment. He sat on the edge of his bed a moment and let the cobwebs flow sluggishly out of his thoughts.

"Bib-bing!"

"Yeah, right," he growled softly and stood up and looked at himself in the mirror. What greeted him was a far cry, over forty years in fact, from the self he remembered - the brash young rookie fresh out of Stanford. Where had all that time gone? He sighed exaggeratedly and straightened his thick white hair. He'd been napping with his clothes on and took the time to straighten the garments on his portly bulk. He preferred to think of himself as full-figured, but deep down he knew the proper word was fat.

"Bib-bing!"

"All right already!" he shouted, still inspecting himself. "You'd think the world was gonna end if I didn't come running!" He brushed a stray lock of hair off his forehead defiantly. If someone wanted to talk to him, Wilton was going to make damn sure that caller was serious about it. "Have an offer I'll find interesting, do you?" he asked nowhere near loud enough for anyone to hear him, let alone the man he knew was ringing the doorbell. "We'll see."

Finally, he started slowly toward the front door. True, he was sixty years old, but life hadn't slowed him down as much as he was letting on. He still worked out at the local gym three times a week and just last month he finished in a 10K race. Admittedly he finished six hundred eighty-seventh in a field of seven hundred three, but he finished.

"Bib-bing!"

"I'm coming!" he grumbled loudly. "Hold yer horses, dammit!" He paused at the door and counted to ten slowly before opening it to reveal the man on the other side.

"Mr. Wilton?" the man asked in gently patient tones. There was something about him that Wilton found deeply unsettling. He was dressed in an expensive business suit and that seemed normal, but he wore his dense curly black hair long with a matching beard that reached to the middle of his chest and yet he seemed well-groomed regardless. His eyes had pronounced epicanthic folds, giving him a strong oriental look, although his skin was Caucasian white and those same eyes were the blue of the South Pacific. There was something else about those eyes. They gave the impression that they contained the wisdom of the ages. Also his face was creased in an almost perpetual smile as though he had seen it all and got the joke.

Wilton made no reply, caught as he was by the stranger's gaze.

The tall man glanced at a small card in a clear plastic envelope and asked "You are Samuel Edward Wilton - 'Hawk' Wilton - are you not?"

"Hmm?" Hawk replied dazedly. He shook himself and blinked a few times. Then he tried again, "Yeah,

"I'm Hawk Wilton. Mister Waters, I presume?"

"E. Waters. Yes," the man replied. "May I come in?"

"Of course," Hawk replied. "Let's have coffee out back." His change of attitude was abrupt even for him, but Waters had passed Hawk's first test. Whatever offer Waters was about to make meant enough to him that he was willing to put up with blatant rudeness. Hawk found that interesting.

"Thank you," Mr. E. Waters replied with polite formality as he walked through the door and allowed Hawk to lead him through the condominium to the backyard patio. There was already a thermos and four glass mugs on top of a white wire table where Hawk had put them two hours earlier, betraying his own interest in Waters' mysterious offer.

"Cream? Sugar?" Hawk asked, pouring the hot black liquid.

"Black, please," Waters replied and started to put the card he was still carrying back in his pocket.

"What's that you have there?" Hawk asked in spite of himself.

Waters' hand stopped its pocket-bound motion and instead flipped the card in its envelope across the table. It sailed smoothly through the air although to Hawk's eye it seemed as though it were traveling in slow motion. He passed that off as illusion and picked the card up to see a portrait of himself as he had been over twenty years earlier.

"A 1973 Topps card," Hawk whispered almost reverently. "I haven't seen one of these in years, mister. You know, this was the only baseball card ever printed of me. 'Catcher for the Cleveland Indians. Played five games,'" he read his own major league stats, "seventeen at bats. Five hits - three singles, a double and one home run. Three RBIs. Batting average - .290. The card's worth twenty-five to fifty cents depending on whether you're selling or buying," he trailed off and tossed the card back to Waters.

"I paid sixty-five," Waters remarked, but Hawk, lost in his memories didn't hear him.

"Might have stayed in the Show, but for the six errors. Went back down to Canton/Akron the next spring and retired at the end of the season and started working as a scout for the Indians."

"You've had quite a career, Mr Wilton," Waters replied, taking a sip of coffee.

"Indeed," Hawk agreed. "I've either played or managed at one level or another in almost every organization in professional baseball." He blinked and wrenched himself back to the present. "Now what's this deal you have for me?"

"Mister Wilton, my baseball team needs a manager."

"What team is that, sir?"

"Well, we don't have a name yet. We're very new to the game, but you'll agree we have more enthusiasm and natural talent than you've ever seen before."

"Natural talent," Hawk echoed. "You mean they have no practical experience. What are we talking about? Little League? I already have an offer pending from a Little League team."

"Hardly. Our team is completely made up of mature adults."

"Oh," Hawk nodded, "one of those fantasy camps, where a bunch of businessmen can spend a couple weeks playing with their heroes. That sounds interesting. Tell you the truth, I've been tempted to go to one of them myself."

"Well," Waters hedged, "you're close, but that's not quite what we're doing. Hm, how to say this..."

"Please come to the point, Mister Waters," Hawk told him. "This isn't my only prospect at the moment. There's a local radio station that wants me to do color commentary in their broadcasts of the Fort Myers Red Sox."

"What's so tempting about that?" Waters asked, slightly puzzled.

"It's a part of the game that's new to me. I've never been a commentator. Sounds like fun."

"I can beat their best offer."

"The money isn't important," Hawk retorted quickly. "It's the game. I'm sixty years old now and haven't been able to land a coaching job in over three years. Spent most of that time scouting for the Braves, but after a while I got too tired."

"Tired of sleeping in cheap motels," Hawk amplified. "Tired of offering a bunch of young kids a dream I know that few of them will ever attain; one that I only touched briefly for five games myself. A dream that led me into coaching in the hopes I might make it back to the Yard as a manager. Almost made it too."

"I'm aware of your career, Hawk," Waters told him softly. "That's why I'm here. We need the best."

"The best?" Hawk laughed harshly. "Mister, I know a snow-job when I hear one. There are dozens, hundreds, of me around. If I was anything special, there'd have been more than one card with my face on it. Hell! If I'd been someone, my autograph would raise the value of that card of yours. As it is, most collectors would prefer not to see my chicken tracks."

"I'd be honored if you would autograph this one for me," Waters replied, removing the card from its protective pouch and handing it to Hawk with a pen. Hawk gave him a crooked smile and signed the card, "Hawk Wilton, #61."

"Okay," Hawk said at last. "I'm ready. Make your pitch."

"This may be hard for you to believe."

"Try me," Hawk challenged him.

"All right. My real name is Enki." He waited for a response.

"Enki Waters," Hawk replied dryly. "Okay. It's an unusual name, but it's got a nice ring to it. So?"

"No, Hawk," Enki corrected him. "Not Enki Waters, just Enki. I'm also called Ea and that's a proper name for me as well, although I prefer Enki." He waited again and still Hawk showed no sign of recognition. Enki took a deep breath and plunged on in, "I'm a god."

"You're God?" Hawk asked, stunned beyond thought at the admission.

"No. Not God with a capital 'G', a god, small 'g.' The ancient peoples of Mesopotamia worshipped me as the god of wisdom and water. That's why I used the name I did."

Hawk stared at Enki and then slowly drawled, "Right," thinking he had finally figured out where this guy had come from. Funny, he thought silently, you can't tell by looking. The business suit threw me, I guess.

"I know what you're thinking," Enki told him.

"Oh? You read minds too?" Hawk asked, wondering what the fastest and safest way to rid himself of this lunatic might be. Better not make any sudden moves.

"Well, no. Not the way you mean it, but your face and your body language are rather easy to read. You think I've been eating too many strange berries. Right?" He smiled disarmingly.

"Something like that," Hawk muttered. He tried to remember where he had put his baseball bat in case the man became violent. He was fairly certain it was in the umbrella stand. Too far away.

Enki, however, did not become violent. In fact, he began to laugh. It was the sort of infectious laughter that forced Hawk to relax and join in.

"I really am a god," Enki said seriously at last. "Look," he almost whispered as he made what looked like a mystical gesture. The air between Hawk and Enki began to shimmer. Then, as Hawk watched, a perfect sphere of water formed in mid-air, floating motionlessly for Hawk to study. It was about the size of a baseball and as Hawk looked at it more closely he could swear he could make out stitches. "Look within the ball," Enki instructed him.

"Within?" Hawk asked even as he did so. At first he could only see the distorted view of Enki's face, but then the colors within swirled and reformed into a clear vision of a baseball game. Not just any game, but the one where Hawk hit his only major league homer. On the mound, pitching for the California Angels, stood number 30 - Nolan Ryan - who had just retired the last five batters in a row. The young pitcher was hot as Hawk Wilton, the thirty-six year-old rookie, stepped nervously to the plate in the third inning.

Hawk watched as his younger image took a few practice swings and then waited for the pitch. It had been his habit never to swing at the first ball, to try and get a feel for the pitcher. When the first ball came blazing across the plate Hawk had thought his eyes must be going bad; he had been unable to follow its path.

Hawk could see himself mouth out the word, "Damn!" and then step out of the batter's box a moment to collect himself. He then stepped back in and right back out again. That was an old ploy. Keep the pitcher waiting, maybe it would give you an advantage. When he stepped back in again he took several practice swings, came set and then took a few more. Ryan waited him out. True, he was younger, but he had several years worth of major league experience even then. Finally, Hawk stopped stalling and the next ball came in flying low and outside.

The umpire held up one finger on each hand - one ball, one strike. By now Hawk thought he was used to Ryan's speed and when he swung on an off-speed pitch, managed to foul it into the stands along the third base line.

The next two pitches were balls, but none of them had the speed of that first fireball, so Hawk figured

that the pitcher was building up for one more really super fastball. He was right. The final pitch came blazing across the center of the plate, about waist-high just in time to meet Hawk's Louisville Slugger head-on, resulting in a line-drive into the "Reservation's" cheap seats beyond right field.

Hawk smiled as his image ran the bases, but as he crossed home plate, the image wavered and dissolved and the ball of water rapidly boiled, evaporating back into the surrounding air. Enki was still smiling gently as Hawk locked gazes with him.

"Nice trick," Hawk admitted grudgingly. "How'd you do it? Hypnotism?"

"What?" Enki asked. He looked blankly into the air for a moment and then replied. "No, Hawk. I didn't mesmerize you. I suppose I could have though. Damn, but you're hard to convince!" Enki became thoughtful for a moment and then said decisively, "Perhaps talking with Enlil might convince you."

"And who is this Enlil?"

"King of my pantheon," Enki replied, standing up.

"Oh? And you think he can say something to make me believe in ancient gods?"

"Maybe," Enki shrugged, "but I'm hoping the journey to meet Him alone will do the job much faster." He spread his arms and the two of them were instantly enveloped in a large bubble. Hawk got out of his chair, and before he could protest the two of them, still within the bubble, shot up into the air and took a right-angle turn from reality.

TWO

Visit To A Really Small Planet

The upward flight of the bubble leveled off when it was several hundred feet over the ground, but it continued to accelerate toward the east.

"This can't be real," Hawk whispered, staring wide-eyed as Fort Myers, swaying palms and all, receded behind them. Soon they had crossed the Florida peninsula and were streaking eastward across the Atlantic at an ever-increasing speed. Before Florida's east coast had completely passed beneath the horizon, the bubble flew into a cloud and the view became uniformly white. "I sure hope you've got radar for this thing," Hawk told Enki. The God of Water merely chuckled.

A minute later the view cleared abruptly and Enki and Hawk found themselves underwater near an odd-looking, low-growing shrub. The bubble had vanished instantly.

"Huh?" Hawk asked, looking around. They were standing at the bottom of the sea. It should have been dark. They should have been crushed beneath the incredible submarine pressure, but, after a few

seconds of flailing his arms through the surrounding brine all Hawk could think to ask was, "Why aren't we wet?"

"A special enchantment," Enki explained. "You'll also notice that you're breathing air. Just don't walk beyond the path. It's marked with a border of pink coral."

"Why not?" Hawk asked. "What would happen?"

"We're several hundred feet beneath sea level. The vast pressure would crush you instantly."

Hawk, shuddered and looked around. "It seems rather well-lighted down here," he opined, finally.

"Another enchantment. This plant here is very important and needs the light."

"What's so important about it?" Hawk asked, studying the unassuming small shrub. It looked like an odd combination of laurel, bayberry, and seaweed. It had hard gray fruit the size of golf balls and its leaves were a brownish green except for one branch that displayed the thin, pinnate leaves of an ash. In spite of the fact that the whole thing was under water, the trunk of the shrub was growing out of a pool of slightly different looking water. Hawk touched it and his hand came away wet. A quick taste prove it to be fresh water rather than salt.

"It's the ancestor of what you know as the Tree of Life," Enki explained.

"You mean like in the Garden of Eden? I thought that was an apple tree."

"Or a pomegranate or a lime or perhaps like nothing you've ever seen. Your Bible doesn't actually say. But the two plants are both aspects of the great world tree that in Norse mythology was called Yggdrasil. It's all rather complicated, but it was through that relationship that we were able to get here. And now just one more short hop," Enki said and the bubble formed around them again and shot upward and quickly burst out into a clear blue sky. The bubble arced out of the sea and traveled westward to a small island.

Hawk took this second trip far easier than he had the first and took the time to calmly look around. "The air's so clear," he remarked, adding with a chuckle, "I could swear I can see the edge of the world."

"That is the edge of the world," Enki informed him calmly.

"Say what?"

"That is the edge of the world," he repeated. "We're not on the mortal plane now. This is the home of the Mesopotamian pantheon, or what's left of us. This particular world really is flat and since it is so much smaller than Earth is, you can see the edge any time you get high enough into the sky. Welcome to Dilmun. It is our version of Heaven and the Garden of Eden rolled into one. There's a fairly extensive underworld too, but I don't think you would find it very pleasant."

"Is that a pyramid?" Hawk pointed at a large structure in the center of the island. It was roughly pyramidal in shape, but instead of smooth, sloping sides, the structure appeared to have been built by a giant child piling up seven successively smaller blocks on top of each other. "I've never seen one in blue, gold, and green before."

"It's called a ziggurat, Hawk," Enki explained, "and unlike the pyramids of Egypt it was built as the home

of Enlil rather than as a tomb for a dead king. The Tower of Babel was a ziggurat too, although this one is a bit larger. My home is a slightly smaller one under water not far from the Food-of-Life bush."

"That's a lot of stone there," Hawk commented, as he started to get a notion of the scale of the building.

"Actually," Enki corrected him, "it's mud brick, mostly."

"Mud? What keeps it from washing away in the rain? More magic? And why is it so colorful? Painted?"

"No magic, aside from occasional maintenance spells. It is faced with fired bricks set in bitumen, natural tar. It's quite water resistant. The blue color is a glaze fired on to the facing bricks. It is meant to look like lapis lazuli. The gold edging really is gold, but the stairways between each terrace are fired brick with a golden yellow glaze as are the terraces themselves. The green parts, of course are plants. The hanging gardens of Babylon were similar, a bit more artful to my eye. Enlil's garden is just bigger. As we get closer you'll see several smaller ziggurats."

"One for each god in residence?" Hawk asked.

"One for each of the major gods. The temples are more for vanity than any real need. Those of us who had large temples on the mortal plane have them here. There are smaller dwellings for the less important gods, although none of us really need them, except maybe to store personal possessions and maybe for a bit of privacy every now and then."

"How about sleep?"

"Sleep is a luxury for a god, not a necessity," Enki replied smoothly as the bubble deposited them gently next to a pool of water about half filled with lotus leaves and blossoms.

"I thought we were going to Enlil's place," Hawk remarked.

"We are, but He might not be in, so I thought we would walk there by way of some of His favorite haunts."

"No phones, huh?"

"Phones?" Enki furrowed his brow in puzzlement a moment and then replied, "Oh yes. Telephones. A remarkable invention. I could have called ahead. We do have the means to communicate at a distance, but it is considered impolite to use them except in an emergency."

They followed a path away from the lotus pool. So far they had not encountered anyone, but in each clearing and carved alabaster benches had been set and along many of the paths as well. Hawk paused to look at one of them, but was unable to fully appreciate the exotic art motifs on them.

The gardens they passed through were well-manicured. Each flower seemed perfectly placed. Every shrub stood at exactly the right height. Even the water in the various pools and fountains was crystal clear. Perfect. Maybe a little too perfect. Hawk mentioned that as they walked through the third perfectly arranged glen on their route.

"You may be right," Enki admitted. "Until recently we were trapped here in Dilmun for over two thousand years."

"Trapped? How does a god get trapped?"

"Quite easily, as it happens. It's a long involved story, but the attributes of a divine being are given him by his worshippers. Over the course of time these attributes change gradually until you have an entirely new god. Sometimes we can merge with these new analogs of ourselves, sometimes we can't, and sometimes we just choose not to.

"The divine realm of an actively worshipped pantheon is infinite, but when there are no longer any living mortals who remember, the divine realm becomes closed off and finite. When that happens we become trapped. Those of our pantheon who got trapped here either had no direct analog to merge with or put off the choice until it was too late."

"Then how did you ever get out?"

"The barrier between our realm and the greater universe has gotten much thinner in the past century since archaeologists started excavating the ruins of ancient Mesopotamia and translating the cuneiform tablets they found there. After that it was only a matter of time before we found a way out." Hawk took the explanation in stride, but before they left the glen he stopped to lift a small statue of some sort of dog-like creature and moved it several feet to the side. "What was that for?" Enki asked as they continued on.

"A small improvement," Hawk replied. "I put the thing in a spot that was obviously wrong. Now the place is a little less than perfect, but far more comfortable to live in." Enki chuckled and ushered him onward.

A few minutes later they found themselves in yet another garden. There were several people dressed in long cotton gowns sitting on the grass near a rectangular pool. Hawk realized that they must be gods, but they just looked like oddly dressed people to him.

"Enki!" a smiling goddess called in a pleasant contralto. She stood gracefully and approached. Hawk was unable to keep himself from staring at her. She stood a mere five feet two but seemed to be statuesque. She kept her medium-length dark brown hair tied back with a soft saffron yellow cord and she was simply clad in a long, leaf green robe with a bold yellow flower in her hair. Strangely, Hawk thought, the fair-sized nose on her face accented rather than marred the beauty of her round face. While she appeared to be in her mid twenties, her sparkling rich brown eyes spoke of untold ages in much the same way Enki's did. "Who is your new friend?"

She smiled at Hawk, and all at once he felt far younger than the rookie Hawk Wilton whose image was on that baseball card he had autographed. He blushed, although he would have thought himself incapable at his age, and felt as though his tongue had suddenly grown three times its size and become dead weight in his mouth. Mesmerized by the sight of her, he was unable to speak and seemingly aware of her affect on the old ballplayer, she blushed as well.

"Nin-ti, my little lady of mercy!" Enki replied, sweeping her up in a warm embrace. A moment later he realized that she was only returning the gesture mechanically for her eyes were locked with Hawk's. "Ah," the god of wisdom sighed, "I'm always being thrown over for a younger man. "Hawk, may I present Nin-ti, sometimes called 'She Who Makes Live' and certainly a lifesaver to me. Nin-ti, this is Hawk Wilton, who will be managing our team this season."

"I will?" Hawk asked, forcing his eyes from Nin-ti.

"Perhaps I spoke too soon," Enki allowed. "You were taking all this rather well, so I thought you had

already made up your mind." He smiled disarmingly and was about to say something else when Nin-ti interrupted him.

"Ea, stop it!"

"Stop what?" he replied innocently.

"You cast a glamour on this man and were about to reinforce it. Stop it and remove your spell this instant!"

"I was merely cushioning his mind against the culture shock, dear one," Enki explained. "The affect of the divine realm on a mortal mind..."

"There have been other mortals here and not all that long ago." she retorted, her eyes flashing angrily. "They managed to cope without any spells on them."

"And they were a bit shaken-up, weren't they?"

"You would be too if you fell off the World-tree. HawkWilton is a grown man. Now stop treating him as a baby."

Enki sighed. "Very well." Hawk felt as though a curtain had lifted. He looked around and saw the gods, Enki, Nin-ti, and those still seated on the other side of the garden, without the comforting buffer of Enki's spell. It was uncomfortably like waking up in a strange bed. He blinked, but the scene didn't change and then shook his head, but found it only made him dizzy. Then he turned a baleful eye toward the god of wet wisdom.

"What the bloody hell do you think you're doing?" he exploded. Enki took an involuntary step backward and stared at the mortal who dared berate him. "Using some cheap carny trick to make me think you were for real. Hypnosis, just like I thought. Shoulda known better. Shit!"

"Hawk, look around you," Enki suggested. "You're not under a spell now."

"Get bent!" Hawk replied. "Sure, I'm not, but I was while you drove me here. No doubt I'll find we're in a public park."

"No, Hawk," Nin-ti disagreed. "This really is Dilmun."

"Whatever that is when it's up and dressed," Hawk retorted, but the sting went out of his voice as he looked at the pretty goddess. While under Enki's spell he found himself strongly attracted to her, but now he was absolutely smitten. "But," he continued, "I'll give you the benefit of the doubt until I wake up and find it's all a dream."

"Do you really believe this is only a dream?" Nin-ti asked taking his hands in her own.

I hope not!, he almost replied. Instead he whispered, "Maybe. We'll see."

"Yes. We will," she replied with a smile. Then she turned on Enki. "And you will leave Hawk's mind alone, old man!" she told him threateningly.

Enki, looking hurt, shifted his gaze back and forth between the two of them. "I'm not all that much older

than you," he replied softly. Then his smile resumed and he continued, "Very well, I'll leave him in your gentle care, my dear. Now would you happen to know where Enlil is?"

"In the council clearing," Nin-ti informed him, "with Nergal and Ninhursag, among others. They're waiting for you, in fact," she added.

"Well then, Hawk. We shouldn't keep the King of the Gods waiting..."

"You have often enough," Nin-ti reminded him tartly.

"It was appropriate at the time," Enki replied loftily. Nin-ti's expression was skepticism personified. "Well, I thought it was appropriate anyway," he concluded lamely. "Hawk? Shall we proceed?"

"What?" Hawk asked, his own skepticism reasserting itself. "Go see the King of the Gods? Yeah, right."

"Hawk," Nin-ti reminded him, "be nice. You promised the benefit of doubt."

"Sorry," Hawk muttered, suddenly embarrassed. They started walking down yet another garden path when something suddenly occurred to Hawk. "Uh, how am I supposed to address the King?"

"We thought that out before ever approaching you," Enki replied. "Since we're expecting you to order a bunch of gods around, asking for subservience would make for a bad start. So, since Enlil is not allowed to play, just treat Him like you would any other team owner. That's the closest equivalent to the relationship you and He will have."

"Maybe I'd better treat Him just a little better than that," Hawk decided. "I'm told my behavior with owners is what kept me back all those years. My worst mistake was in telling Steinbrenner off a day and a half after being hired as the Yankees' manager. It was in the off-season, so I never actually managed a major league team."

Enki laughed. "Just be yourself, Hawk. We've all agreed that you have carte blanche for the duration."

Hawk wanted to point out that he hadn't agreed to manage any team yet, but before he could the path opened up into a wide courtyard-like area. Alabaster benches had been placed in a wide circle and about half of them were filled with various gods and goddesses. Enlil, the obvious leader of the group, was a white-haired elder god dressed in a multilayered robe, the cloth of which seemed to have been cut to resemble the over-lapping scales of a fish. To His right sat a tall god with curly blond hair and beard who seemed to be the same age as Enki.

On Enlil's other side sat a stately goddess who, even to Hawk's untutored eye, did not seem to fit in with the rest of the group. She wore a diaphanous pale green chitan trimmed with rich brown embroidery that wound like intertwining branches along all the edges of the cloth. Her eyes were a startling green and Her wavy, dark green hair was loosely bound in back by a seashell-shaped comb.

Enlil looked up as Hawk, with Nin-ti on his arm, approached at Enki's side. He smiled and stood, saying, "This must be Mister Wilton. So you have agreed to manage our team?" He asked expectantly.

"Not quite yet, 'GreatMountain,'" Enki replied respectfully. "Mister Wilton is rather a skeptic and has not quite brought himself to believe in a collection of gods who haven't enjoyed an active cult in thousands of years. I brought him here in the hopes of convincing him of the validity of our offer."

Enlil nodded. "From what I have learned of our endeavor, that sounds exactly like the sort of man we need. Tell me, Mister Wilton, what would it take to convince you?"

"Sir," Hawk replied, "let's put my beliefs aside for the moment. Until I find out otherwise, I'll assume that you all are who you claim to be."

"An open mind," Enlil murmured.

"A skeptical one, sir," Hawk corrected him, "but words alone aren't likely to change my mind and visions can be faked, so let's move on. I have some rather critical questions."

Enlil nodded and replied "Then ask away, Mister Wilton."

"First, why do gods feel the need to play baseball? It's a great game and I love it, but don't you have something better to do?"

Enlil smiled faintly. "One of the problems of godhood is in knowing that you're a superior being," He explained. "Once you know that, you also want to know just who you are superior to. I don't intend offense, but it is obvious that we are superior to all mortals."

"Physically in any case," Enki chimed in.

"Uh, yes," Enlil agreed uncomfortably, "physically superior."

"Moral superiority is rather debatable, given our history," Enki laughed, earning himself a scowl from Enlil.

"Anyway," Enlil continued, "Once you start thinking along those lines you start comparing yourself to everyone you meet and if comparative ranking isn't immediately obvious you compete to see who is better. Among mortals this competition can often be quite subtle, but gods are anything but subtle." There were murmurs of general agreement all around. "Our competitions have been known to become quite violent and our activity is always reflected on the mortal plane. Our struggles have destroyed the Earth more than once."

"Destroyed?" Hawk asked. "I don't recall any destruction of the world."

"As a denizen of the mortal plane," Enlil replied, "you wouldn't. The creative force we used to build the world in the first place allows us to repair the world mostly."

"Mostly?"

"There are always some scars that cannot be completely healed," the King of some Gods commented casually. "After the last great struggle a few years ago, it was decided that we ought to try to rechannel our aggressive tendencies into a less destructive activity. We turned our eyes to the mortal plane and began a study of modern team sports.

"The first to catch our attention was football," Enlil continued.

"Soccer," Enki clarified for Hawk. "although we did later study American, Canadian, and Australian football as well."

"Yes," Enlil agreed, "but they were all too violent. Even exhibition games sent tremors through the space-time continuum. The Greco-Roman gods suggested a set of Olympic-style games; the team with the most medals wins, but the idea did not gain much favor with non-Western pantheons.

"After considering Cricket; we thought it showed a lot of potential..."

"But even the King of the Dead..." Enki interrupted again.

"That's me," the blond-haired god seated next to Enlil added with a faint grin.

"...didn't have the patience to finish a match," Enki concluded.

"After we had discussed all the other team sports," Enlil summed the explanation up, "however, the Judeo-Christian pantheons made their joint suggestion."

"Pantheon?" Hawk questioned. "There is only one Christian God."

"But many angels and demons," Enlil replied. "Not a pantheon, if you take the word literally, but I fail to see any practical difference between the gods seated here today and the major and minor angels or demons of Heaven or Hell."

"We don't pray to them," Hawk replied.

"You don't?" Enlil countered, amused. "Do you mean to say that no one asks for a miracle from a saint or for one to intercede with your God? Are there no Satanists who hold black masses and try to raise demons? Say rather that they are not the primary objects of worship, for that is the largest difference.

"Regardless, we're straying from the subject. It seems that Heaven and Hell have had competing baseball teams for decades. The game has a fair number of adherents among the other modern gods and because the sport has already been proven non-destructive to the world, it was decided to give it a try this season.

"Now, we would very much like to compete, but we don't really know very much about how to run a successful team, which is where you come in."

"Why me?" Hawk asked. "There are plenty of men who have a better record in the game than me."

"Our researches say otherwise," Enlil replied.

"Research? What sort of research? You read a lot of baseball cards?"

"Hawk," the green goddess spoke for the first time, "you are aware of various forms of divination; tarot cards, palm reading, tea leaves, oracles?" Hawk nodded, biting back a sarcastic retort. "Not very effective in the hands of a mortal," she admitted, "but they can work when performed by a god."

"You found me by reading tea leaves?" Hawk asked with a nasty laugh.

The goddess' eyes flashed and somewhere in the distance an ominous clap of thunder could be heard. "You have a most unbecoming habit of hearing only what you want and then repeating it to belittle Us. An insecurity, perhaps?" she asked pointedly. "Trust Me, it is beyond your ability to belittle Us."

"Ninmah, be nice," Enki told her with an edge to his voice.

"Yes, Mother Ninhursag," Nergal added in his soft voice, "You agreed with the rest of us that Mr. Wilton was not to be treated as an inferior."

"And I will stand by that agreement," she replied, "when he signs the contract. Until then, I expect a modicum of courtesy."

"Maybe you should explain it," Nin-ti whispered to Enki.

He nodded. "Hawk, we used the powers of our oracular gods and goddesses to seek out the best manager for our proposed baseball team, and as a result we found you."

"But," Hawk returned, "As much as I like hearing it, I have to honestly admit that there are dozens of managers who have proven themselves better."

"Better, Hawk?" Nin-ti asked gently. "Better for whom?" Hawk found no words to reply to that and she continued, "You see, prophesies are very subjective. Maybe you are correct and there are men who would be generally considered better managers than you, but would they be the best for us?"

"That's right," Enki agreed. "In your parlance we're greener than the greenest rookie. We need someone who is used to teaching."

"Maybe you need a Little League coach," Hawk retorted. "Nobody makes it to the pros without knowing the game. You guys don't even know the basics."

"If that was what we needed, someone else would have been found. The person we sought was the one available person who would afford us the best chance at having a winning season. Not the best for Hell's Hall of Flames, not the Wolf Cubs, not even for one of the mortal major league teams, for us and us alone. Hawk, you are our first best choice as team manager. If there were others better, they were not available, having already signed on to manage another team of gods."

"You didn't even check?"

"What good would it have done?" Enlil asked. "If they aren't available, there's no need to look for them. So, Mister Wilton, will you accept the position as manager of our team?"

"Will you, Hawk?" Nin-ti whispered in his ear.

He turned to look at the exotic beauty who had remained on his arm throughout the conversation and all his objections and questions slipped away to a meaningless void. Suddenly it all seemed so clear and easy. From an infinite distance, he heard his own voice saying, "Sure. Why not?"

THREE

A Deal With The Devil

"I'm rather surprised you didn't at least ask how much we were paying you," Enki commented as he dropped Hawk back off on the patio of his Fort Myers home.

"I always was a lousy negotiator," Hawk said ruefully. "I shoulda brought my lawyer with me."

"Not to worry," Enki said with a smile, "We'll pay you whatever you want. In fact we've already set up a numbered account for you in Switzerland."

Hawk nodded. Then the glaring anachronism struck him upside his head. "How do you know about Swiss bank accounts?"

"Doesn't everybody?" Enki laughed. "Most of us prefer the old ways, but ever since we found our way out of Dilmun, I've been reacquainting myself with the mortal plane. No wonder your people don't believe in us any more. You seem to be able to do with your technology almost anything we do with magic. Most impressive.

"Well," Enki continued, "I must be going. Spring training begins in two weeks and there's so much to do before then."

"Where is spring training?" Hawk asked.

"We're building a stadium in Dilmun. I'll bring you the plans tomorrow or the next day for your comments. Get some rest," he advised. "We're all going to be quite busy." With that the ancient god vanished.

"Nice trick," Hawk muttered to himself. He looked around and saw only his one mug of now-cold coffee. Shaking his head he spoke to himself, "Must have been bad shrimp last night." He picked up his mug and tossed the cold beverage out at the foot of a small lemon tree. When he went to refill it, however, he noticed that the thermos was gone. Suddenly, he heard the noise of something glass hitting the floor coming from his kitchen.

Hawk bolted through his back door and took the few fast steps needed to bring him to the front where he found his bat in the umbrella stand. Noises continued to come from the kitchen as he reached out and grabbed at the bat. He ran to the kitchen, arms over his head, swung through the doorway to see Nin-ti trying to pick up the shards of his coffee pot.

She looked up and gasped in surprise. Then her eyes opened wide and she started laughing uncontrollably.

"Nin-ti!" Hawk exclaimed. "What are you doing here?" She tried to speak, but could only point at him and redouble in laughter. "What's so funny?" he demanded. Then he followed the line described by her out-stretched finger and realized that he was threatening her with a green and white umbrella.

His first reaction was embarrassment, but as he relaxed his stance and lowered the menacing anti-rain device, he too began to laugh. They kept that up for a few minutes until Nin-ti finally caught her breath and gasped, "Oh, Hawk! If you could have only seen yourself."

"I guess it was pretty ridiculous at that," Hawk admitted, tossing the umbrella aside and bending down to help with the broken coffee pot, "but what are you doing here?"

"Trying to repair your coffee pot," she replied innocently.

"Right," he remarked dryly. "Don't bother. It's only glass. I'll buy a new one later."

"That's hardly necessary," she replied. "Glass, you say? Like faience?"

"I've never heard of faience, but it's basically sand," Hawk replied uncertainly. "I seem to recall hearing that there was more than just sand, but I wouldn't know what else goes into it."

"That's alright," she replied lightly. "If I'm not mistaken the ancestor of the material of this pot was invented in Mesopotamia ." She began to weave complex patterns with her hands as she spoke. "The first faience, a primitive form of your glass, was blue-green in color; a deliberate attempt to mimic the highly valued lapis lazuli by using a large percentage of copper ore in the mix. The results looked more like turquoise, which I guess was not surprising." The shards of glass began to move, seemingly of their own volition, and as she continued to speak, they reformed the shape of the broken pot. "Artisans in both Egypt and Mesopotamia experimented with other pigments and, in time, there were many different colors." The glass of the pot began to glow a light, transparent red along the cracks. "Interestingly, glass, therefore, was the first synthetic material ever made by Man to shape to his own uses," she concluded as the glowing red lines faded.

"There you go," she said, handing the mended coffee pot to Hawk. "And Enki thinks I only know how to mend broken ribs." She smiled.

"Ribs?"

"Yes. You see I was created by Mother Ninhursag in order to heal Enki's rib, which was only fair since she broke it in the first place."

"Why did she do that?" Hawk asked.

"She was upset when he ate some plants of hers," Nin-ti explained. "They were very special plants and the only ones of their kind. She wanted to propagate them, but instead Enki came along and made a meal out of them. She cursed him with one ailment for each plant, but later, when she relented and lifted the curse, she also had to create eight goddesses to heal him. My job was to heal his rib."

"Why didn't she just make more plants?"

"No act of pure creation can ever be duplicated," she replied. "Once lost, those plants were lost forever. Now how about showing me how to make coffee. Enki's told me about it, but I've never actually tasted it."

As it turned out, Nin-ti abhorred the taste of black coffee and was unable to understand how Hawk could tolerate it, but with cream and enough sugar to put a water buffalo in a diabetic coma, she found it very much to her taste.

Nin-ti quickly eased into her self-appointed role as Hawk's personal assistant. Hawk was, at first, unsettled by her constant presence and her assumption that they were to be lovers, but she wasn't really very hard to get used to and he soon stopped questioning his own good fortune and started wondering

where he found the energy to keep up with her.

The next two weeks passed quickly although Hawk had trouble remembering in which order various events happened. Soon after he agreed to manage the team, dozens of gods began to appear on his doorstep, his patio, his living room, and on one unnerving occasion in his bedroom.

"HawkWilton ?" a strong masculine voice asked from just above.

"Gah!" Hawk grunted, trying disentangle himself from Nin-ti. She persisted on holding him for a moment and after a quick kiss released him to deal with his visitor while she unashamedly and unobtrusively got dressed. "Who the hell are you?" Hawk asked. The deity floating just to the side of the bed lowered himself until he stood gracefully on Hawk's carpeted floor. He stood six and one half feet tall and with wavy light blond hair and clear blue eyes, Hawk took him for one of the Norse gods in modern clothing. He couldn't have been more wrong.

"Good guess!" Nin-ti giggled.

"Permit Me to introduce Myself, sir," he declared in fair, bell-like tones that filled the room without being loud. "I have many aspects, but in this guise I am known as Lucifer. You may have heard of Me," he added casually. "May I have a seat?"

Hawk stared in horror at the Fallen Angel. "Get thee behind me, Satan!" he barely managed to squeak out.

"Oh please!" Lucifer said disgustedly. "This is Satan." He instantly transformed Himself into a large, dark red satyr-like creature with curly blue-black hair and shiny black hooves. His eyes shone a deep blood-red light and in all, he was enshrouded by a dirty black aura. After a moment, he transformed himself back into his Lucifer aspect and said, "Satisfied? Look, maybe I've caught you at a bad time. Sorry about that. Really. Tell you what, why don't you get dressed and we'll talk over breakfast?" He suggested. Then he vanished as silently as he had appeared.

"Odd," Hawk mused, "I would have expected him to vanish in a puff of smoke and a wiff of brimstone."

"He could have, I suppose," Nin-ti commented lightly, "but it wouldn't have been very polite."

"The Devil is not known for his courtesy," Hawk retorted, "and what the hell does he want with me?"

"Why don't you get dressed and we'll find out," Nin-ti suggested, kissing him on the cheek. "I'll go make coffee."

"You don't seem very concerned," Hawk pointed out.

"I'm not. If he wanted to harm either of us, He would have done so already. No, the King of Hell has something else in mind."

"Sure, he wants my immortal soul!"

"A common misconception, Hawk. He doesn't work that way. The Judeo-Christian Hell, as I understand it, is the ultimate correctional institute, but nobody suffers more than they deserve and souls who end up there get there by virtue of their own sins in life. The old 'deal with the Devil' routine is an interesting literary device, but Lucifer has enough to do without scaring up still more business for himself.

Now get dressed, dear."

Nin-ti smiled as she breezed out the door. Hawk got dressed quickly and by the time he rejoined her, she and Lucifer were chatting casually like old friends.

"Ah, Mister Wilton," Lucifer rose to greet Hawk and offered His hand. Hawk balked at accepting it, but an angry glare from Nin-ti changed his mind and he clasped the extended hand. The Devil's hand had a warm, comfortable feel to it and gripped Hawk's with just the right amount of pressure. "I hope you don't mind, but I made myself at home in your kitchen." He indicated the kitchen table where heaps of pancakes and a large cheese and mushroom omelet were the main features of a breakfast with all the fixings.

"No. Be my guest," Hawk muttered without thinking.

"Thank you," Lucifer replied politely. They sat down and began eating between bits of small talk about the weather, the recent citrus crop, and the folly of governmental attempts to control the economy. Throughout it all, however, Hawk was very uncomfortable with his visitor's presence and he held himself stiffly and thought carefully before saying anything at all. They were down to their second cups of coffee before Lucifer came to the point. "Hawk," he began, "I want to play on your ball team."

"What?" Hawk asked, suddenly forgetting his unease. "I was under the impression that you already had a team of your own."

"Yes," Lucifer replied easily. "Hell's Hall of Flames - a fine team and I'm very proud of them, but you see, there's a long standing agreement that no chief deity may actively play. A game in which, for example, both I and Yahweh were involved would be as upsetting to the universe as an all-out war between Heaven and Hell."

"I don't really see how I can help you," Hawk replied after some thought. "Not only are you the King of Hell, or is that Prince of Hell?"

"It doesn't matter," the Devil replied with a shrug.

"Okay, but you are the chief deity in your own realm, right?"

"Correct."

"So not only are you barred from play, but it would be a conflict of interests if I allowed you to play on my team."

"Not to mention the fact that you don't trust me as far as you can spit a cat," Lucifer commented with a hint of the deep Sahara in his voice. "Perhaps I haven't made myself clear. I didn't mean that I would play as Lucifer or as any of my incarnations that have become associated with Hell. I propose to use one of my earliest aspects and play as Marduk, son of Ea."

"So you'll look a bit different," Hawk shrugged. "You'll still be the Devil playing illegally and I won't be a party to such deception."

"It won't be a deception if I diverge my Marduk aspect; separate it from all my other incarnations."

"Can you do that?" Hawk demanded. Lucifer nodded. Hawk turned to Nin-ti for confirmation.

"I've never heard of anyone doing it," she admitted, "but if he can then there will be two beings. This one, the Lucifer/Satan ruler of Hell, and Marduk, the hero-god of Akkad and later cultures."

"And there would be no taint of the Devil in this Marduk?" Hawk asked.

"None whatsoever. I might have diverged before approaching you," Lucifer admitted, "but it requires a great amount of power and effort and I did not wish to go to that extreme until I was sure of acceptance, especially since there is no guarantee I'll be able to merge with my Marduk aspect again afterward. You see, I'm risking something very dear to me in order to play."

"How will we know that this Marduk will really be completely separate from You?" Hawk asked suspiciously.

"Enlil and Enki will both know," Nin-ti asserted.

"Are you certain?" Hawk asked intensely. She nodded, although he thought he could detect uncertainty in her manner. "One more question, though; why do You want to play in the first place?"

"I suppose that deep down it may be because I'm not allowed to," the Devil admitted haltingly, "but if it were as simple as that, I would probably be satisfied just playing pick-up games with the boys during the off-season. I didn't think much of the game when I first became aware of it, but since the turn of the century it's grown on me.

"There's magic in the game, Hawk," Lucifer continued. "The sort of magic that transforms a mortal to god-like status in an instant and can turn him back again just a fast."

"All sports are like that," Hawk pointed out.

"Mm, yes," Lucifer continued smoothly, "but there is a style and grace to baseball befitting a god. Neither brute force nor crafty strategies alone are enough to win a game. They must be constantly blended with patience, experience, and luck to meet an ever-changing situation. It's a magical showcase of both individual prowess and team expertise where mystic passes are replaced by the wind-up and the pitch and countered by the swing of the bat; where a small leather-covered ball is used in the place of fireballs, lightning bolts, and other magical spells and the journey that ball takes determines the success or failure of two teams pitting their abilities against one another. And it does all that with an unhurried grace that I personally find satisfies my aesthetic taste. So, do I get to play?"

Hawk considered that. "Very well," He said at last, "I'll accept you for spring training camp, if both Enlil and Enki can vouch for you."

"Thank you, Hawk," Lucifer replied, apparently sincere, "I will see you day after tomorrow in camp." Then he stood up, nodded once at Hawk and Nin-ti before vanishing as silently as before.

"Just when I think I've gotten used to this, something even stranger happens," Hawk remarked to Nin-ti. "When do I get to see the stadium?"

"Day after tomorrow," Nin-ti replied, taking on a business-like tone. "It should be finished by then. Meanwhile, today we have to meet with Enlil and His counsel to decide on a team name. That should take most of the afternoon and evening. Then tomorrow with Uttu, the goddess of clothing, to design the team uniforms."

"Uniforms are all well and good," Hawk replied, "but it's far more important to get the right equipment."

"Enki told me he's taking care of that," Nin-ti replied.

"I'd feel better if he had consulted with me first."

FOUR

Spring Training

Hawk had insisted on walking alone through the long corridor of the newly built stadium at Tiamat Field. It was the first look he had at the home of the "Lamassu"; the team name Enlil and his advisors had decided on. Hawk had been somewhat taken aback when he learned that lamassu were sort of hyperthyroid lizard-dogs that the ancients saw as a protective spirits, but decided that it was no stranger as a team name than the "Phillies", "Marlins", "Rainbows", or "Mud Hens."

The corridor made a final turn and suddenly the open doorway to the home team dugout was before him. Reflected daylight lit the hall the rest of the way, replacing whatever eldritch means the gods had chosen in lieu of fluorescent lights. For the umpteenth time Hawk felt his heart pounding in anticipation. He had another season under the sun, another season of that special magic that only baseball could provide, another season of clear skies and rain-outs, another season filled with the crack of the ball against the bat and the smell of well-tanned leather, another season of strike-outs and grand slams, and another season on the diamond with its rich red clay and bright green grass studded with white sparkles...

"What the hell?" Hawk muttered softly as he noticed the unfamiliar vegetation.

"Hi, skipper!" a large-muscled player greeted Hawk with a big smile. Hawk looked to his left to see who had spoken. The speaker stood there in the approved practice uniform, a dark blue shirt trimmed with gold and red over standard home-team-white pants that finished in blue and gold stockings. On his head, concealing most of his glossy black hair, he wore a navy blue cap on which had been embroidered a cuneiform hen-scratch in red thread and then outlined in gold. Hawk had been told it was the ancient Sumerian written form of Dilmun. The number - Arabic numerals, thank the gods! - on the uniform was 9 and Hawk identified the player as Gilgamesh, whom he had met briefly the day before. Gil, as Hawk decided to call him, was the ancient king of Uruk who qualified to try out for the team on the basis that his blood was two-thirds divine, although even he couldn't explain how that had happened.

Hawk nodded mutely at the former king and then pointed out at the field and asked, "What's that?"

"Uh," Gil replied, "the emera... I mean the diamond!" He finished triumphantly, feeling he had passed his first test."

"I know what a diamond is," Hawk snapped at him. "What is that stuff in the grass? It's going to make it

bloody hard to see the ball."

"A problem, Hawk?" Enki asked as he entered the dugout behind the manager.

"That surface," Hawk said simply, pointing out at the diamond.

"Yes," Enki replied. "Pretty, isn't it. Standard for the Celestial League. It's much tougher than earthly grasses. It has to be. We're much harder on a field than..."

"You mean we're stuck with that stuff?" Hawk cut him off disgustedly.

"Of course. Why? What's wrong with it?"

"I hate AstroTurf," Hawk retorted softly.

"You'll get used to it," Enki laughed patting him on the back.

"That's what they told me about the lights at Wrigley," Hawk replied sourly. He looked again at the field and suddenly realized that something else had been bothering him.

The stadium structure was not particularly large, but looked as though it could comfortably seat five or six thousand. Selling tickets was obviously not a consideration. Who could afford the travel expenses? The grandstands had been built like an inside-out ziggurat, mud-brick faced with baked bricks and bitumen. There was still a faint odor of tar in the air. All around the base of the grandstand, designs had been built into the ten-foot wall using various colored ceramic cones stuck into the mud brick, and every so often the figure of a lamassu (the team mascot and namesake) in lapis lazuli blue could be seen sticking out slightly in bas-relief. However the outfield seemed nearly infinite. Hawk asked about that.

"It is a bit larger than the fields you are used to," Enki admitted wryly.

"A bit!" Hawk exclaimed. "It goes on for miles!"

"Actually the fence is only a quarter-mile away," Enki admitted. "Another standard Celestial League regulation. We are all fully capable of hitting a ball much further than that."

"We'll see," Hawk muttered darkly. "What about Lucifer? Is he on the up and up?"

"Lucifer?" Enki echoed. "Who knows what his game is, but if you mean Marduk, then the answer is yes. Marduk is a noble hero, true of heart and utterly trustable. Actually, from what I understand, in spite of the common mortal perception, Lucifer is an entirely honest entity in his own realm as well, although extremely clever and nearly impossible to outwit. Much like me," Enki added with a grin, "but since he is my son, I suppose it's in the genes as you might say."

"So we can trust Marduk?"

"Definitely," Enki told him firmly. "That aspect has been completely diverged from his other selves. Just to be on the safe side, Enlil insisted that the Commissioner both certify the divergence and approve Marduk's qualification as a player."

"The Commissioner?" Hawk asked. He could hear the capital "C" that Enki had pronounced and attempted to duplicate it.

"Your God - Yahweh - of course."

"If He's the Commissioner, then who's in charge of Heaven's team?"

"The Angels? Jesus is the owner of record for the purposes of this season." Hawk looked confused so Enki continued, "It's not a conflict, just another temporary divergence of aspects. I think that's where Marduk got the idea. The only difference is that Yahweh knows He has the ability to diverge and converge His various active aspects at will. Marduk and Lucifer may not be able to rejoin afterwards. It's never been done before."

As Hawk and Enki spoke, the other potential players had filed out of the locker room. They were milling about the field, curiously examining bats, gloves, and various other pieces of equipment and, in general, wandering aimlessly.

"I didn't realize there would be women trying out," Hawk commented, spotting a handful of goddesses on the field.

"Not many are interested," Enki acknowledged. "but those who are, are extremely serious. Why? Is there a problem?"

"It doesn't seem natural. There are very few women who can compete on an equal basis with men in professional sports. Every so often one comes along who looks good in the amateur and minor leagues, but she never makes it into the bigs."

"It's a bit of a 'good old boys' situation," Enki pointed out. "I understand that there were women in professional baseball a few decades ago."

"That's right," Hawk admitted grudgingly. "I remember seeing them play once when I was just a kid. They sort of filled in the gap when so many of the best players were fighting World War II, and their league did last into the mid-fifties, didn't it? As I recall there have been a few female umpires in the last century, too. Well, we'll see."

"Who plays is entirely up to you, but if you choose not to use either Inanna or Ninhursag, please give me fair warning. I'll want to watch," Enki told him dryly and added, "from another continuum if possible."

Hawk studied the gods on the field. They continued to mill about looking somewhat bemused by their surroundings, causing Hawk to realize that while wanting to compete, they really had only the foggiest notion of what they were getting themselves into. The thought depressed him utterly. He was going to have to explain the game to them starting with first principals such as what the bases were for and what they were doing there. Never in his life had he ever had to do that before. Even the most uninterested American knew the basics of the game and could tell you what you were supposed to do with a ball and a bat.

"Let's get started," he sighed, stepping out of the dugout with Enki at his side. "All right, you rookies!" he shouted. "Line up. We're going to start off with some warm-up exercises." He paused and looked around while they formed a loose semi-circle around him. So much for lining up he thought to himself. Aloud he asked, "Where's Marduk? If he's so hot to play he ought to be here by now."

"Sorry, I'm late," a voice called out from behind. Hawk turned to see a six-foot tall god with dark brown hair and eyes hurrying out of the dugout with a long, dark wooden bat slung over his shoulder. He

emanated a feeling of pure power and his muscles rippled visibly with every move he made. Hawk had taken the time to read up on the various gods in this pantheon and this one looked very much like he was as capable of single-handedly handling Creation as the Babylonians claimed. "My uniform wasn't ready yet," he explained.

"Marduk, I presume," Hawk replied flatly.

"You got it, boss!" Marduk replied cheerfully as he joined the line-up. "When's batting practice?"

"Tomorrow," Hawk replied, "or the next day or maybe the day after that. When the team is ready for it."

"You're the boss," he replied and let the bat drop gently to the ground beside him.

"All right," Hawk announced, clapping his hands together, "let's start with some calisthenics. Jumping jacks! One, two. One, two..." he demonstrated and worked out with the team doing his usual morning routine. It left him winded, but he accurately guessed that they were mere warm-ups to the likes of these. He occasionally caught himself thinking how far he could bring them on stamina alone, but stopped when he reminded himself that all the other teams were gods as well.

He spent the rest of the day trying to determine the individual abilities of his team and where on the field each one would fit; who ran the fastest, who was the strongest, who had the greatest stamina, and, most important, who could hurl a small, leather-clad sphere with all his or her might and still have it pass through the strike zone some sixty feet and six inches away. He'd worry about pitching speed later, but told Nin-ti to see about getting a radar gun and a camcorder. For now his stopwatch was the only tool he really needed.

All the gods had great power and incredible stamina, it turned out, and it took several days for Hawk to become acclimated to the scale of it all before he could truly judge their relative merits.

Pitching, on the other hand, was another matter. Of them all, only three were capable of an accurate pitch without the use of magic. Hawk had been promised a copy of the Celestial League's special rule book as soon as it was available, but until then he was told that the "Official Baseball Rules" as established by "The Official Playing Rules Committee" would be close enough. One important difference was already well-known; all players must use their own non-augmented physical abilities. Like steroids, the use of magic was strictly prohibited.

Enki had been right, two of the goddesses did, in spite of appearances, out-perform the gods. Ninhursag, whom he had met on his first visit to Dilmun, had been the green goddess seated next to Enlil, but that was her guise as Mother Nature. Because she was not strictly reserved to any pantheon, she could try out for any team she pleased, but since she was here with the Lamassu, she decided to use her long-abandoned Mesopotamian guise. She stood a mere five foot five, and her long hair was jet black and straight so that her only green features were her eyes, but those were a bright leafy color rather than the dull green more common among green-eyed humans.

The other goddess who showed an initial talent for the game was Innana, who was also known as Ishtar and Astarte and answered readily to all three. She was, by far, the most beautiful of the goddesses Hawk had met and he tended, with typical male chauvinism, to discount any possible ability on her part until she proved herself through sheer aggressiveness. She was not the swiftest nor was she the strongest. She could hit the strike zone every time, but her fast ball was seventy miles per hour at best; not a really bad speed, but a mere shadow compared to speeds others could produce. What she could do, however, was hustle. She had, perhaps, more stamina and determination than anyone else on the team. She also

showed more single-mindedness than her peers. Hawk was certain he could find a spot for her.

Near the end of the day, Hawk let most of the team go to the showers, but he held his three potential pitchers back. They were Enki, who without training or prompting threw the meanest curve Hawk had ever seen; Ninshubur, Innana's Vizier who threw the ball left-handed almost too fast for Hawk to follow; and Isimud, Enki's personal messenger who could place a fast ball to within a quarter of an inch of where he aimed.

"This is the shallowest bullpen I've ever had to deal with," Hawk told them. "You guys all have stamina, but how well are you going to hold up over the course of the season? Hard as I found it to believe, Nin-ti has made it perfectly clear that none of you are omnipotent"

"Not omnipotent, but you'll find any of us can pitch every day of the season," Enki replied confidently.

"How about injuries?" Hawk asked pointedly. "There are healing gods and goddesses at our disposal, but the fact that they exist proves you can be injured. Take Nin-ti for example."

"Well, yes," Enki replied, "but..."

"No buts!" Hawk snapped back at him. "Our healers are excellent, but very specialized, aren't they? Not only that, but each of you have very different pitching talents and I'm going to have to rely on all of them. I just wish I had more pitchers so we could switch between north and southpaws in tight situations."

"I'm ambidextrous," Enki informed him. "Are we allowed to switch pitch?"

"Damned if I know," Hawk admitted. "I don't think there are any rules about it in here. " He indicated his dog-eared copy of the official rules. "It certainly hasn't come up all that often. I believe Greg Harris had an ambidextrous glove, but I don't know if he ever actually pitched lefty in the Bigs. I'll read through the Celestial rules when I finally get a copy. In the meantime, you'll want to get a glove you can wear on either hand."

"I can always pitch without a glove," Enki informed him.

"A good way to break your hand," Hawk retorted. "Do you have any healers who specialize in that sort of injury?"

"I'm tougher than that," the water god replied. "It would take more than a mere leather ball to harm me at any velocity."

"Don't be too sure of that! Besides, the glove is quite a bit larger than your hand and will improve your ability to catch."

"Whatever you say, Hawk," Enki agreed uncertainly.

"Well," Hawk continued with a sigh, "I guess we'll just have to play this by ear as best we can. Tomorrow we'll start out with a general review of the rules of the game and then see if anyone is actually capable of hitting a ball."

"Hawk, you look very tired," Enki observed worriedly. "Maybe you should take a day off."

"What do you expect? I'm an old man," Hawk retorted. "I've just been out in the sun too long today. I'll

get to sleep early tonight and I'll try to take it a bit easier tomorrow. I don't suppose we can hire some assistant managers."

"Sorry, Hawk. One mortal only per team. Maybe you can recruit some of those who don't make the cut as players."

"I don't know," Hawk replied uncertainly, "if they can't play, how the hell can I expect them to coach properly?"

"There's a mortal saying I picked up recently," Enki told him. "Those who can't do, teach."

"It's worth a shot," Hawk replied hopelessly.

FIVE

Batting Practice

"What did you call this contraption, Hawk?" Dumuzi asked pointing at the machine Hawk had installed just in front of the pitcher's mound. The shepherd-god of Uruk and erstwhile husband of Inanna was a gentle being with shoulder-length dark brown hair and haunted silver-gray eyes.

"It's an Atec "Casey" pitching machine," Hawk replied. "It can throw any type of pitch known to man to give you some basic batting practice. Starting tomorrow we'll keep it in a permanent batting cage. It's not quite the same as facing a real pitcher who can fake you out, but it's still a damned good way to get practice so I want you all to use it as often as possible."

On learning the night before that Dumuzi had been killed by his wife's pet demons, Hawk asked Nin-ti how the one-time king could still play on the team.

"That was a long time ago," she had replied.

"So long that he's no longer dead?" Hawk asked.

"Exactly! You see? You're starting to understand us."

"I am?" he retorted. "What are we talking about? Reincarnation? Trance channeling? Pyramid power?"

"Not even pet rocks, dear," she replied, patting his hand gently. "His spirit - his soul if you'd rather - spent the remainder of that cycle in the underworld of Erishkigal and Nergal. At the end of the cycle after the war with the Greco-Roman pantheon..."

"What war was that?" Hawk asked, trying to dredge up his long-neglected junior high school knowledge of ancient history.

"You wouldn't remember it, dear. It happened on the celestial plane, but the Greek gods took on most of the other major pantheons of the ancient world - us, Egypt, Persia, India, a few others - and won. The war was reflected on the mortal plane by the conquests of Alexander the Great."

"Oh. Him I've heard of."

"Thought so. Anyway, when the cycle ended the bodies of those gods who had died regenerated and their spirits were able to return to life. Even Gilgamesh, who in life was only two-thirds divine. It was a shock to all of us. We never suspected that ability in ourselves. Ishtar - Inanna that is - was enraged and wanted to kill Dumuzi all over again. She did too, eventually, and then did it again the next cycle."

"No wonder the poor guy looks so haunted," Hawk muttered. "Probably afraid she's gonna do it again. What did he ever do to upset her so?"

"He wasn't always the gentle soul he is now," Nin-ti replied. "The first time around he was a rather proud and haughty king, strange as that might seem for a shepherd. Inanna, who has always been more than a bit greedy, decided that she wanted to rule the underworld as well as her own portion of the heavens, so she went down to confront her sister Erishkigal. Ishtar died there, but Ninshubur, her vizier and one of the pitchers you selected, went to Enlil to plead for her life. With Enlil's and Enki's help she was brought back to life, but no one who enters the nether realm may return without providing a substitute, at least for the duration of a cycle. But we knew nothing of the cycles then."

"So she returned to Earth, followed by a pack of demons to ensure she found another deity to take her place. When she returned to Uruk, she discovered that Dumuzi had been celebrating during her absence rather than mourning her death so she set the demons on him. After a long chase they finally caught, killed, and dragged him into the depths. He returned to life with a great deal of humility."

"I can imagine." Hawk shuddered. "Am I going to have to worry about her bumping him off in the middle of a game now?"

"I wouldn't think so," Nin-ti opined. "She hasn't tried to harm him physically in millennia. Instead you might see her showing him up in every way she can."

"Terrific. I need a team that works together, not a squabbling bunch of over-powered children. I was hoping to deal with grown-ups for a change."

"We're a reflection of the mortal plane and vice versa, dear."

"I was afraid of that," he replied sourly.

The second day of spring training, Hawk decided, would be devoted entirely to batting practice. The gods claimed to have more stamina than any mortal and he intended to test that stamina to the limit. The pitching machine had just been the first step.

Hawk looked up into the stands and tipped his hat to Enlil, who was seated once more in his favorite box on the third base line along with several pretty female Anunnaki. He nodded, smiling and several of the minor goddesses giggled and waved back. Then Hawk's attention was drawn back to the field.

"I don't understand," Enki admitted as Marduk, Nanna-Sin, Gilgamesh, and Utu each carried a case of baseball bats out to where Enki and Hawk were standing. "Why can't Isimud, Ninshubur, and I do the

pitching for practice?"

"Because there are no designated hitters in the Celestial League and I want you to take as much practice as everyone else. Besides, in spite of your potential, this gizmo still has more pitches than you do. Don't worry, the three of you will get enough pitching all afternoon. Gather round!" he shouted to grab the team's attention. "Everyone grab a bat and we'll get started."

"What size bat?" Nergal asked confusedly. "I note that we have several different sizes here."

"Pick one that seems comfortable to you. Bat length can be anything up to forty-two inches long. We'll be experimenting through the training season until we find the best bat size for each of you." There were only a few forty-two inch bats, but Gilgamesh quickly helped himself to one and smiled tightly as he made a few practice swings with it, satisfied with his first choice. Like it, do you? Hawk thought silently to himself. We'll see. "Gil, you're first. Step up to the plate. Everybody, watch this. I don't want to have to go over this too many times." He took a few minutes to correct the ancient hero's stance at the plate before signaling Nin-ti to start the batting machine. A moment later a small, two cycle motor chugged to life in a cloud of bluish smoke that drifted toward the first base line.

"Couldn't you have gotten something a little less noisy and a bit cleaner?" Ninhursag asked nastily.

"Sure, but last I checked," Hawk retorted, "Dilmun didn't have any three-phase, 220 volt lines, and building an electric plant would be a bit extravagant, don't you think?" He realized belatedly that he was fooling with Mother Nature, but managed to hold her glare with one of his own and eventually she blinked first. "Ready, Gil?" Gilgamesh nodded and Hawk signaled to Nin-ti who flipped a switch on the pitching machine.

A few seconds passed and then a loud bell rang out and a ball was lobbed toward home plate. Gilgamesh went into his swing. There was an explosive crack as the bat made contact sending the ball on a long looping trajectory into right field.

"My bat broke," Gilgamesh complained.

"It happens. Maybe it was flawed," Hawk told him as another ball flew over the plate. He signaled to Nin-ti who switched the machine back to neutral. "Get another and try again."

Gilgamesh shrugged and picked up another long bat. He got back into the batter's box made a few practice swings while waiting for the next pitch. Then another ball came across the plate and he swung. And missed. And missed again.

"Relax, Gilgamesh," Marduk advised him. "You're trying too hard. It's a game. It's supposed to be fun."

"You should try a smaller bat," Inanna commented just a bit suggestively.

"I wouldn't change yet," Hawk disagreed, ignoring the Goddess of Love and War's innuendo. "He seems to be bringing it around fast enough. Try a few more times, Gil."

Gilgamesh readied himself again and this time as the ball flew over the plate, swung hard and sent the ball foul, breaking his bat again. Dumuzi picked up another forty-two inch bat and brought it to him.

"Maybe you're swinging too hard?" he whispered. Gilgamesh shrugged his massive shoulders and tried again. This time he hit a ground ball that barely made it out of the infield.

"A little harder would be nice," Hawk commented dryly.

The next ball would have been a homer over the fence atop the Great Green Monster of Fenway Park, but here only landed in the middle of left field. The next two hits, spaced evenly between strikes, were of similar depth, but when he tried to swing hard enough to put one out of the park, he broke another bat. Two bats later, Hawk pulled him out of the batter's box and sent Marduk in.

Marduk's light swings produced ground balls and line drives that landed with respectable depth, but when he tried to hit a home run, he started breaking bats too.

"Maybe we should be using metal bats," Nergal suggested.

"Can't," Hawk replied, pulling out his copy of Baseball's official rules. "See? Right here it says that bats must be a single solid piece of wood, round and smooth, no more than two and three quarter inches in diameter at the thickest part and no longer than forty-two inches.

"This must be a problem in the Heaven/Hell games, how is it solved?" Hawk asked Marduk. "Assuming you remember, of course."

"Of course I remember," Marduk replied, inspecting yet another bat. He seemed to prefer one that was thirty-six inches long. "I remember everything Satan knew at the time we diverged. Our bats were magically fortified so as to be unbreakable."

"Damn!" Hawk swore. "We can't use magic."

"Why not?"

"Celestial League rules prohibit the use of magic."

"They do?" Marduk asked. "That's news to me, although as Lucifer I stayed out of planning for Celestial League play until after divergence. Given the nature of the players, though, that seems rather silly. Are you certain about that?"

"Not really," Hawk admitted. "Only what Enlil and Enki have told me."

"Ea?" Marduk asked Enki, using his Akkadian name. "Is that true?"

"That's the way I understood the rules as Enlil told them to me," Enki replied, "but I haven't seen them yet either."

"Maybe we should talk to Enlil," Hawk suggested.

"Magic may not be employed," Enlil quoted a few minutes later, "to enhance the ability of a player, nor to achieve greater performance out of any piece of equipment."

"Would making a bat unbreakable constitute the enhancement of its performance," Enki wondered out loud, "if all other physical characteristics remained the same?"

"A very good question," Enlil admitted. "I'll ask the Commissioner." As He stood up the wind began to blow; gently at first and then much harder. As the wind velocity increased, the God of Air gradually

became transparent and then invisible. When he had, at last, entirely disappeared, the wind stopped abruptly.

"You sure you guys don't need a telephone?" Hawk asked. "Well, until He gets back is there a way to fortify your bats?"

"I can handle that," Ninhursag replied.

"Fine. And while you're at it why don't you step up to the plate. Gilgamesh, Marduk, grab some gloves and we'll see how you are at fielding."

SIX

Enter the Squirrel

Scientists frequently talk about the basic forces of the universe. They will go on for hours about magnetic fields, and will wax poetic (To be more accurate, they will wax scientific) about gravity, explaining more than the average person would ever find useful about the reasons why they prefer terms like free-fall when the popular media would say zero-gee and why they differentiate between gravity and tide. Don't even let them get started on weak and strong electro-chemical bonds.

However, they tend to overlook the strongest of all the basic universal forces - routine. Stronger than the tidal forces of a black hole, routine will assert itself in even the most unusual circumstances. So even on a baseball diamond where the grass has tiny white sparkles and the game is played by ancient mythological characters, routine will eventually get a toehold.

With no exhibition games during the spring training period, Hawk split the team up into two squads that scrimmaged every day after batting and fielding practice. Hawk didn't really like scrimmages, preferring a form of practice where he could concentrate on each player's individual strengths and weaknesses, but the one weakness that everyone, aside from Marduk, had was an unfamiliarity with the game itself and playing, he felt, was the best way to drill the rules into their heads.

Enki's boast that his stamina and that of Ninshubur and Isimud far exceeded that of any mortal pitcher proved to be true and after the first few days, the pitching machine was relegated to the batting cage where each of the players were sent for additional practice as needed. It was Isimud who was pitching to Inanna one afternoon during a practice game when an unexpected visitor arrived.

Inanna wasn't having a good day. In fact, while she had proven herself to be the most aggressive player on the team and maybe the best shortstop Hawk had ever seen, her ability with a bat was proving to be less than adequate. If it were not for her fielding, Hawk would have already bumped her from the team in spite of Enki's warnings. In practice her average was proving to be a disappointing .115 and with every successive failure, her mood was growing blacker. It had gotten so bad that Enki started giving her easy pitches. When it became obvious, Hawk made sure that another pitcher was on the mound when she

was at the plate.

Isimud, like the Roman god, Janus, had faces on both front and back of his head. It was an excellent feature for a pitcher, allowing him to keep an eye on any base-runners without turning around. However, both his faces were looking uncharacteristically nervous as Inanna stepped up and he kept shaking off Marduk's signs.

"Time!" Hawk shouted and strode purposefully out to the mound.

"Time out!" the umpire agreed. He was one of the Anunnaki - the lesser gods - who had already been cut from the squad and put to work as practice-game umpires and assistant coaches. Marduk doffed his catcher's mask and ran out to join the mound conference.

"What the hell are you doing?" Hawk demanded without preamble. "Marduk knows this game better than anyone else on the team. Until you know better, just throw the pitches he tells you to, unless you really have a good reason not to."

"Hawk," the two-faced god replied worriedly, "you don't expect me to strike her out do you?"

"I expect you to bloody well try!" Hawk snarled back.

"But Ishtar... well, she's really not in a very good mood. She's threatened to have me eaten by a pack of gallas if I strike her out again."

"What are gallas?" Hawk asked.

"Perhaps she was bluffing," Marduk suggested simultaneously, then turned to Hawk, "Erishkigal's underworld demons. They have an unpleasant reputation."

"Understatement?" Hawk inquired, matching Marduk's dryness.

"You're catching on." Marduk commended him.

"Do you really think she was bluffing?" Isimud asked hopefully.

Marduk turned and looked at Inanna waiting impatiently by home plate. "Probably not. No, but I'll protect you if she tries anything."

"I'll do more than that," Hawk told him and walked the sixty-feet to home plate. "Congratulations," he told Inanna dryly. "You've managed to intimidate the pitcher."

"That's good, right?" Inanna replied smugly.

"One minor problem. You're supposed to do it through your presence at the plate and your ability with the bat, not by threatening to turn him into Purina demon chow!"

"Did Isimud tell you that?" Inanna asked, narrowing her eyes dangerously.

"It's true, isn't it?" It wasn't really a question.

"Well, yes, but..."

"No buts!" Hawk snapped. "This is a team I'm building here, not a pack of spoiled brats. You will either behave yourself or you can join Enlil's cheering section." He pointed toward the pretty, giggling goddesses seated with the king.

"You presumptuous little twit," Inanna snarled. Then her voice became magically amplified and reverberated emphatically, "DO YOU KNOW WITH WHOM YOU ARE DEALING?"

"Yeah," Hawk replied nonchalantly. "I got the low down on you. You're the Goddess of Love and War, a fair combination, I thought, but these days you're pretty much out of a job, and that includes your aspects as Artemis and Venus, although I suppose you could always fill in for Vanna White on her days off. How are you at turning letters over and smiling a lot?"

Inanna's eyes flashed and she seemed to grow almost imperceptively as though gathering her power. "WHY YOU..."

"Go ahead, babe," he told her, successfully hiding the fear stampeding up and down his spine, "take your best shot!"

"Inanna!" a deep, but hollow voice suddenly boomed. All eyes turned to see a transparent gray version of Gilgamesh, but dressed in animal skins, floating a few yards away and one foot off the ground. He scowled darkly at the goddess of Love and War. Inanna blanched, her eyes grew wide, and her mouth opened slightly as though she were about to scream in abject terror. "'GreatMountain' Father Enlil the bright-eyed, will see you. Now!" concluded the ghost implacably.

Trembling, Inanna glanced up at the stands where Enlil was now seated by himself. He smiled grimly and beckoned toward her. She bit her lip nervously and flashed Hawk and Nin-ti a worried smile before walking slowly toward the stands. The other gods continued to stare at the gray figure.

"Enkidu!" Gilgamesh exclaimed joyfully and rushed forward, his arms wide and tears streaming out of his eyes. Enkidu, the ghost tried to meet the gesture, but there was no contact and Gilgamesh passed right through the apparition. Gilgamesh stopped suddenly and joy turned to torment as the ancient hero dropped to his knees sobbing uncontrollably. Enkidu tried to comfort him to no avail. Then, weeping as much as the fallen Gilgamesh, Enkidu looked up at the others, shrugged helplessly and faded from sight.

"Hawk," Marduk remarked softly, "the way you stood up to Inanna. That was the bravest deed I have ever seen, and I have seen a lot of very brave deeds."

"Thank you," Hawk replied equally softly.

"It was also the most foolish," Marduk concluded. "Do you have any notion of just what she is capable of?"

"Maybe," Hawk drawled. "I suppose she could have turned me into a mouse before feeding me to her pet snake."

"Nothing so pleasant," Marduk muttered.

"Whatever," Hawk replied calmly, "but that's hardly the point. The moment I show a bit of weakness with a player, I'm no longer the boss. Believe me, I'm used to dealing with temper tantrums thrown by players who can physically mop the floor up with me. They can threaten and bluster all they like, but the

moment they try to do anything about it, they're off the team. I don't like the idea of losing a player who can field as well as she can, but I'll be damned if I'll let her push me around."

"Be careful what you wish for," Marduk replied.

"Hawk was perfectly safe," Nin-ti asserted with a smirk. "Enlil was not about to let anything happen to his best chance at a winning season and Inanna knew it, or she does by now."

"Now you tell me," Hawk muttered.

"You should have figured it out for yourself, dear," she replied.

A great sob erupted from the still-kneeling Gilgamesh and Hawk asked quietly, "Who was the ghost?"

"Enkidu," Nin-ti whispered the reply. "In the first cycle he was a wild man created by the gods to battle Gilgamesh, but instead they became the closest of friends. Together, they hunted, they fought monsters and demons, and in short, enjoyed life. They were brothers of the spirit.

"When Gilgamesh spurned Inanna's offer of love she talked Anu into giving her the Bull of Heaven with which to have her revenge, but together they slew the Bull. When Enlil learned of the bull's death he declared that one of them must die and since Enkidu was fully mortal, he was chosen. However, nobody has ever forgotten that it was Inanna and her overweening pride that set off the chain of events that led to the death of Enkidu. Gilgamesh may have forgiven her over the millennia, but I doubt Enkidu ever will, and Enlil didn't much like being forced to kill him. I assume he and Nergal agreed to let Enkidu's shade out of the underworld on a limited basis to keep Inanna in line. Now hush. Here she comes. Be nice when she apologizes."

Inanna looked positively defeated as she approached, unable to meet the direct gaze of anyone for long. Nin-ti discreetly returned to the dugout before the love goddess arrived and even Marduk contrived to find business elsewhere - helping the weeping Gilgamesh back to the bench - although as catcher he had a right to be within earshot.

"Mister Wilton," Inanna began humbly, "I behaved badly. I'm sorry. If you will allow me to continue to play, I promise that it will never happen again." She looked at him hopefully.

"All right," Hawk nodded. "We'll say no more about this. Play ball."

"Play ball!" the acting umpire shouted, and Marduk ran back from the dugout.

Hawk flashed the pitcher a thumbs-up sign on his way back to the third base coach's box. The two-faced god nodded and went into his set position. Then came the wind-up and the pitch. Inanna swung and missed as a slider glided in Marduk's mitt.

"Strike!" the umpire called.

Inanna stepped out of the box a moment and collected herself. She had a determined look on her face as she stepped back into the box. Isimud fired his fastball in toward the plate, but it came in low.

"Ball!"

Isimud tried his fireball again but it came in high and crashed against the fence behind home plate for

another ball.

Marduk called for time and brought the ball out to Isimud. "Relax," he told him. "Her fangs have been pulled, at least for the time being. Try something off-speed this time." Isimud nodded and when Marduk and Inanna were ready tossed the next one in squarely over the plate.

Inanna was ready for another fastball and swung early with such ferocity that she spun herself completely around and fell, ending up sitting in the dirt with a look on her face that was part astonishment and part indignation.

"Rather pathetic, isn't it?" a high-pitched voice commented from Hawk's waist level.

Looking down, Hawk saw the largest squirrel he had ever seen in his life. It didn't surprise him. After two weeks in Dilmun, it took more than a talking rodent to surprise him. "Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

"Hm? Oh Ratatosk's the name. Who were you expecting? Alvin and the Chipmunks? You're Hawk Wilton, right? Who's the babe at the plate? Number 3."

"Inanna."

"Go on! Pull the other one. That's Inanna? Ishtar? Aphrodite? That uniform doesn't do a thing for her." His high, squeaky voice carried across the field and Inanna looked up and glared at him. The squirrel merely raised one paw and gave her a Bronx cheer. She fumed, but held her temper when she saw Hawk rounding on the hyperthyroid rodent for her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Hawk asked harshly.

"I'm here to interview you and your team. Why? Did you think I wanted to play? Hey, these things," he held up his paws, "might be able to grip a bat, but I'd never be able to swing the thing. No upper body strength. No, I'm a journalist, a sports writer."

"God! I thought I was at least safe from the sports writers here. Well, Mister Rat..." Hawk stumbled over the name.

"Ratatosk," Ratatosk finished for him.

"Whatever. You can wait in the stands and I'll talk to you after practice. Capeesh?"

"You got it, Hawk, baby!" the squirrel replied and scampered off the field.

Hawk watched Inanna clumsily foul-tip the next two pitches and then fan a dirt ball. She was walking dejectedly away from the plate when he shouted, "Time!" and went to meet her. "We've got to work on your batting," he told her as gently as possible. She nodded sadly. "Take another turn at the plate."

"But the game," she protested.

"It's only a practice," he replied. "This once we can give you six strikes, maybe nine." He guided her back to the batter's box and studied her more closely than he had before. There was something wrong with her stance, like she was doing something extremely unnatural. Hawk had noticed it before in passing, but had just chalked it up to the game. What could possibly be natural about ancient gods playing

baseball? Then, after her second strike out he got an idea. "Give me the ball," he told Marduk, who tossed it to him. He made a show of studying it while surreptitiously keeping an eye on Inanna. Just as her attention started to wane, he said, "Look at this," and tossed the ball lightly to her. Inanna reached up and caught the ball easily in her left hand.

"What's wrong?" she asked concernedly.

"Nothing," Hawk replied. "Toss it back." She did, also with her left hand. "Inanna, I think you're a south-paw."

"I prefer to use my left hand," she admitted, "if that's what you mean."

"Yeah," he said slowly. "That's what I mean. Why don't you try batting lefty."

"The other side of the plate?" she asked, a hint of wonder in her voice. "Is that legal?"

"That's why we have a box on each side of the plate," Hawk replied. "I wondered why nobody was using the left side."

"Most gods are either right-handed or ambidextrous," Marduk informed him, "mostly ambidextrous. Since you demonstrated batting as a righty, I guess everyone just followed suit."

"This doesn't seem right," Inanna complained.

"Reverse your grip," Hawk suggested. "Put your right hand below your left. That feels better now, doesn't it?" She nodded, keeping her eye on the pitcher. "Okay, try again." While she wasn't looking he signaled to Marduk to call for a fast ball. He nodded and as the pitch came blazing in across the plate, Inanna swung, sending a powerful line-drive over the left field fence.

"I did it!" she shouted happily, jumping up and down a bit.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Hawk asked her acidly.

"What?"

"Run the bases!" he replied loudly. She smiled and did her best three hundred and sixty-foot jog. "I'm surprised she was able to hit anything at all before this," he commented to Marduk.

"She's a very persistent player," he replied dryly. "I just hope she doesn't try to kiss all the basemen in a real game every time she hits a dinger. There's got to be a rule against it somewhere."

"There is," Hawk replied, "although I doubt this is what they had in mind when the rule against players of opposite teams fraternizing while in uniform was written."

The rest of the day went smoothly enough as other players started experimenting with switch-hitting. To Hawk's surprise it turned out that while Inanna was best batting left, she still preferred to throw with her right hand. "It's what I'm used to," she told him on her way to the showers at the end of the day.

"Why not," Hawk shrugged. "Plenty of players bat and throw with opposite hands." He was ready for a good long session in the whirlpool when he noticed Ratatosk still waiting for him. "Come on," he told the squirrel, "We'll have to talk while I soak."

"Hm, if you don't mind, I'd like to interview the ladies first," Ratatosk replied lecherously.

"Sure," Hawk retorted easily, "but you take your own chances when you peep at Inanna and Ninhursag."

"Suits me! Uh, did you say Ninhursag? As in Ninmah, Nintu, Aruru..."

"Demeter, Ceres, Mother Nature, and a few thousand other names," Hawk finished for him.

"Oh," the squirrel replied weakly. He swallowed hard and then, "So, Hawk, old buddy, tell me how you rate your chances this season."

"Who are you, anyway?" Hawk asked as they entered the clubhouse.

"Told you. My name's Ratatosk. I'm a sportswriter."

"Oh yeah? Who do you write for?"

"My own paper, actually. The Yggdrasil Limb." the squirrel replied. "I'm putting together a series on the Celestial League this season."

Nin-ti was waiting for Hawk in his office when they arrived. "Hello, Ratatosk," she greeted the squirrel neutrally, "A little far from home, aren't you?"

"You know this guy?" Hawk asked.

"We've met," she replied. "He normally lives on the Norse aspect of the great World Tree."

"Putting nuts away for the winter?" Hawk asked dryly.

"Get real!" Ratatosk replied. "I have a very important job there."

"Yes," Nin-ti agreed quickly and told Hawk, "he carries strife up and down the trunk of Yggdrasil."

"It's a living," the squirrel said defensively. "At least I'm a natural critter, not like some idiot tree-dwelling deer. Good thing we only have four of them."

"You carry strife," Hawk commented. "A heavy load?"

"I do what a can."

"Yeah, well I suppose that stands you in good stead to write a newspaper."

"I see a lot from the limbs of the Tree, but I'm trying to get around and actually talk to the managers and players. There's only so much you can learn by just watching."

"Sorry, but I don't have a media guide for you," Hawk told him. "I don't think anyone expected one would be needed."

"No problem. I know who the players are."

"So tell me why I should allow a self-professed trouble-maker free access to my team?"

"Hey!" Ratatosk complained. "I'm really one of the good guys. You have more to worry about from your own team."

"What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? Well, for starters, you got Satan catching for you. How Yahweh ever approved that one I'll never know."

"Not Satan," Nin-ti corrected Ratatosk. "Marduk. Yahweh and Enlil supervised and certified the divergence of aspects."

"You're kidding!" Ratatosk replied, amazed. He let a low whistle escape through his lips. He produced a small note pad, seemingly from thin air and started writing furiously. "He must have really wanted to play. That's going to make a great story all by itself. You have two others who are desperate to play, and those are the two ladies who seem to have made the cut."

"Inanna and Ninhursag?" Hawk asked.

"You got it. This is the only team that would consider them in any of their aspects. Mother Nature is a powerful entity, but she's not directly associated with any pantheon in her most modern aspect. Both she and Venus wanted to play with the Wolf Cubs..."

"Who?"

"The Greco-Roman team," Ratatosk explained. "Anyway, the Cubs had plenty of better players than Demeter and Venus, so they came here. I suppose Inanna might have tried out in her Artemis aspect, but she does have a temper so she gathered up her personae and returned to grass roots. I'm surprised she isn't playing as Astarte, but then I notice that most members of the team are using their Sumerian names."

"Team image," Nin-ti commented. The squirrel nodded and made a few more notes.

"So Hawk," Ratatosk said at last, "You still haven't answered my question. How do you see the chances this year for the Lamassu?"

Hawk paused for a moment and then fell back on the old cliché. "Well, I think we have a lot of talent here and I see no reason why we can't go all the way."

The squirrel rolled his eyes, but dutifully wrote it down. "I really expected better from you, Hawk," he said disgustedly, "really I did."

SEVEN

Take Me Out To the Ballgame

From the outside as one drives up between rows of matched palms, Baseball City Stadium in, of course, Baseball City, Florida looks like a great dark green castle. Appropriately, it is the spring training home of the Royals. From inside it loses much of its castle-like appearance, but the feel of the stadium remains palatial and it contains all that is best about a minor league park. With a capacity of eight thousand, it is large for a Class A park and the outfield wall is covered with the colorful advertising billboards that are so much a part of baseball that the billboard-free fields of the majors can be considered an exception to the rule.

Hawk and the Lamassu had great seats. Not that there was a truly bad seat in the park, but these were phenomenal. The team filled the front two rows overlooking first base and for all their practice, this was the first real experience with baseball for most of them. Up until now it was drills, scrimmage games, and anything else Hawk could think of, but there was more to the game than learning how to turn a double play. It was time they saw how the pros did it.

They had wanted to wear the team uniforms, of which they had become quite proud, but Hawk didn't want to be overly conspicuous so he settled on letting them wear their team caps. It lent an air of uniformity, but half the people in the park were wearing ball caps of one denomination or another and a group of men and women wearing matching caps would not, he felt, attract any particular attention.

After the time in Dilmun, Hawk was able to appreciate the magic of the diamond anew; it permeated the atmosphere of the stadium. The public address system was excreting tinny renditions of pop tunes while one of the grounds keepers ran a heavy screen behind a small tractor over the base lines of the outer infield, keeping the packed dirt smooth and flat.

"How in the world did Enlil arrange to get these seats?" Hawk asked, taking a sip of beer. "It's a miracle we not only got to sit together but also right on the base line."

"Well," Enki replied lightly, "we're gods. Miracles are our job."

"So you don't know either."

"Haven't a clue," Enki admitted with a laugh.

"Hawk?" Inanna asked from just behind. "What sort of sausages are these?"

"We call them hot dogs," he replied. "They're a baseball tradition."

"Hot?" she asked looking at the red tube of meat product carefully. "Dogs?"

"Good, huh?" Marduk replied, starting in on his second. "Try it with mustard and relish."

"It doesn't taste like dog to me at all," said Martu, the ancient god of the Semitic Bedu people who figured so prominently in several Mesopotamian myths. So far he had shown great potential as a utility man. "More like pig, I think. Maybe some beef mixed in."

"You're right," Hawk laughed. "I'm not sure what part of the animal it is. They say you're not supposed to ask, but you pretty much hit it dead on."

"Then why do you call it hot dog?" Inanna asked.

"Damned if I know," Hawk shrugged. "If it really bothers you, try the Cracker Jacks."

"Yeah," Gilgamesh laughed. He had returned to play and showed no further sign of grief for the fate of Enkidu. "Who knows what died to make them!"

"Who doesn't want their mini baseball cards?" the sun god, Utu, asked, referring to the toy surprise in each box. "I think I'd like to collect the whole set."

"Hawk?" Nergal asked, pointing out at the field, "What are the grounds men doing now?"

"They're marking out the base lines and the batter's boxes with powdered chalk or lime."

"Why don't they mark them out with something more permanent?" the King of the Dead wondered aloud.

"It's traditional. The rules merely call for any white material, but this is the most common. I'm not sure I like the indelible lines on Tiamat Field. The fuzzing of the lines, especially those of the batter's boxes is part of the game. At least I got Enlil to remove the spell that kept home plate dust-free."

"Getting the afternoon off is a nice change," Ninurta, the god of the stormy south wind commented.

"It's not an afternoon off," Hawk corrected him quickly. "Consider it another form of practice. The boys you're about to watch have been playing the game since childhood. Some of them are already earning a king's ransom every year while others are struggling just to get the chance to play on a major league team during the main season. I want you to watch them play today with a special eye toward the positions you've been playing and, of course, how they all work together as one finely tuned unit or not as the case may be. Try to figure out why some plays work for them and why others don't."

"Such as?" Ninhursag asked.

"Any number of reasons; timing, coordination, poise, panic, being in the right or wrong place. Just watch. We can discuss it as it happens."

"What kind of fried creature are these?" Ninshubur asked, looking at his french fries."

"Potatoes," Enki replied, "a New World root crop."

"Oh, that's okay then. I was afraid they might be grubs. You never can tell what a mortal might eat."

"Be thankful we're not in California," Hawk told him. "They serve sushi there."

"What's that?"

"Bits of pickled, raw fish on a rice cake," Ninhursag supplied dryly.

"You're kidding!" Ninshubur showed disgust.

"Don't knock it 'til you've tried it," she retorted, smiling mysteriously.

"I'd rather have a few strips of fried mutton," Dumuzi commented.

"Then try one of the hamburgers," Isimud told him. "They're not far off."

"There aren't any hamburgers left," the shepherd god complained. "Hawk?"

"Still hungry?" Hawk asked. "Where do you guys pack it in? Oh, all right. What do you want?"

"I'll try one of those hamburgers."

"Me too," Gilgamesh added.

"I'd rather have a cheeseburger," Inanna noted.

"I'll just have a Coke," Marduk told him.

"Coke?" Ishkur asked. "What's that?"

"You're drinking one," Nanna-Sin told him.

"Oh. I suppose I could use another."

"I prefer the beer," Utu commented. "It's a bit thin, but at least it isn't lumpy like the stuff back home."

"Hawk, dear," Nin-ti requested, "Could I have one of those iced cream bars?"

"Right!" Hawk sighed. "Gil, Martu, Utu, Nergal, and Enki," he called to the gods closest to him. "Follow me. You can help carry everything back." They stood and started toward the concessions stand.

"More fries!" Inanna called out from behind.

By the time they reached the front of the line at the concessions, Hawk decided to buy twenty of everything and left word that the roaming vendors would probably do quite well if they frequented a certain section along the first base line.

"I don't think I've ever spent so much money at a ball game in my life," he grouched as they returned to their seats.

They got back just in time to watch the local congressman throw out the first pitch and then stood for the Star Spangled Banner.

"What's that song?" Inanna asked curiously.

"The United States' national anthem," Enki informed her.

"Do they always play it before each game?"

"Well, in Montreal and Toronto they play O, Canada, and in other countries they play whatever anthem is appropriate, but the ritual is essentially the same, why?"

"What's our national anthem?" she wondered. "Do we have one?"

"Ha!" Marduk laughed, "We don't even have a nation, really. How can we have a national anthem?"

"Then what are we going to use for this ritual?"

"You're getting caught up in the form of the game, when it's the spirit you should be concentrating on," Hawk told her. "We'll leave opening ceremonies to the 'owners' to work out. Our job is to win games."

"Point taken," Inanna admitted. "Who are these teams playing today, anyway?"

"Kansas City Royals versus the Chicago White Sox or at least everyone who hasn't been sent down to the minors yet. This is a split squad game so only some of the real stars are here today. That's actually why I picked this match-up. These boys are going to be playing their hearts out for the chance to go to the Yard."

"The Yard?" Ninhursag asked, awash to the term.

"The Show," Hawk replied. On seeing she was still confused he continued, "The Bigs. They're all ways of saying the same thing; the major leagues. A ball player's success is measured first in whether or not he can get into the majors, then how well he does once he makes it to the Show."

The starting pitcher for the Royals was a young rookie who had played for the Memphis Chicks for most of the previous year before getting sent to the Royal's AAA club in Omaha in the middle of August. He was looking good as he struck out the Sox's first batter, but then he walked the next two and served up an easy pitch that Frank Thomas belted out of the park. The manager left him in and the next two batters grounded out.

"Looks like he'll be back in Memphis this year," Enki commented.

"Maybe not," Hawk disagreed. "This is only the start of spring training. Everyone needs to loosen up a bit before their true potential is realized. The kid has a blazing fastball and mean curve. If he brings it all into control in the next couple weeks or so he may make it to Kansas City. You'll notice that he hasn't been yanked yet."

"How can you tell?"

"There's nobody warming up in the bullpen. There would be if a new pitcher was planned or even a possibility. Like I said. It's only spring training. Finding out what your team does under pressure is more important than winning, not that they aren't playing to win, of course, but the championship of the Citrus League is not first and foremost on their minds."

The pitcher for Chicago put the first three batters away on a total of seven pitches producing a fly out and two ground outs. In the second inning the Royals' pitcher started out by giving up a single. The next batter hit into a double play and the third belted a blazing line drive that forced the shortstop to jump and touch the ball with his glove. The ball skipped out of his glove and seemed likely to land in the hole between him and the left fielder. However, the left fielder sprinted in and dived across the damp grass to catch the ball even as he slid several feet. Out number three and the fans cheered wildly.

"He caught it?" Nanna-Sin wondered, unsure of what he had just witnessed.

"Apparently," Dumuzi commented. "I didn't know a mortal could fly like that. I'm not sure I can."

"Sure you can, if the grass is wet enough," Enki laughed.

"Even farther if it's an artificial surface," added Marduk.

"Can't get a more artificial surface than Tiamat Field," Ninhursag commented. She had been the only one to agree with Hawk that natural grass should have been planted rather than the magical hybrid the Celestial League mandated.

"I don't recall the grass in Dilmun ever being wet during the day," Dumuzi noted.

"That can change," the water god replied, grinning widely.

"Intentionally keep the grass wet?" Dumuzi asked. "Wouldn't that be immoral, if not contrary to the rules of the game?"

"I don't recall any rule against it. Hawk?"

"Not off hand, but there's probably something. If nothing else it would be unsportsman-like behavior to say the least and would probably violate the no-magic rule if anyone asked the commissioner for a ruling."

"Speaking of which, have you received your copy of the league rules yet?"

"No. Ratatosk and Enlil both have promised to get me copies, but so far neither of them have come through."

"If it's any consolation, I've been asking around and it seems that nobody has a copy yet."

"Really? The season opens in two weeks. How long do we have to wait?" Enki had no answer to that.

The next three innings passed without incident and both pitchers retired without giving up many hits, but this was spring training and five innings was the limit even for the longest-lasting opener. The White Sox started the bottom of the sixth with their veteran knuckleballer. The man, one of the last of a breed in baseball, had been playing longer than almost anyone still active in the majors, and he could still get them in over the plate.

"The problem with a knuckleball," Hawk explained when Isimud asked, "is that its flight is totally erratic and unpredictable. That's because if thrown properly there's no rotation on the ball so there's no stabilizing influence on its flight."

"I would think that would make it very hard to hit," Enki's personal messenger commented.

"True, but there's also very little control on where the ball goes. Most pitchers, you see, work on their control so that they can put the ball exactly where they want it. A knuckleball pitcher throws it in and hope its unpredictability fakes the batter out into either swinging at a bad pitch, or letting a good one get by him. When done well, a knuckleball can be almost impossible to hit, but no one's perfect and a batter can always get lucky."

"I'd like to try throwing a knuckleball," Isimud commented as the Royals' side was retired. "It could come in handy. Can you teach me?"

"I can show you how it's done," Hawk told him dubiously, "and we'll see if you can learn. When a knuckleball pitcher has a bad day, his team might as well just throw up their hands and go fishing for all the good it does them to play."

Hawk's reservations were proven out when the Royals and the Sox traded three runs each in the seventh inning and then the Royals tied up the game in the eighth causing the White Sox manager to send in a sophomore left-hander to close the inning before the Royals pulled ahead.

Frank Thomas came to the plate to start the ninth inning and drove a double into deep right field. A sacrifice fly moved him to third base, but he looked like he might be stranded there when the next man was struck out. The fourth Chicago batter of the inning was quickly loaded up with a full count, but when he fanned on a strike three that was really high and outside, the ball got behind the catcher and he ran for first base. Thomas sprinted for home, crossing the plate even as the catcher fumbled for the ball. With only one target left the catcher threw the ball hard to the first baseman, but in his panic the throw went high forcing the baseman to jump for it, allowing the runner to make first safely.

"What was that all about?" Ishkur asked Hawk. "I thought he was out. His bat totally missed the ball, didn't it?"

"Special exception," Hawk explained. "If the catcher fails to catch a third strike with either the first base unoccupied or with two outs, the batter may attempt to run to first base as though he had hit the ball fair. It happens more often than you might think, so keep it in mind when we get back to Dilmun."

The White Sox sent in their star closer in the bottom of the ninth, but after striking the first batter out on three pitches, he proceeded to walk the next one. The third man to the plate hit a home run out of the park and game was over; Chicago 7, Kansas City 8.

EIGHT

It Looked Extremely Rocky...

Gilgamesh stood at the plate, facing a count of one ball and two strikes. Enki's pitching was dead-on that morning and so far he had struck out half the team at least once while only giving up one walk and two hits. Not bad, Hawk thought, after one hundred twenty pitches. Hawk had Isimud warming up and planned to relieve Enki after this last batter.

Today was the day he had to make the final cuts. The first game of the season would be the next day, although with the low number of players left on the roster Hawk's choices were over who got to be in the starting line-up rather cutting anyone totally from the team.

Hawk's mind was instantly snapped back from his musings by the crack of the bat. It sounded odd and at first he thought that Gilgamesh had somehow managed to break another bat. Since they had learned that magical reinforcement of the bats was allowed so long as it was done along approved lines none of

the bats had broken, although Marduk explained that the enchantment was not proof against damage. Broken bats were a part of the game, but now they would stand up in the hands of the gods about as well as an unenchanted bat would in the hands of a mortal player.

Hawk looked up in time to see the leather cover of the ball flop down on the first base line, while the rest of the ball unwound lazily as it curved foul, towing a ten-foot tail by the time it landed in the seats.

"Remind me never to tell you to knock the cover off the ball," Hawk told the ancient hero sourly. "Damn! That sort of thing only happens in the movies!"

"I noticed that the stitches were getting a bit scuffed," Enki admitted.

"Well, for practice that's okay," Hawk replied, "but in a real game you're to request a new ball from the umpire."

"I can do that?"

"Sure can. A lot of pitchers would prefer a scuffed ball since its flight would be more erratic and harder to hit, but in this league I think it would work to our disadvantage." Hawk recalled the scene in *The Natural* when Roy Hobbs had his first at bat, and the confusion that resulted when the ball self-destructed. With the power he had seen here, Hawk wouldn't be surprised to have that happen regularly. "Besides, you're a control pitcher," He reminded Enki. "All your tricks depend on the exact placement of the ball. The last thing you need is a ball that won't go where you throw it."

"Isimud had fairly good control too," Enki pointed out as Hawk escorted him back to the mound, "but you let him throw knuckleballs."

"Izzy seems to have a talent for the pitch that neither you nor Ninshubur seem to have. With a three-man bullpen we need all the variety we can get," Hawk admitted, "so I'm letting him practice with it some of the time. You, on the other hand, have the best curve I've ever seen, and you seem to be able to do it without sandpaper, grease, or pine tar."

"What would I do with any of those things?" Enki asked, confused.

"I don't want you to know," Hawk replied quickly.

"But..."

"Don't even think about it!" Hawk commanded and walked back to the third base coach's box.

Gilgamesh caught an edge of Enki's next pitch and sent it upward in a high pop-up toward third base. Martu took an easy step forward and to his left and brought his glove off for the catch, but at the last moment, whipped his cap off and caught the ball in it instead and turned smiling toward Hawk.

"Interesting catch, Marty," Hawk told him dryly.

"Thanks, boss!" Martu replied, throwing the ball back to a scowling Enki. "What's wrong with him?" Martu indicated the pitcher.

"Well," Hawk drawled, "that all depends. I may have been working him too hard and he needs a nice relaxing week in his pyramid."

"Ziggurat," Martu corrected him.

"Whatever." Hawk shrugged off the interruption. "However, I think he's a little upset that you just gave Gil there an automatic triple."

"What?" Martu's satisfied smile slid off his face fast enough to leave a puddle at his feet.

"You should have read the rules a little more closely. A runner is allowed to take three bases if a fielder deliberately uses any part of his uniform aside from his glove to catch the ball."

"I could tag him out."

"You weren't listening. He is allowed to take three bases. Without liability of being put out." Martu stared at Hawk with a certain discomfort starting to dawn in his eyes. "Don't do it again," Hawk concluded and walked out to the mound. "Enki, you've had a good day. Go get a bit of batting practice in the cage."

"My arm's still good, Hawk," Enki protested.

"Keep it that way," Hawk retorted. "And don't work in the cage too long, you're opening against the Angels tomorrow. Shubur!" he called Inanna's vizier, making the name sound more like "Schubert." "You're up! Gil, take third base. Marty, shift over to shortstop. Inanna, show me how good your batting's gotten and I'll let you play tomorrow!"

The ancient Love and War goddess nodded and ran to the dugout to select a bat. Since discovering her ability to bat left, Hawk had let the other gods experiment, but only Ninurta, God of the Stormy South Wind, had also proved to be left-handed, although Marduk and Gilgamesh were capable of switch-hitting.

Inanna entered the batter's box with her usual look of fierce determination. She had only thrown one tantrum since she started batting left, but had behaved herself when Hawk explained that in baseball failing seven times out of ten made one a superstar. In practice her average was a remarkable .352. Encouraged by her attitude change, Ninshubur had been making it as difficult for her as he could. At first she had more than a few problems with the pitches Ninshubur served up, but toward the end of her turn she was hitting more than she missed.

Ninhursag was next. Of all the members of team, she was one of the best fielders, second only to Nanna-Sin. Hawk had decided to place her at second base. However, she was the worst batter. In practice her average was .218, which Hawk had to admit was better than some of the professional players he had worked with, but was low compared to the rest of the team. All their averages would drop once they started facing the other teams. Not for the first time, Hawk wished he had scouts watching the other teams, but all Celestial spring training camps were closed and his only news came by way of Ratatosk's sports column, which didn't give him the sort of details he needed.

Mother Nature was having an especially bad day at the plate. She kept missing or else hitting directly to one of the fielders. Marduk had started to razz her unkindly, once setting up with his glove directly behind her head. He backed down only when the sky grew as dark as her expression and a deep growl of menacing thunder rolled across Dilmun.

"It looked extremely rocky for the Dilmun nine that day," a squeaky voice misquoted dryly beside

Hawk.

"Ratty," Hawk told the giant squirrel tiredly, "how many times have I told you to stay off the field during practice?"

"Twice."

"Third time's the charm," Hawk sighed. "Scram!"

"All right," Ratatosk replied, looking up at the sky. "If you're not interested in a copy of the rules, I'm history."

"You have a rule book for me?"

"Maybe," the squirrel replied maddeningly. "Watcha gonna give me for it?"

"How about an ice cream sundae, heavy on the nuts and berries."

"How 'bout a steak dinner with all the fixings?" Ratatosk countered.

"Since when do squirrels eat meat?" Hawk asked, giving the carrier of strife the once-over.

"I'm not your ordinary squirrel, and I've had it up to here," he indicated a spot some inches above his head, "with fruit and nuts. Think of it this way, I live in a giant tree with two birds and four deer, and after a few millennia in a situation like that, you start to wonder how well the fruit and nuts would garnish a meal of venison and chicken soup."

"I've a better deal," Hawk countered. "How about a job?"

"I'm not hiring," the squirrel replied flatly.

"I meant that I would give you a job."

"What sort of job? It's not like I don't have enough to do already."

"I need a scout," Hawk told him bluntly.

Ratatosk stared at Hawk with his large brown eyes for a long moment while Ninhursag grounded out twice more. Finally, "You're serious?" Hawk nodded. "You're on! Damn! I wanted to scout for the Valhalla Vikings, but Odin only laughed at me. Yeah, if you're being square with me, I'll be your scout."

"What about your newspaper?"

"What about it?"

"Won't scouting get in the way of reporting the news as you see it?"

Ratatosk considered that. "Nah," he replied at last. "Vethrfofnir's been telling me he could run a better paper with one eye closed. I say, 'Let him have it!' We'll see how good a job he can do."

"Vethr...what?" Hawk asked.

"One of the guardians of Yggdrasil, the world-tree that supports the universe. He's a great hawk who spends much of his time perched on the branches guarding against enemies. Dainn, Dvalinn, Duneyrr, and Durathror can act as reporters for him as well as for me. When do we start?"

"How about right now," Hawk suggested, "with that rule book? Then we'll meet with the team in the clubhouse for a briefing on the Angels."

"You got it, boss!" Ratatosk replied happily.

"Let's start with their manager," Ratatosk began as soon as the team had showered and changed into clean clothing. At Enlil's advice, they had also adjourned to a nearby poolside garden where the players might feel more relaxed. Hawk wasn't certain he wanted them too relaxed, but couldn't find a good reason to object. "Casey Stengel."

"Casey Stengel is managing the Angels?" Hawk asked confused. "But he's dead."

"What's your point?" the squirrel asked.

"His spirit or soul lives on," explained Enki, "and Heaven can employ him as well any living mortal."

"Oh. So who's in charge of the Hell team? Billy Martin?"

"No," Ratatosk replied. "That would be Leo Durocher."

"That would have been my second choice. So is that how's he's doing his penance?"

"Managing the Hall of Flames has nothing to do with the status of Durocher's soul, Hawk," Ratatosk replied just a bit stiffly, "and before you ask, that information is classified. I would assume he was chosen because of his three National League Pennants with the Dodgers and the Giants. Do you mind if I continue?"

"Sorry," Hawk replied.

"Casey Stengel," the squirrel repeated. "In life he brought the Yankees ten pennants and seven championships. You can pretty much depend on similar results with the Angels."

"Who have they got playing? Ruth? Gehrig? Dean?" Hawk asked and would have continued except that Ratatosk cut him off.

"You should be so lucky! But people don't become angels just because they go to Heaven. Blessed souls, perhaps, but being with the angels doesn't mean you're one of them. No, angels, like demons, are supernatural. They're the monotheistic equivalent of minor gods and the transmogrification from mortal to god happens far less often than even the mythology suggests." He paused to take a deep breath. "So much for the fancy side of my vocabulary. In any case you won't be facing Ty Cobb, Shoeless Joe Jackson, Honus Wagner, or any of the other baseball greats on any of the other teams."

"That's good," Hawk breathed, relieved.

"Actually that might have been to your advantage, since not even the Bambino could put one over a fence four hundred yards away. Let's consider who they do have." Ratatosk paused to sip some of the beer, Enlil had thoughtfully provided.

"Gah!" he gasped after a sip. "You guys ought to import something better. They have Gabriel in right field batting first. As the patron of post office, telephone, and telegraph workers he has the speed to beat out most throws to first. He can hit to any side he likes, but he doesn't have the gross power of some of his team-mates, so look to him for a lot of grounders and bunts and just pray, if he gets on base, that you can put him out or catch him stealing. He excels at hitting low and away, but his weakness, if he has any, is anything inside of the plate. If you can rattle him with a little chin music you've got a good chance of striking him out.

"Next up; Raphael - third base. Bats both sides equally well, but usually favors the right side. Throws right too. Got a thunderbolt for an arm, but no control when he tries to throw the heat, but he can nail one in to any part of the diamond when it's needed. He has a strong swing and tends to hit hard and deep. Keep your fielders way out when he takes the plate. He hit .300 last year in the series against the Hall of Flames, but he's a sucker for an off-speed pitch and your knuckleballer should throw him for a loss. Whatever you do, don't throw him anything more than twice in a row.

"Michael. He's their catcher and maybe their most powerful hitter. If you ask me, he ought to be batting clean-up - he did last year - but only Yahweh knows what Stengel has in mind. Of course, I can only report it the way I saw it in practice. All those angels are ambidextrous, so make a note to keep an eye on which side of the plate they're standing on, especially since you only have northpaw pitchers, but I've never seen Michael bat lefty yet. He doesn't need to. He's got the swing of a dragon-slayer, reminds me of Gilgamesh here, not surprisingly. The main difference, however, is experience and success rate. If Michael has a good year he may well bat over .400."

"Weaknesses?" Enki asked hopefully.

"He doesn't have any," Ratatosk snapped, "just relative strengths. Mix your pitches up a lot and don't be afraid of walking him. He has the reach and will swing for an outside pitch, so you might be able make him fan at a sinker or a breaking ball. He's not as fast as most of the team, though, so he relies on the long hits to give him the time to make base. If you can stop the ball in the infield, you can probably put him out."

"And in the meantime, Gabriel will have scored," Nin-ti commented sourly. Of all the Mesopotamian gods, she had shown the most aptitude for learning the game, even though she didn't have the athletic ability to compete with the other players. Hawk had assigned her to coach at first base.

"Like I said," the squirrel replied, "pray you can put him out.

"Okay," Hawk sighed. "So give us the bad news. Who's batting clean-up?"

"Saint Peter. That old fisherman's got a swing that..."

"Wait a minute!" Hawk stopped him. "He was a mortal. I thought you said a mortal couldn't become an angel."

"Pete's a special case," Ratatosk shrugged, "and I didn't say it never happens, just not very often. Look at Hercules. He was deified after his death."

"What about all those Roman Emperors?"

"In spite of what they believed, godhood is not bestowed by an act of the Senate, although if the Cubs had him, I imagine Vespasian would have one hell of a swing, but we're getting off the subject. Saint Pete's angelification's given him more than enough power to drive a ball out of the park every time he makes anything vaguely like a solid hit. The good news is that while he batted .342 last season, Pete's average has only been .233 in practice this year."

"Anyone can have a bad streak. If he's as good as you say, he'll turn around," said Hawk.

"Evidently Casey thinks the same," Ratatosk agreed, "or there'd be someone else batting clean-up. Well, those four are the stars of the team. The others, an assortment from the various angelic orders, are nothing special as individual players, but as a team Stengel has them honed to a fine edge. Errors are going to be few and far between, but when it comes to baseball even the most perfect team can be beaten."

"Who have they got in their bullpen?" Hawk asked.

"Half a dozen angels, seraphim, and principalities, no one you would know of, they've had very little direct contact with the mortal plane, but their names are common enough; Achim, Boniface, Jolyon, Melyar, Hew, and Fred."

"Fred?"

"What's in a name?" Ratatosk shrugged. "Imagine a name and there's probably an angel or two who has it, even some of those more commonly attributed to demons. A name doesn't determine the nature of the creature."

"As pitching staffs go, they're very good, but then I could say the same about the rest of the league. I haven't the foggiest who they're going to start with tomorrow, but they're likely to use at least three of them just so you won't have a chance to get used to any one of them."

"Stamina isn't an issue?" Hawk asked.

"Not a chance," the squirrel replied. "Any pitcher in this league can do two or three innings every single day indefinitely. The question is whether all three of our pitchers will be able to handle the pace over the course of the season."

"You aren't going to be here for the game?" Hawk asked Ratatosk much later in the house Enlil had provided for his team manager. The house was a big, open, one-story affair with a large courtyard and garden in the center. The gods of Sumer, Akkad, and their successors, he had decided, were very big on gardens. Whether or not this had something to do with the cultures they were the patrons of, Hawk didn't know, but he had to admit that the home he had been given for the season was idyllically comfortable. His only regret was that he never had enough free time to enjoy it.

"No." replied the squirrel. "If I'm going to be your scout, I'll need to keep an eye on the other teams, and I can watch all five games tomorrow from the branches of Yggdrasil. Have you decided on your starting line up?"

"I think so." Hawk handed Ratatosk a yellow legal pad he had been fidgeting with.

The giant squirrel scanned the top page thoughtfully. "It's blank," he said at last.

"Try the second page," Hawk shot back. "I always leave the top one blank."

"For security?" Ratatosk asked. "Good idea."

"No. Just a habit," Hawk admitted. "The top sheet gets rather grimy, so I leave it as a cover." Ratatosk nodded and turned the page over.

STARTERS

- 1) #4 | Ishkur | Left Field
- 2) #13 | Marduk | Catcher
- 3) #8 | Nergal | 1st Base
- 4) #9 | Gilgamesh | 3rd Base
- 5) #3 | Inanna | Shortstop
- 6) #18 | Utu | Center Field
- 7) #0 | Ninhursag | 2nd Base
- 8) #2 | Enki | Pitcher
- 9) #5 | Nanna-Sin | Right Field

"Ishkur?" Ratatosk asked. "He's the storm god, right?" Hawk and Nin-ti nodded as one. "Why him and in left? Why not Ninurta? His batting average has been a bit better."

"Ishkur's a faster runner and we'll need his speed, both in the field and along the base lines," replied Hawk. "I'll have Ninurta and Dumuzi for relief."

Ratatosk considered that. "Okay," he nodded finally. "You're probably right and if not, it's only one game out of one hundred sixty-six. I've been meaning to ask, who chose these uniform numbers?"

"The players themselves," Nin-ti informed him. "Each chose a number he or she felt appropriate or at least was willing to play under. I chose my own number, ninety, as a Sumerian-English pun. I seem to have a lot of puns wrapped around me and my name, so I figured I might as well add one more."

"Do you both agree with the batting order?" Hawk asked.

"You're asking me, Hawk?" Ratatosk replied, unable to hide his surprise. "Hell! You're the one with a lifetime of experience in the game. I've only been studying it for the last year or so."

"That's right, dear," Nin-ti agreed. "We'd never try to second guess you on such a matter."

"Yeah," the squirrel nodded. "Are you so uncertain of your choices?"

"Not really," Hawk replied, "but if I've learned one thing over the years it's that there are no absolutes in baseball. My opinion of our best possible starting line-up is not necessarily yours. There's not a fan in the world who hasn't at least once thought he could manage a team better than whoever was in charge. Not a single one hasn't at one time or another thought he knew the obvious flaw in the manager's strategy or felt he knew exactly how the players should be used or traded. Baseball is a strange and wonderful game. Who knows? Maybe each and every one of them was right at least once. So what I want to know is, what would either of you do differently? Ratty?"

"Well," Ratatosk began after a deep breath, "I already mentioned that I might have put Ninurta in Ishkur's place, but on second thought you're probably right. Ninurta's hits tend to be all over the place when he gets them, but Ishkur is a fairly consistent ground ball hitter. He won't hit many homers, but if he can bring his average up he'll hit a lot of singles and doubles, a good lead-off man.

"You have your strongest four at the top of the order, but I think I'd have put Marduk on clean-up," he continued. "He's pure immortal and I'm not sure I believe that Gilgamesh's one third mortal soul has been completely deified."

"That was a tough decision for me too," Hawk admitted, "but I finally decided on Gilgamesh on a hunch. He's been a part-mortal contending with gods all his life. I think he'll try that much harder."

"You may be right," Ratatosk admitted, "and that may be Stengel's reasoning for putting Saint Pete in that position as well. The rest of the line-up looks as good as you're likely to get. You have better batters in the club than Mother Nature, but nobody's a better fielder except, maybe, Ishtar. Starting with Enki is probably a good idea. He's your best all around pitcher and he hits better than average." Ratatosk stopped and took a long pull at a bottle of imported beer Hawk had provided. When it was apparent Ratatosk had concluded, Hawk turned to Nin-ti.

"I think your decisions here were perfect, dear," she told him loyally. Hawk shot her a skeptical look and she blushed. "Well, I did have one question. Why did you decide to use Utu over Dumuzi? I think Dumuzi is a better man for the outfield."

"Dumuzi needs to bring his batting average up," Hawk replied. "He's only been hitting .196 in practice and we can only sacrifice offense for defense so much. After that... well, it was a judgement call. Don't worry, though. He'll see a lot of action. So will Martu who's a damned good utility man. He can play infield or out with equal ease, but for this first game at least, I'm starting them on the bench. Ratty, how do you judge our chances against the Angels tomorrow?"

"With this line-up?" the squirrel replied and shrugged, stalling for time. Then he decided to plunge on ahead. "It's only the first game," he remarked, implying the obvious, "and no one can lose them all."

NINE

Play Ball!

"That squirrel better be right," Hawk muttered sourly at the middle of the first inning.

"About what, dear?" Nin-ti asked. They were on their way to the coach's boxes.

"About not being able to lose them all." He pointed at the scoreboard. The Angels had gone through their batting order three times, scoring twenty-one runs before Enki finally got his third out.

"It's only one game," Nin-ti told Hawk, kissing him lightly. "Let's just loosen up and have fun with it." She turned and jogged across the field to the first base line.

"If it's ever over," Hawk replied to her retreating back.

The Angels jogged out to their positions and after the customary and maximum eight warm-up pitches between Jolyon and Saint Michael, Ishkur stepped up to the plate. Jolyon fired one pitch across the plate and Ishkur belted a high pop-up to Gabriel in right field.

I told him to lay off the first pitch, Hawk subvocalized angrily to himself as Marduk stepped up.

"Slumming, Nick?" Michael asked him nastily. "Or were you cut from your own team?"

Marduk smiled easily and shot back, "You look good down there, Mike."

Marduk didn't swing at the first pitch nor at the second and promptly found himself behind in the count, 0-2. The next pitch came in wide but on the fourth, Jolyon made the mistake of serving it up right where Marduk wanted it. The bat came around and made solid contact with the ball sending it high and far, promising to sail cleanly over the center field wall.

The angel in center faded way back and then suddenly launched himself into the air with several powerful strokes of his wings. He soared higher and higher just in time to catch the ball before it could leave Tiamat Field.

The visiting fans of the angels cheered loudly, but Hawk's protests were loudest of all. "What the hell was that?" he screamed at the umpire standing nearby while pointing at the now descending angel.

The umpires were a surprise to Hawk. He had expected to see giants and demons and other powerful creatures officiating the games of the Celestial League, but instead he found they were ordinary mortals

or their souls who had been major league umpires in life. According to Marduk and Ratatosk these mortal souls were the only ones that all the gods knew they could trust to be impartial and who could not be cowed by even the angriest diety. Hawk agreed with that last part but had strong reservations concerning impartiality, but he had to admit that at least he probably wouldn't encounter the extreme prejudice that the Hall of Flames was likely to find.

"You have a problem?" the official retorted.

"Problem? You bet I have a problem. The rules specifically prohibit the use of magic 'to enhance a player's abilities!'" he quoted, shouting. Nin-ti started running across the field to find out what the problem was, but it was the pitching coach, Enkimdu who arrived first.

"So?"

"He flew!" Hawk shouted.

"I noticed," the umpire told him dryly.

"Well? Are you trying to say that's not magic?"

"He used his wings," came the smiling reply. "Now, if he had flown without wings..." Hawk's retort was not particularly nice and got him thrown out of the game.

He returned to the clubhouse to discover that while the game was being broadcast in some way, there was no receiver at his disposal. Unwilling to leave the stadium, he showered and then pulled a can of American beer from the magical cooler in his office, wishing he couldn't hear the cheers of the crowd outside. A six-pack later, Nin-ti joined him. Hawk watched silently as she stared at the can until it opened and then chugged the contents.

Then she opened a second can and said, "I didn't know I could be thrown out for arguing balls and strikes." Then she finally sat down and stared at him.

"What's the score?" he asked hopelessly.

"Thirty - zip going into the bottom of the fourth. Enki struck out all three angels in the third."

"That's good news," Hawk replied emotionlessly.

"Well, it's nice to know he can do it, dear." Hawk reached for another beer, but Nin-ti stopped him. "I think you've had enough."

"What else is there to do? I can't watch the game from in here."

"Good point," she conceded. Then she took another sip and gave him her can. "Since I've been sent to the showers, I might as well take one." Hawk was grateful that at least while the water was running, it drowned out the sounds of the game.

When she returned, she carried with her a strangely shaped board game that she said was a sort of an ancestor to backgammon. They were still playing an hour later when Enki entered.

"Did you lose your temper too?" Hawk asked.

"No," he replied. "Enkimdu decided to let Isimud pitch for the last two innings." Hawk asked for the score and Enki replied that they were still being shut-out by forty-one runs. It was another two hours before the game was over.

"How bad?" Hawk asked Ashnan, the batting coach who was normally the goddess of grain, as the team filed dispiritedly back into the clubhouse.

"Fifty-nine to three."

"Three? We scored three runs?"

"Bottom of the ninth," Ashnan replied. "Marduk bunted for a single and then Nergal knocked one through the hole between first and second for another. You would have loved it; Gilgamesh, after fouling off six pitches with a three and two count, knocked one out over the right field wall so hard that it took Gabriel out of the park with it."

"Then it was a catch," Hawk noted.

"No, umpire's ruling," said Enkimdu, who had joined them while they spoke. "If the force of a fly ball is sufficient to carry a flying fielder beyond the outfield wall, then it is deemed a homerun. Casey Stengel didn't like it and promises to contest it, at least I think that's what he said. He isn't easy to understand, you know."

"I've heard him speak," Hawk nodded. "Stengelese is a language all its own."

"Yeah," Enkimdu nodded. "Anyway, Gabriel was carried several hundred yards out of the park and the ump gave us that one."

"Well," Hawk shrugged, "at least it wasn't a shut out. Maybe tomorrow we'll take those guys."

"Those guys are tough!" Enki groaned as he headed toward his locker.

"You're telling me?" Isimud nodded agreement. "Curves, sliders, breaking balls; it doesn't matter. They hit everything I threw at them."

"Why didn't you use your knuckleball?" Hawk asked. "That sort of chaos might have been just what we needed."

"You told me not to use it unless you gave me the signal."

"That was assuming I was in the game," Hawk explained. "Oh well, we were too far down in the hole by then anyway. How would you like to start tomorrow?"

"Whatever you say," Isimud replied, shrugging.

"Hey, Gil!" Hawk called to Gilgamesh. "Hear you hit a dinger. Good show!"

"For all the good it did," the ancient hero replied dejectedly.

"Hey!" Hawk forced himself to sound cheerful. "The fact is, you did it. Nobody can win every game, but

with some better defense and a few more hits like that one, we'll soon be among the contenders. I guess I was wrong," he added.

"What do you mean?"

"Only that I taught you to hit through the ball when I guess I should have told you to hit through the opposing ball player." They grinned at each other before Hawk turned to talk to Marduk. "How many other teams have flying players?"

"I don't know," Marduk replied, "Hell's team has a few, and they get used in the outfield too. They can't fly as fast as angels, but they mass more and aren't likely to be knocked out of the park. Gilgamesh's homer might have gotten by them, but if they caught it, it would have been an out.

"Before this year there were only two Celestial League teams. The Memphis Crocodiles might have one or two, but I don't think any of their winged deities have hands. That would make it rather hard to catch and throw."

"And the league only allows humanoid players, so when Quetzalcoatl plays it won't be as a dragon," Hawk concluded. "I'll have to ask Ratty when he gets back. Coaches, clean up then meet me at my place. The rest of you take the night off and be back tomorrow morning for batting practice."

Hawk broke out the Wild Turkey for his coaches' meeting an hour later. The gods of Dilmun had a penchant for sitting in a circle on stone benches, but Hawk decided early that he would have none of that. One of the rooms in his Dilmun home had been furnished with modern office furniture including a conference table with padded chairs. The room was a Twentieth Century anachronism in the ancient splendor of Dilmun. Hawk placed a silver tray full of small ceramic cups surrounding the bottle of deep amber liquid on the table and sat down.

He poured himself a shot and drank it, then refilled the cup before telling the assembled, "Help yourselves." Nin-ti took a cautious sip of the bourbon and decided immediately that she didn't like it, but continued to nurse the jigger's worth for the duration of the meeting. Enkimdu, the pitching coach, tried to duplicate Hawk's drinking style and almost gagged on the fiery liquid. Thereafter he drank more carefully, but without showing any real appreciation for the beverage. Only the batting coach, Ashnan the grain goddess, truly liked the bourbon and she proceeded to drink it like water until Hawk warned her to slow down.

They sat in uncomfortable silence for several minutes before Hawk finally told them, "Talk to me."

"Interesting drink," Enkimdu muttered. "I assume it's medicinal."

"There are those that think so."

"What's it used for?" Ashnan asked interestedly.

"Getting drunk," Hawk replied flatly. "Quickly and efficiently, but that's not what we're here to talk

about. I've decided to let Isimud start tomorrow."

"Why Isimud?" Nin-ti asked. "Ninshubur hasn't had a chance to play yet."

"I want to see how the angels react to his knuckleball. Now I wasn't able to watch the game today but I gather that the only hits we got aside from Gil's home run were grounders and bunts."

"That's correct and most of our players fancy themselves as power hitters," Ashnan commented.

"That's my fault," Hawk admitted. "In a normal league they would all be homerun kings. I should have realized that in this league their abilities would be the norm."

"I noticed that the Angels seem to have a weakness for ground balls," Nin-ti observed.

"And their outfielders all play really deep," Ashnan added. "Maybe if we try to keep the ball down and stop trying to hit long, we can score a few runs tomorrow."

"Good thinking," Hawk agreed. "Then all we have to work on is our defense."

TEN

The Trouble With Angels

"Play ball!"

Gabriel sauntered nonchalantly to the plate, his face bedecked with an expression of serene smugness. He took a few practice cuts and then took his position for Isimud's first pitch. He was supremely confident he could handle anything that came his way. After all, he'd hit two homers off this pitcher the day before.

The fascinating thing about a knuckleball is that without any rotation there is no way to predict exactly where it is going to go. It is all up to chaos physics; the harder you throw it, the wilder the flight. A knuckleball pitcher, of course, knows little of chaos physics. He just knows "that sucker's gonna go all over the place."

Isimud set, wound up and let fly. The ball wobbled in flight, zigging slightly to the right and then curving left. Gabriel let it continue uncontested and at the last instant it wobbled leftward again to catch a corner of the plate.

"Strike!" the umpire called.

"The Devil you say," the archangel muttered softly, but kept the comment to himself, only slightly irked by Marduk's deep chuckle.

After a few more practice swings, he brought the bat up and watched Isimud wind-up and pitch. Once

more the ball wobbled chaotically, this time appearing as though it was going to go inside the plate. Gabriel jumped back needlessly as the ball jerked once more at the last moment and flew over the plate.

"Strike!"

"Magic!" Gabriel called accusingly. "He's using magic!"

"Not according to the detectors," the umpire retorted pointing at a series of silvery-gray patches set at even intervals about the field. They would instantly turn bright red if so much as a lick of illegal magic was used on the diamond.

"Then check the ball. Anything that flies like that must be scuffed or greased!"

Marduk handed the ball to the umpire who glanced at it and said, "Looks fine to me, but if it will make you happy we'll use another ball." He reached into his pouch and brought out a new ball, stepped forward and tossed it to Isimud. "Play ball," he added, stepping back behind the catcher.

The next pitch came in nearly straight, ducking low only after Gabriel began a mighty swing.

"Strike! You're out." Gabriel muttered something the umpire couldn't quite catch and walked back to the dugout, shaking his head as Raphael took his place.

Raphael took his defeat with better grace, fouling off the first pitch and then watching the next two go low and outside. His attempt at the fourth pitch popped up and back with such speed and loft that it left the stadium the short way without bothering to bounce off the roof. The next pitch wavered inside for the third ball and then Raphael fouled three times in a row before finally fanning on one of Isimud's rare heaters.

Marduk walked the ball back to Isimud, telling him, "You're on today, but watch out on Michael, his reflexes are fast enough to recover it you throw one in straight like that last one."

"How about a slider instead?" Isimud countered, smiling.

"Just follow my signs and keep throwing the knuckleball unless I call for something special," he replied sternly. "And whatever you do, don't get cocky! Hell, you've only put two batters out. The game's young yet."

Saint Michael growled when Marduk smiled charmingly at him and sneered at the pitcher as he went into his set. Isimud grinned briefly before letting his face crease in concentration. Marduk called for a curve.

A curve? thought Isimud. I thought he just told me to pitch the knuckler. He tried to shake Marduk off, but the catcher wasn't having any and called for the curve again. A curve you want. A curve you get! Isimud wound up and put more spin on the ball than any mortal pitcher ever could.

The flight path described a sharply bent parabola that came from inside and cross the plate to make Marduk reach way outside to catch it. Michael, having jumped up to avoid being hit floated gently down, fuming as Marduk chuckled nastily.

"Cute," Michael snarled. "Real cute. What's he do for an encore?"

"I could have him reverse the pitch and send the ball right at your..."

"Try it, Nick!" the archangel challenged him. Marduk continued chuckling and shot several meaningless signals to Isimud.

The pitcher nodded and went into his set position, adjusted his grip under cover of his glove, and then wound up and threw the ball. It wobbled, it wiggled, and it wavered all the way from the mound to the plate, and all the while Saint Michael could only stare at it in disbelief.

"Strike!"

"What!" Michael exclaimed.

"Are you arguing my call?" the umpire asked, staring the archangel eye-to-eye. Saint Michael may have been an experienced dragonslayer, but he had never encountered a major league umpire in his lair before.

The archangel's manner evaporated rapidly. "No, sir," he replied. "I was just amazed by the flight of the ball. Perhaps there is something wrong with it, or the magic detectors."

"What's the matter, Mikey?" Marduk asked, saccharin crystallizing in the air between them. "Your eyes going bad?"

"Stay out of this, Satan!" Michael shot back angrily.

"Oy!" Marduk replied theatrically. "Have you got the wrong devil! Or hadn't you heard?"

"I heard. Just didn't believe it."

"Yahweh certified the operation," Marduk replied. "You having a little crisis of faith?"

"Shut up."

"Both of you shut up and play ball," the umpire grated.

The next pitch came in wide, but Michael made a check swing at it that was deep enough for Marduk to call for a second opinion from the first base umpire, but the ruling was that the bat had not crossed the plate. The next pitch was a ball as well and Marduk called for a fastball, low and outside. The ball practically left a vapor trail as it came sizzling in, but Isimud's control was off and the ball came in higher than he planned, letting Michael catch enough of it to send it hard toward right field. Only the inherent spin and the prevailing breeze in the stadium caused it to curve foul, landing just a few inches to the right of the foul post.

"That ought to keep you quiet for a while," Michael growled with no small amount of satisfaction.

"Don't count on it," Marduk laughed. He flashed another sign at Isimud and then set himself with his glove directly behind Michael's head.

"Yeah, right," Michael muttered.

Another ball, this time, predictably inside and high, knocked what little serenity was left out of the archangel. It also brought the count up full. The final pitch of the inning was another of Isimud's specials that practically zigzagged its way around the plate. However, Saint Michael was so rattled that he swung

at the erratic ball anyway.

"Strike!" the umpire called.

"Foul!" Michael cried heatedly as the Lamassu began to leave the field.

"You missed the ball entirely," came the reply. "Strike three and yer out!"

"No," the archangel corrected himself. "I mean there is something foul about the pitching. They're cheating. No one can make a ball fly like that without magic."

"What's the matter, kid?" the umpire asked. "Ya never seen a knuckleball before?"

Michael stared at the umpire a few moments with his wings flapping uncertainly. "I'll be damned," he whispered at last and walked away muttering to himself.

"All right!" Hawk commended Isimud and the team. "All right! Now let's get ourselves on the scoreboard."

However, against the defensive power of the Angels, scoring proved to be as difficult as it had the day before. Ishkur grounded out with a hard-hit ball to shortstop, but Marduk managed a single and Negal was walked. Then Gilgamesh and Inanna both struck out and the Lamassu side was retired.

Isimud's pitching managed to confound the Angels for another three innings, but in that time had only managed to strand another five runners.

"At least we're getting the hits today," Nin-ti commented.

"Hits alone don't win a game," Hawk replied sourly, "Nothing counts 'til you cross the plate."

In the fifth inning Isimud started throwing more balls than strike and after loading the bases with no outs, Hawk finally had to admit that it was time to send Ninshubur in. It had been Hawk's original intention to use Ninshubur as a closer starting around the seventh or eighth inning, but Isimud's sudden failure changed everything.

"Feeling good today?" Hawk asked Ninshubur as Isimud left the mound to the applause of the crowd.

"Sure thing, boss! Let me at 'em!"

"Okay. Saint Pete there likes to crowd the plate. Toss one or two inside balls at him until he steps back then serve them up low and outside." Hawk gave him the ball and returned to the dugout.

All the advice, however, turned out to be useless when Peter adjusted his stance after the first pitch and knocked the second straight out over the center field wall. Marduk got a fresh ball from the umpire and walked out to the mound where Ninshubur, shocked, stared blankly in the direction the ball had disappeared.

"Think it'll burn up on re-entry?" Marduk asked him dryly. "Cheer up, kid. Even Roger Clemens tends to give up a few hits in the first two or three innings." Ninshubur was so shaken that he didn't even think to correct Marduk on the difference between their relative ages; Ninshubur was a bit older than Enki's son. Of course, Marduk was a major god, while Ninshubur's rank was considerably less within the complex

divine hierarchy.

"There goes my earned run average," Ninshubur sighed.

"Make that their last homer and you'll still have the best ERA on the team. Whatever you do, don't try to equal Enki's feat yesterday."

"Right," Inanna's vizier replied ruefully. "Even Enki won't try that."

"It had the dubious virtue of being a record setter," Marduk shrugged, "and one not likely to be broken, I hope."

"Knock wood," Ninshubur replied, hitting his own head.

"Don't knock yourself, kid. In the old days you were known for your saves. Remember where Ishtar would be without you?" Ninshubur nodded. Her lifeless body would probably still be hanging from Erishkigal's gibbet in Hades, or else compromised in a dozen other demeaning ways, which to a goddess of her ego might have been far worse. Each time the aggressive and greedy goddess got herself in trouble it was faithful Ninshubur who somehow managed to save her. "Well," continued Marduk, "just apply all that ingenuity of yours to a baseball format and win us a few games." Ninshubur nodded and promptly struck out the next three batters in a row.

Hawk reached into his decades of experience and pulled out every trick he could find that might help the team score, and score they did; one run per inning for the next four innings while giving up eight hits, but no runs until the top of the ninth.

The score was four all as Israfel, the Angels' left fielder stepped up to bat. Between them, Marduk and Ninshubur tried everything they could, but Ninshubur had thrown an average of twenty pitches per batter since he had relieved Isimud. After three hundred-odd pitches even a god's arm can get tired. Another ten pitches and Israfel found one he could knock through the hole and into left field.

Ariel, the Angels' shortstop, was up next and made no bones about showing a bunt. He placed it expertly down the third base line and moved his teammate into scoring position with his sacrifice.

Malachai was sent in next to pinch-hit for Hew, who had been Stengel's choice for relief pitcher. Ninshubur was losing the drop on his sinker, and Malachai caught enough of it to pop-up into shallow center field, holding Israfel up at second base. Hawk saw danger and instructed Enki to start warming up.

Next came the top of the order. Gabriel stepped up and put Ninshubur's first pitch into the very deepest corner of right field. Gabriel's speed was pushed to its limits as he raced around the bases even as Nanna-Sin retrieved the ball and fired it back toward the infield. Gabriel and Israfel rounded the third base corner within ten feet of each other and Ninshursag rushed to relay Nanna-Sin's throw. She caught it, spun and threw even as Israfel crossed the plate. In Ninshursag's haste, however, her throw was a little off. Marduk had to stretch to catch it and just barely had the time to twist around to tag Gabriel as he crossed the plate.

"Safe!" the umpire called.

"What?" both Marduk and Hawk screamed as one. Hawk rushed out of the dugout to protest the call. He knew full well that the umpire would never change his call and that Gabriel probably was safe, but it

was close enough that he felt justified in protesting. It was just a standard ploy; enough protests might put enough doubt in the umpire's mind that the next close call would go for the Lamassu. He shrugged and returned to the dugout.

Ninshubur threw one more pitch, but there was almost nothing on it and Raphael smashed it into deep left for a double bagger.

Hawk swallowed hard and paused to notice Enki still warming up in the bullpen. "Time!" he called and walked out to the mound where Marduk and Ninshubur were already deep in conference. "How you feeling, Shubur?" he asked the tired pitcher taking the ball from Marduk.

"My arm feels like mush," Ninshubur replied hesitantly.

"You're honest, at least," Hawk sighed. "You gave this game everything you got. Take the rest of the day off."

"Right, boss!" Ninshubur replied, defeat mingling with relief. The crowd cheered loudly for Ninshubur's efforts.

Hawk signaled to Enki who stopped warming up and strode out to the mound. "Bring it on home," was all he told his last remaining pitcher.

Enki took his eight official practice pitches, but as Raphael approached the batter's box, Marduk called for time and returned to the mound, ball in hand.

"A problem, son?" Enki asked.

"No, father," Marduk replied, I just wanted to get our signals straight since Raphael can see what you see. I'll flash them four times. On the first pitch take the fourth flash, on the second the third..."

"On the third I take second sign and so on, then repeat, right?" Enki finished for him. Marduk nodded and returned to the plate just as the umpire was approaching to break up the conference.

Enki's first pitch to Saint Michael was a blazing split-finger fastball that left him looking. The next pitch was a curve that made the ones Isimud had thrown look like straight shots. Michael fanned the pitch for the second strike. Ahead in the count, Marduk signaled for Enki to waste the next two pitches, high and tight and then low and outside. The second ball almost fooled Michael into swinging.

Michael stayed alive against another fastball just barely high enough to be in the strike zone by fouling it off to the right. A straight, but off-speed pitch, however, retired the side and the Lamassu entered the bottom of the ninth trailing six to four.

Inanna was up first against Melyar, the Angel's closer. She kept an eagle eye on the pitches and with a full count hit a hard grounder that bounced off Ariel's glove and was retrieved by Israfel, but not before she had safely crossed first base.

With the count against Utu at one strike and two balls, Hawk signaled Inanna to steal second. Utu caught the sign and swung on an obvious ball low and away. Michael reached for the pitch and fired it out to Peter at second. Inanna slid, feet-first, into the base and the call was "Safe!"

Utu smashed a hard line drive back to Melyar who caught it, spun and threw to second, but Inanna

managed to return to base safely. Ninhursag would normally be up next, but Hawk sent in Ninurta, the god of the Stormy South Wind in her place.

Ninurta, gripped his bat hard, went into a low crouch, and brought his bat around to meet Melyar's first pitch, sending it bouncing into right field. Gabriel sprinted forward to grab it and sent it to first base, but it was a close call that, this time, went in favor of the Lamassu. Casey Stengel protested the call while Hawk paused to consider his position.

He had runners at the corners with only one out, but he was at the bottom of his batting order and still two runs behind. Enki was due up next and if, by some chance, they managed to tie up the game they would need him in the tenth inning. On the other hand, Enki's batting the day before had produced no hits at all. Hawk was strongly tempted to send Martu, the Semitic Bedu god who seemed to be a promising utility man, in Enki's place, but at the last moment decided to let Enki bat and put Martu in for Nanna-Sin.

Enki was the most clever of the Lamassu and he wisely waited for the pitch he wanted to come his way, but when it came he hit the middle of center field where Malachai deftly caught it. Meanwhile Inanna tagged up and ran for home. Malachai fired the ball straight in to Michael who caught it just as the goddess of Love and War slid in under his reach.

With two outs, the tying run in scoring position, and the go-ahead run at the plate, Hawk signaled to Martu to try to pull his shot into right field. Martu signaled his understanding right back and stepped into the box. Melyar looked to Michael for his sign, but didn't like what he saw, a fast ball straight in. He shook the archangel off and then agreed with the second sign, an inside curve.

Martu went into his swing, pulling his arms in for a short, hard slap to right that landed just short of Gabriel who threw the ball hard back into the infield, keeping Ninurta holed up on third.

Hawk dared to hope as Ishkur came to the plate, but hopes died hard as Ishkur's grounder was caught by Peter and relayed in plenty of time to first base. The Angels had won the second game of the season with a score of six to five.

Hawk just stood in the third base coach's box staring disconsolately out at Tiamat Field. Nin-ti crossed the diamond and tried unsuccessfully to tell him how well she thought the team had played, but nothing managed to cheer him up until he exchanged looks with Casey Stengel, still in the visitors' dugout. Stengel reached up and respectfully tipped his cap to the Lamassu manager. Hawk smiled bleakly and then crossed the field to congratulate his opponent on a game well-played.

ELEVEN

Where, Oh Where Has My Ratatosk Gone?

The Lamassu had the next day off to be followed by a four game series with the Pacific Basin Green

Sox. After the first two games, Hawk realized that his team needed a lot more work on their defense. At practice he put them through their paces with a special emphasis on double plays. One day wasn't enough, however, and even though the Polynesian deities were as new to the league as the Lamassu, the Green Sox managed to sweep the series, leaving the Dilmun team with an oh and six record.

In spite of the fact that they had yet to win a game, Hawk was actually encouraged. The team was showing a marked improvement in their playing and two of the last four games were decided in extra innings. A little more experience and they would start winning games; maybe even tomorrow when they visited the Greco-Roman team from Olympus, the Wolf Cubs.

Unfortunately, the rest of the team didn't feel the same way. Following the sixteen inning, 1 - 0 loss that concluded the series, Hawk tried to say encouraging things as the team slogged off to the showers, but he got the impression that he was only making them feel worse, so he shut up. Nin-ti noticed his change in attitude, however.

"You seem surprisingly chipper, dear," she commented as they returned to the clubhouse, "especially since we just lost yet again."

"Yes, but we lost well," Hawk replied a little too cheerily.

"Oh, good," she returned flatly.

"We're starting to come together," he clarified. "It won't be long before we turn it all around."

"I hope not. We're already three games down and in the cellar of our division."

"If we were in the West Division," Hawk replied, "We'd be six games out of first. Lucky for us, the two best teams are in the West. There's only one fly in the ointment. Where the hell is our scout?"

"Ratatosk?"

"That's the one. Where is he? I expected a report on the Green Sox. Hell! We might have taken them if we had any idea of who they were. Lugeilang, Maui, Pele, Solang - who are those guys?"

Nin-ti shrugged, "I've never met any of them before either."

"Exactly! What are we paying Ratty for if he doesn't show up with his scouting reports?" They took the two steps down into the dugout and continued on toward the shower area.

"What are we paying Ratatosk?" Nin-ti asked suddenly.

"Now that you mention it, I'm not really sure. He agreed to scout and I put him to work so quickly we never actually set the terms, but I got the impression that he'd settle for all the steak dinners he could eat."

"Sounds like him," Nin-ti laughed, stopping by the door to the goddesses' locker room. "I'll see you at the post-game meeting, dear," she promised before slipping out of sight.

The Lamassu didn't look any better after they had showered. Even Inanna, who was normally quite vain about her appearance, let her hair hang down in a sodden, tangled mass. Enki had lost his perpetual smile, and none of them could look Hawk straight in the eyes.

"You all played well today," he told them simply, "and I'm proud of you. Enki, you pitched nine perfect innings. That's world-class pitching and Ninshubur's relief work was all I could ask of anyone."

"If we played that well," Inanna replied, lifting her head to finally face him, "why didn't we win?"

"They got lucky first. Nobody's perfect, so when Ninshubur's last pitch didn't have enough drop to it, Maui knocked it out of the park. The same thing might have gone our way and eventually, I'm sure it will. Look! There's more to the game than skill. There is a bit of luck in any sport. So lately it's just been going against us, but we're a better team for it. We'll just practice a little harder and get even better until we can take any team in the league."

"You really think we can do it?" Martu asked hopefully.

"Of course we can," Hawk replied, not completely feeling it himself. "Any team can take on any other one on any given day. That's the beauty of the game. Just wait. You'll see what I mean. Now tomorrow we start our first road trip with a three-game series against the Cubs."

"Do we have any better idea of how they play than we did about the Green Sox?" Dumuzi asked.

"I don't even know for certain who's on the team," Hawk admitted, "but I suppose we can guess."

"Right," Ninshursag agreed, "and we know that they won't have Artemis, Demeter, nor Aphrodite with them."

"Why not?"

"Because Artemis and Aphrodite are two of Inanna's later aspects and Demeter is one of mine," she replied. "Both of us were flatly rejected by the Cubs before they even had try-outs. That's why we both returned to our," she paused a moment, "roots." She flashed a tight smile at the group. "Two months back in this pantheon and already the puns are coming naturally!"

"Blame it on the ancient scribes," Enki replied. "Written language was a new thing to them and they were a little too impressed by their own cleverness. Consequently most of their writings about us were sandwiched between half a dozen puns at a time. It's only natural that we should use those same word plays ourselves. Mother Nature returning to her roots could even be an accidental pun. So who were the Cubs planning to use?" he asked her, returning them to the subject at hand.

"Naturally I don't know for certain, but I would assume that most of the powerful male deities will be on the team; Hercules, Ares, Apollo, Mercury, Poseidon, Pluto, and all that lot."

"Didn't you just mix Greek and Roman names for them?"

"I used the names they currently prefer. Frankly, I think they're missing a good thing by not using their goddesses," Mother Nature continued. "Athena had a fit that nearly toppled Olympus."

"Who's she playing for?" Hawk asked interestedly.

"No one. Unfortunately she doesn't qualify. She's the tutelary goddess of Athens, but while she shares some attributes with Inanna and Isis, there's no clear previous aspect, and the only subsequent one she has is Minerva, if you count that as a separate aspect; most of us do not. Last I heard she was working as one of two deputy commissioners and Jove was losing his already white hair over how she might take

her revenge. She won't, of course," Ninhursag laughed, "but Jove doesn't know that."

"That's not going to help us against the Cubs," a deep voice commented from the doorway. Everyone turned to see King Enlil standing between the doorposts. "I came down to see if there was anything I could do to help the team out."

"I don't suppose you know anything about the Cubs?" Hawk asked.

"Not as a team," Enlil replied. "No, but I could try to find out what happened to our scout."

"I think he got a better deal," Inanna commented sourly, "from a winning team."

"That's it!" Hawk retorted sharply. "That's the last defeatist attitude I'll tolerate from any of you! Now when I say we're improving, believe it."

"So you think we're as good as we're going to get?" Isimud asked.

"I never said that," Hawk back-peddled. "There's always room for improvement. So far, our pitching has been keeping us in the game, but most of our losses have been from a combination of defensive weakness and low batting averages. We're going to continue the fielding drills and batting practice everyday all season and any time now we'll start winning. Now," he turned to Enlil, "when do we leave for Olympus?"

"Two hours," the "GreatMountain" replied. "I have already instructed the Anunnaki to start moving the team's gear as soon as you are done in here." He smiled encouragingly and left the room.

"If you don't mind, Hawk," Enki said, breaking the ensuing silence, "I'll go on ahead now. Our route takes us along some of the branches of Yggdrassil and maybe I can find out what's been holding Ratatosk up."

Enki walked the wide branches of the great ash tree that supported the Universe. The smooth grayish bark provided him far greater traction under foot than he might have thought and the vast number of branches above shielded him from the worst of the storm that raged around him. It was still too early in the season for the characteristic pinate leaves that would later adorn the tree. Instead the branches were tipped with tight dark purple clusters. The Great Tree was just coming into bloom.

Enki was slightly annoyed by the constant drip of rainwater. It seemed as though the water had a special affinity for him as maybe it did, but he did not appreciate the fact that no matter where he moved the very largest drops seemed to fall directly on his head.

"This is getting me nowhere," he snarled at last. "Damned tree is too big." He stood silently for a moment then slowly raised his right leg and then his left and sat in a semi-lotus position, floating two and a half feet above the branch. Then, reaching within himself, he cast a spell and abruptly found his spirit floating next to his body. Far faster than his body could negotiate the Tree, his spirit soared upward until he could see the very uppermost branches of Yggdrassil. There to his left Enki saw the giant falcon, Vethrfolnir,

perched on a particularly sturdy branch constantly surveying the landscape around the great tree. Enki bent his mind to the task and his spirit swooped over to where Vethrfolnir stood.

"Enki of the Waters," the falcon greeted him in characteristically formal tones. "It has been long since you have been here for any time."

"Except in passing," Enki agreed. "I've been in and out of one aspect of the Tree or another on a regular basis."

"I would not know about the other aspects," Vethrfolnir admitted gravely. "It is my duty to protect only this one."

"Of course," Enki nodded. He looked over toward the other side of the tree where a large bald eagle was perched, surveying the surroundings as vigilantly as Vethrfolnir did. "Didn't you used to have a golden eagle for a partner?" Enki asked curiously.

"He retired years ago," the falcon replied. "Samuel is his replacement."

"But isn't a bald eagle an American bird?"

"There are a fair amount of followers of the old religion in America," Vethrfolnir explained, "or at least what they think of as the old religion."

"From what I've seen, the phrase 'old religion' these days includes every thing from Wicca to the Neo-druids and beyond," Enki noted dryly before changing the subject. "Awful weather today."

"It is good for the Tree," Vethrfolnir replied neutrally. "You did not come to discuss the weather, Water God."

"True. I'm looking for Ratatosk."

"That scamp?" the great bird turned his head to face Enki. "I have not seen him since he turned his newspaper over to me. I have assumed he was in one part of the tree or another, but Samuel and I keep our eyes looking outward. Attacks on Yggdrasil rarely come from within. Try asking one of the four harts."

"Four harts? You mean deer?"

"Their names are Dainn, Dvalinn, Duneyrr, and Durathror; one for each of the four winds. You will find each one in his corresponding quadrant." With that Vethrfolnir returned to his surveillance.

"Thank you, guardian," Enki replied formally. The falcon said nothing, but nodded his head while keeping an eye on the horizon.

Enki turned his spirit and headed back into the tree. One by one, he encountered the four deer who live on the branches of Yggdrasil. None of them had seen Ratatosk lately and only Dvalinn had noticed his absence.

"There's been some pressure building up in my sector," he told Enki. "Strife that should have been carried from one place to another. That's the squirrel's job and I keep waiting for him to show up."

"Is it a major problem?" Enki asked concernedly.

"Not yet, but you never know."

Enki returned to his own body and stretched after the prolonged period of inactivity. "There's more going on here than I can handle," he told himself resignedly. "Better go back for reinforcements."

"You couldn't find even a trace?" Ninhursag asked him not much later. Enki had found her skating by herself on a pond she had frozen specially for the occasion. She continued skating while he shuffled carefully on the ice nearby.

"None or too many," he replied. "Over the millennia he's been all over that tree. I checked the places that were supposed to be his usual haunts when he wasn't busy, but my abilities are not finely tuned enough to distinguish old traces from newer ones. Naturally, I thought of you."

She didn't reply as she went into a pair of triple axles. Not even she could keep up a conversation while performing such a maneuver. Then she skated around the far end of the pool and returned to where Enki stood applauding. "So," she said as she began a comparatively lazy figure eight, "what did you have in mind?"

"How about helping me look?" Enki retorted, then softened his words with, "We made a good team once."

"When you weren't drunk," she shot back. Enki's face dropped several notches, stung by her attack. She relented and said, "All right. We need our scout and I'd hate to think anything had happened to him." She skated to the edge of the pond. "Come on." She stepped off the frozen pond and as her feet came down on the shore they were clad, once more, in the sandals she customarily wore when not in a team uniform.

Another instant change that occurred was that the pond was no longer frozen solid, not even nicely chilled with a few ice cubes around the edge. Enki abruptly found himself knee deep in the water while a startled fish got out from under his right foot.

"Very funny, Nintu," he commented sourly, using one of her many alternate names. "I would think that after several thousand years you might learn to forgive if not forget." He took two steps upward as though climbing stairs and then walked across the surface of the pond until he reached her side.

"Oh, I forgave you long ago, trickster," Ninhursag laughed. "Well, at least for the major insults," she added with a mysterious smile.

"Terrific," he replied tonelessly. "Are you ready?" She nodded and they were instantly enveloped by the same sort of bubble that Enki had used to transport Hawk, except that this trip took place at a far greater velocity. After they splashed spectacularly into the Dilmun Sea, Enki glanced at Ninhursag to see how she was taking the high speeds and abrupt turns, but she merely returned his gaze with a serene smile. He shrugged and continued guiding the bubble toward the Food of Life shrub. Then, they were suddenly standing on a branch of Yggdrasil.

"Next time you'll let me do the driving," she said, playfully malicious. Then she noticed the constant drip of rain off the ash flowers. "Nice weather," she commented dryly.

"Cheer up," he replied. "It could be snowing."

Ninhursag was about to say something, but instead she abruptly transformed herself into her modern aspect as the green-haired Mother Nature. "There's something wrong," she told Enki, all traces of her former playfulness banished. "It shouldn't be raining."

"The weather could be better," Enki agreed, "but the Tree does need water every now and then. You ought to know that."

If looks could kill, the one she gave him would have masticated every bone of his body. "The Norse aspect does not have a history of acid rain."

"What?"

"Check for yourself," she told him seriously.

Enki shrugged and closed his eyes for a moment, tuning himself in to the nature of the rain water. As the God of Water, Enki had been an extremely important deity in ancient Mesopotamia where even bare subsistence was totally reliant on a dependable system of irrigation. The people of Sumer, Akkad, Assyria, and the other civilizations that lived there recognized the genius that had been needed to create such a system and so wisdom was easily associated with the Water God as well. He concentrated on the condition of the rain and realized that Ninhursag was right. There were all sorts of unnatural impurities in the water that was falling. On the mortal plane this would have been alarming enough, but there were no factories to spew tons of carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide, and various hydrocarbon chains into the air of the universe in which Yggdrasil existed. She was right; there was something definitely wrong here.

"Why didn't I notice it before?" he wondered aloud, opening his eyes. Ninhursag said nothing and when he turned to face her he saw that she was seated on the smooth bark, stroking and crooning to the Tree.

"The Tree is weeping," she informed him.

"I felt its pain," he replied, "once I opened myself to it. Any notion what's causing it?"

"Wait here. I'll be right back." She disappeared abruptly and Enki settled back to wait. A few minutes later he heard hoof beats approaching and soon Dvalinn came into view from down-branch.

"Water God," the red deer greeted him with a polite nod. "You are still seeking the strife bearer?"

"Still," Enki nodded.

"Come. I have something to show you."

"Will we be gone long?" Enki stalled, not wanting to make Ninhursag come looking for him.

"What is time?" the deer replied, cocking his head at an angle.

"Terrific," Enki sighed. "I needed a philosophical argument. Hold on." He cast a minor spell that left a small sphere of water hovering next to him. "Let's go," he said at last and followed Dvalinn down branch, leaving the large water drop behind.

They headed out at a trot that may have been comfortable to the tree-dweller, but that kept Enki pushing himself to keep up. He was tempted to use magic, but decided not to. Playing baseball on only his natural abilities had built up a habit that was hard to break.

A few minutes later he was forced to change that decision when Dvalinn effortlessly jumped from the branch they were on to another slightly above and fifty feet to the right. Enki shrugged and used his usual form of long-distance transport and settled back, letting the bubble do his legwork.

They headed back inward for a minute until they came to a junction where the branch they followed had diverged from another. Dvalinn banked hard and then headed outward on the other branch, bearing to the right at the next two forks. The deer made one last prodigious jump to a very wide branch fifty feet down and seventy-five away before the hart abruptly stopped where the wood of the branch had formed a natural seat along the far edge. There were several waterlogged notepads and a ballpoint pen on one edge of the seat.

"This is where Ratatosk had been spending much of his time lately," Dvalinn announced simply.

Enki sat down on the natural shelf and looked down and around. Yggdrassil supported the universe and from its branches one could travel anywhere in creation. From this particular vantage point one could see several Celestial League baseball diamonds.

"Ratatosk must have searched long and hard to find this spot," Enki commented.

Dvalinn disagreed. "The view from the Tree can be adjusted or tuned to a certain extent, depending on how far along the branches one gets. You can see most of creation from the trunk and the view gets more specific until you reach the branchlets from which you can enter the other realms. Each branch, as I think you know, leads to only one location."

"Yes, I know," Enki nodded. "So this is where Ratatosk did his scouting from. More specifically," he continued looking at the top sheet of one of the notepads, "I think he was abducted from here during a game."

"I thought so too," Dvalinn agreed. "His notes stop abruptly in the middle of several games."

"These seem to be in a nice neat stack, although quite damp. If he was overcome, I would expect there to be more signs of violence."

"It was a little less neat when I found it," Dvalinn admitted. "The pads were scattered across the seat and I think there's one missing."

"How can you tell?" Enki asked.

"Look."

Enki shrugged and studied Ratatosk's notes a little more closely. After a few minutes he saw what the hart had. "There are only four games being recorded here. This is the game we lost on the first day of the season, so I assume these others took place at the same time. Except for the Lamassu/Angels game they stop in the middle of the fifth or sixth inning. Ours took entirely too long to get over with," he added dryly. "There are no notes of a game between the Crocs and the Eagles and I know they were scheduled to play then. Do you think those notes may have fallen in the struggle?"

"I will go look, but before I leave, please note this damage to the bark of the tree." He indicated some deep scratches not far away.

"They look like claw marks," Enki noted. "Could have been caused by the squirrel just coming and going."

"No," Dvalinn denied the possibility. "No guardian of the Tree causes it damage through their normal comings and going. These must have happened in the struggle. I go now. Wait here."

Enki sat back down and returned his attention to Ratatosk's notes. Even incomplete they could be of use. Drops of water falling from the saturated pages gave him an idea and after a moment of concentration the water began flowing from the pages more freely until they were satisfyingly dry again.

"What do you have there?" Ninhursag asked from behind him a few minutes later. He turned and saw her standing behind the clear ball of water he had left behind.

"Ratatosk's notes on the first few innings of the games on opening day." He handed her one of the notepads as he released the homing spell represented by the globe of water. The sphere dropped abruptly and splashed across the surface of the branch. "You find anything?"

"There was a gateway spell opening into New York City two hundred leagues west of the Tree. That's where the pollution was coming from so I dissipated the spell. Another dozen leagues further on I found the center of a weather spell, which I shut down as well. The skies should clear up by dusk."

"Any idea who cast the spells?"

"I didn't recognize the signature," she admitted. She looked at the notes. "He was interrupted in midgame?"

"That seems to be the general consensus," Enki replied and then pointed at the damaged bark. "What about those claw marks?"

"They were caused deliberately," she told him. "Yggdrassil remembers."

"Does Yggdrassil remember who caused them?"

"The squirrel, but the Tree is unaware of the circumstances only that Ratatosk scratched it several times and that they won't heal unless acted upon." She paused and healed the scars in the bark until it was a smooth gray once again. "That's better. If we follow the others we may find the squirrel."

"Sounds good, but let's wait for Dvalinn to return."

"Dvalinn? The hart?" Ninhursag asked.

"Right. He led me here and then went looking to see if Ratatosk dropped any of his notes in the struggle."

They didn't have long to wait. Dvalinn appeared a few minutes later with another notepad in his mouth. "This was on one of the lower branches," he told them.

Enki dried the paper out and then flipped through the abbreviated notes, but found nothing in them to

suggest what might have happened so he followed Ninhursag as she let the Tree guide them to the next scratch. It was a long slow process because she insisted on stopping to heal the wounds as they went. Three hours later, Nin-ti found them almost at the main trunk.

"Hawk and Enlil were getting worried," she told them. "What's keeping you?"

Enki's quick explanation brought Nin-ti up to date. "So we'll meet you in Olympus as soon as possible." Nin-ti nodded and hurried back to Dilmun, while Enki and Ninhursag continued on to the trunk.

"Now how does one climb a tree this wide?" Enki mused. The trunk was miles in circumference where the branch met it and more resembled an immense gray wall than any part of a tree.

"We could fly," Mother Nature suggested, "but it is far easier just to change your perspective. Think of the tree as a road."

"Say what?"

"Enki," she replied sternly, "while I admire your grasp of the modern idiom, I must say I don't think much of that particular expression. Now just do as I say and you'll see what I mean."

"If you say so," Enki shrugged.

"I do," she replied.

He thought of the Tree as a road between worlds and suddenly his perspective did, indeed, change. As he watched, his view of Yggdrassil tilted over on its side and the branch they were on became a foot path intersecting with a wide highway.

"That's amazing!" Enki breathed. "I didn't know the Tree could do this."

"I was rather amazed too," she admitted calmly as they proceeded on, "when I first encountered it a thousand years ago."

"That recently?"

"Maybe a little longer. I don't keep track of such short-term intervals. Do any of us?"

"Some do, I imagine," Enki replied. "Those whose job it is to do so." She nodded.

They came across another scar in the tree's surface. In its highway aspect the scar appeared as a small pothole. Ninhursag paused to heal the wound before continuing. They passed several forks and intersections in the road before they found another pothole at a wide crossroads.

"We turn right here," she announced after healing the wound. They stepped on to the side road and their view twisted around until they were once more surrounded by the sylvan beauty of Yggdrassil. Enki looked confused by the change. "I much prefer this aspect," Ninhursag commented by way of explanation, and Enki realized that the change had been her doing.

They walked outward bearing to the left when they came to a split in the branch. There were no new scratches in the bark and Enki asked how Ninhursag was certain they were going the right way.

"The tree is telling me where the next and final wound is," she replied. A few minutes later they stopped and Ninhursag announced, "We're here."

Enki looked around and saw only the Tree. The branch they stood on was one hundred yards wide. A dozen yards further out it split into two branches and he walked to that point and looked down between the split and saw nothing but more tree. Reaching, as only a god can, into another aspect of the Tree where it was harvest time, he picked a ripe apple from another branch and took a bite before asking, "And where is here?"

"The road to Hell," she informed him after a momentary pause.

"Oh good," Enki replied dryly. "You and I are probably the only gods in our pantheon who have managed not to visit our own version of the underworld. Now you're telling me we have to invade the Judeo-Christian version?"

"I did not say we were going to Hell," Ninhursag replied primly, and then grinned as she added, "although we will, of course, after the series in Asgard. I merely meant that the tree said we were at the site of the final wound. I'm as perplexed as you are. Let's search a bit."

"I think I've found a tree," Enki informed her a moment later, kneeling on the branch and placing one hand on the smooth bark. It was a weak joke at best.

"Good," she replied grimly. "Now let's see if you can still use all that vaunted wisdom you're supposed to have."

They searched in silence for a while until Enki asked, "Are you sure the Tree said we were in the right place? Maybe another aspect..."

"Yggdrasil would have told me if we were supposed to seek in another aspect," she replied.

"I can't even find the scratches you say are... Wait a minute I think I hear something." They both listened as the sound of a muffled voice came to them dimly from under foot. "Inside the branch?" Enki wondered aloud.

"Ah!" Mother Nature said, understanding at last. "A botched healing. Intentional, unless I miss my guess, and I don't. See this crease here? The wood and bark abutt almost perfectly. So much so, in fact, that we might have missed it." She knelt on the branch and stroked both hands lovingly across the surface of the bark.

At first nothing happened and then the crease began to slowly grow into a wide crack. As it widened, they saw it went at least ten feet deep and then it became clear that it was concealing a small chamber within the wood of the tree. Ninhursag continued the healing, but Enki slipped down into the revealed chamber as soon as he was able and landed directly on top of Ratatosk who lay, bound and gagged, at the bottom.

"Bloody well about time someone found me!" were the squirrel's first words after Enki removed the gag. "What the hell took you so long?" Ratatosk demanded.

"You were very well hidden, my friend," Enki replied lamely.

"Yeah? Well, tag, you're it! Some gods! Can't even find a missing squirrel. Idiots probably didn't even

miss me. Shows what I get for caring. Ffffd!" That last was forced out from between the folds of the gag as Enki calmly replaced it and hoisted the protesting squirrel up over his back and brought him back up to the top of what was now a smoothly healed trench.

"I fear this is the best I can do," Ninhursag commented, looking down into the deep trench in the branch. "At least it's healthy now."

"And just what is going on here?" a smooth contralto voice asked from a few yards down the left branch.

TWELVE

Devil In a Blue Dress

Enki and Ninhursag looked up to see a young woman standing in a determined, no-nonsense pose with a perfectly formed hand placed on each hip. Her light blue spandex dress was stretched tightly across her well-developed chest and hips. Her legs, ensconced in navy blue silk, were long and shapely and neatly tucked into a pair of shiny black boots. Her dark violet eyes were set in a heart-shaped, deeply tanned face framed by waist-length, loosely curled hair of jet black hue, but the expression on that beautiful face was decidedly smokey and the hair just above her forehead gave the distinct impression of... horns. She studied the improbable trio, however, and her attitude changed. "Enki? What are you doing here? And... Great Mother!" She stepped forward and knelt at Ninhursag's feet without averting her eyes.

"Ninmah, have you met Jael?" Enki asked.

"Don't believe I've had the pleasure," Ninhursag replied neutrally.

"Really? Oh well. Mother Nature, this is Jael, a middle-management demon I've know ever since Dilmun was reopened to the rest of Creation. Jael, this is Ninhursag, whom you already recognized."

"Pleased to meet you, dear," Ninhursag told Jael.

Jael was about to echo the pleasantries when she noticed the bound and gagged squirrel. "Enki!" she demanded. "What's happened to Ratatosk?"

"We were just about to find out ourselves," he replied, untying the ropes that held Hawk's only scout. "What brings you here, might I ask?"

"There was a major quake in Hell for the second time this week and as far as we could tell they originated here in the Tree," Jael explained.

"And Lucifer sent you to investigate?" Ninhursag asked.

"No," a slightly higher pitched voice said using Jael's mouth, "She was just bored so she assigned herself the job."

"How many of you are there?" Mother Nature asked concernedly.

"Just two," Jael replied. "It's a minor problem I've more or less learned to live with."

"But what's the problem?"

"I'm sort of possessed by a mortal soul," Jael admitted, an embarrassed flush rising in her cheeks.

"I understand it's the sort of thing that happens when a demon falls in love," Ratatosk commented acidly having ripped the gag from his mouth.

"But how?" Ninhursag tried to ask.

"Another time, perhaps," Jael shoved the question aside. "It's a very long story and not at all the way the rodent implies. Anyway, I asked first; what's happening here?" Enki spoke quickly, explaining what had brought them to this particular limb. "Well, that explains, I guess. The first tremor was caused by the damage and the second by its repair," Jael concluded. "But who kidnapped you, Ratty?"

"Damned if I know," the squirrel grumbled. "It was in the middle of the opening day games. Someone hit me from behind. Next thing I knew I was in a big sack being dragged around the tree. I made those scratches you followed here by poking my claws through the burlap," he told Ninhursag and Enki, "but I never saw who hit me. Then he, she, or even they hit me again and when I woke up I was inside the tree." He reached out and plucked several peaches and a handful of nuts from mid-air. "Gods! But I'm starving!"

"You poor thing," Jael murmured sympathetically. "Enki, I've learned what I needed to know and I ought to get back to work, but I'll do what I can to try to figure out who did this. Will you get back to me if you learn anything?"

"Of course," Enki nodded.

Jael shot him a heart-breaking smile and took several steps back down the branch then turned and said, "I'll see you at the game next week if not before." She paused and took one last look at the Tree. "The Tree is so lovely in the spring, don't you think?" She sighed then turned and abruptly disappeared.

"I didn't realize a demoness could appreciate natural beauty," Ninhursag murmured in Jael's wake.

"Jael's a very special demoness," Enki informed her. "In a way she's related to you since I understand she's in charge of the section that punishes environmental sins."

"Interesting girl," Ninhursag noted. "Is she on Hell's team?"

"Didn't make the cut," Ratatosk said between mouthfuls, "but the idea for the Celestial League was hers, and she's working as Deputy Commissioner along with Athena. No doubt that's the work she's getting back to. Hey," he broke off suddenly and looked around, "I know I've been locked away a while, but I didn't think my time sense had gone all that bad. Shouldn't it be night by now?"

"My fault," Ninhursag admitted. "I didn't want to lose the light while searching for you. Besides we're fairly close to the Arctic Circle in this aspect so I doubt that at this time of year you get more than an hour or two of night each evening anyway."

"But they're very important hours," Ratatosk continued.

"That's true," she admitted, "But it will straighten itself out by the next dawn and it would take more than one short night to hurt this tree. Meanwhile we're off to Olympus . Care to lead the way?"

"Can we stop off in New York ?" Ratatosk asked. "I'm going to need more than fruit and nuts to satisfy this hunger and the gods of Olympus get by on the smell of burnt offerings!"

"I suppose we have a little time," Enki said uncertainly. Before anything else could be said, however, the sun went out.

Space is variable on the Celestial Plane. What Earthlings know as Mount Olympus in Greece is actually only the entrance to the true home of the Greco-Roman pantheon - a vast world all its own. Like Dilmun, Olympus is a flat world; not because the ancients were incapable of visualizing a spherical one, but because this particular home of the gods existed coextant with the known world of the Roman Empire . Beyond those places whose locations were clearly charted in the ancient world the boundaries of Olympus become fuzzy and limbo-like. Eventually one can find the edges of the Olympic Plane where the land suddenly falls off in the most precipitous drop in all Creation. Beneath Olympus is a truly bottomless pit. Fall off the edge and you will die of old age before landing if you happen to take that leap with a lifetime's supply of food. On the other hand, if you fall that long you might even have enough time to learn how to fly and eventually find your way back to the top.

Jove's pantheon had chosen to create Olympic Park in the image of a large Roman amphitheater. A fair-sized hill had been selected and half of it had been scooped away in step-terraces each faced with pure white marble. Then topsoil had been laid down on the steps and planted with the same star-spangled grass that adorned the playing field in all Celestial League diamonds. Instead of dugouts, the players' benches were at the same level as the field, in wide, open niches in the walls under the first few rows of spectator seats.

Hawk had to admit that it was a very pretty stadium, but he was more concerned about what had happened to Enki and Ninhursag. He had planned to start with Isimud in any case, but second base was not Martu's best position, although he still seemed like the best choice to fill in for the Mother Goddess if it came to that.

"Where the hell are they?" he asked, looking out at the nearly empty field. The groundskeepers were a group of hamadryads under the guidance of Pomona , the dryad who, according to the mythology, preferred cultured gardens over the wild woods and streams. They were just finishing their daily work on the field and Pomona approached the Visitor's bench.

"Your team may practice now," she told Hawk with just a touch of tartness. "Try not to damage the grass too badly."

"We'll do our best," he assured her.

"Yeah, right," Pomona replied sarcastically. "At least you lot don't look like you'll leave burn marks," she added as she walked away.

"Okay, team, let's go!" Nin-ti called out from behind Hawk. He hadn't been aware of the team's presence, lost as he was in concern. "Don't worry, dear," she told him gently, "They'll turn up soon, I imagine."

"When?" he countered. She had no answer as she led the team on to the field. The Wolf Cubs had already taken their batting practice, leaving the Lamassu almost an hour to warm up before the groundskeepers returned to prepare the dirt surface for the game. Hawk took refuge from anxiety by diving into his pre-game routine. He stomped around the field shouting advice, encouragements, and occasional insults; anything to get the missing players off his mind.

"Maybe Dumuzi ought to play at second," he suggested to Nin-ti after a third grounder got past Martu.

"I'll try him there and we'll see who does better, although Martu's usually been slightly better than Dumuzi on the infield," she opined.

"Maybe it's just not his day. It can happen to any player," Hawk commented.

"Hawk?" a husky male voice called out from behind. "HawkWilton ? Ye gods, man! Where ya been keeping yourself?"

Hawk spun around to see a clean-shaven, elderly man in the white-with-blue-pin-stripes home uniform of the Wolf Cubs. The uniform was almost identical to that worn by the Chicago Cubs, save that the shoulder patch showed the head of a wolf rather than a bear cub and that the famous "C" logo of the team was replaced by a similar "O" forming a tricolor bull's-eye. The approaching manager looked familiar, but it wasn't until they were only a few feet apart that Hawk placed him.

"Boyd Hunter," Hawk greeted him, clasping hands warmly. "So you're managing the Cubs? How appropriate."

"Yeah," Boyd nodded, grinning. "I finally made it back into the bigs."

"Beyond the bigs," Hawk countered. "Although with five years in Chicago, you have more major league experience than I do. You're looking good, Boyd. I'd swear you look ten years younger than when we met last spring."

"I am ten years younger," Boyd countered. "It was part of my contract. They let me have a sip at the fountain of youth. To tell the truth, though, I really needed it. My old body was really falling apart there, but they put their healers to work on me and I wouldn't be surprised to get another good twenty, thirty years after this season. More if we take the pennant. I get a bonus for the pennant and another if we win the series. You're looking pretty good too, Hawk. Did they give you a little youth juice too?"

"Nah," Hawk drawled. "Guess I'm just a tough old bird. It's the game that's keeping me young." It was just something to say, but Hawk suddenly realized that he meant it.

"So your prediction did come true," Boyd remarked.

"Prediction?"

"Yeah, back when we were both in the Carolina League; you were playing for Lynchburg and I was pitching for the Bulls. It was in the last week of the season."

"That was the game where you struck me out three times?" Hawk asked.

"And in the bottom of the eleventh you tapped a grand slam over the left-field fence. Right," Boyd agreed. "You remember what you told me that night at the bar?"

Hawk shook his head. "Something pretty fantastic, I expect, for you to remember it after forty, fifty years."

"You said that you would never get old as long as you stayed in the game."

"I did? I was only twenty-one. What did I know about getting old? Must have been smashed."

"We were only drinking beer as I remember," Boyd laughed, "just like at Stamford, but your words left their mark on me. I remembered them again when the Cards released me when I was thirty. I got picked up by the Phillies the next week, but that's when I realized that I wouldn't be a kid forever. When I started having shoulder problems that next year I made a point of asking to do my rehab in Scranton where maybe I could get a foot in the door to a manager's office. Spent ten years as a pitching coach in Clearwater, but I eventually got to Reading and then back to Scranton. I was managing the Red Barons when I got the call from Seattle."

"Hawk!" a voice called out from across the field. "They're back!"

"Catch you after the game, Boyd?" he asked, taking a step backward.

"Sure thing," Boyd agreed.

Marduk directed Hawk toward the clubroom and Hawk ran all the way to find a bedraggled trio sitting listlessly on the benches.

"Good heavens!" Hawk exclaimed. "What happened to you?"

Enki looked up, obviously using all his available energy just to hold his head up. "You tell him," he said to Ninhursag.

"Mm?" she mumbled a reply, equally spent.

"We've been fighting the forces of darkness, evil, and chaos," Ratatosk filled in, evidently thriving on abuse. He was missing fur in a few spots where it had been burned off and two Anunnaki, Nin-ti's sisters in fact, were bandaging his left knee and right shoulder. Hawk looked skeptical and the squirrel continued. "I was ambushed while watching the games on opening day. Don't know who did it, but they sealed me up inside one of Yggdrasil's branches." He went on to describe what he knew of Enki's and Ninhursag's search. "Just as we were about to leave, however, we were attacked."

"Did you see who did it?" Marduk asked ominously.

"No. Whoever it was attacked us by remote control through an impersonal force of some sort. It was like battling a video game only without the joystick."

"Like battling who without what?" Enlil asked from the clubhouse doorway. Word of Enki and Ninhursag's arrival had brought him running as well.

"Never mind," Ratatosk swept the question away with a gesture that made him cringe in pain. "We don't know who it was, but we were nearly defeated in the first few minutes by some force that stole our energy. Enki and Ninhursag cast a spell together that gave us some respite, but we were trapped for hours until Samuel and Vethrfolnir came to the rescue. When they attacked, the enemy abruptly pulled back and we were free. We then got here as soon as possible. Got anything to eat? I'd even take a hotdog."

"We have some chickpeas," Utu offered. Ratatosk wrinkled his lip, but ate them anyway.

"I'll send word to Odin - Yggdrasil is in his jurisdiction if it is in anyone's," Enlil announced, "and I'll also contact the Commissioner, in case this has anything to do with the team."

"Good idea," Enki nodded tiredly. "I need to sleep," he continued after a bit." Ninhursag nodded her agreement.

"All right," Hawk decided. "Go sleep it off. We'll see if we can win this one for you."

THIRTEEN

Rock Bottom

As it turned out, the Lamassu did not win the game for Enki, Ninhursag, and Ratatosk, nor did they win the next two games either. As soon as he was fed and bandaged, the squirrel returned to Yggdrasil, but this time Hawk sent Nanshe, whose function had once been to keep Enki's holy shrine, with Ratatosk to watch his back. Meanwhile Enki and Ninhursag slept.

Hawk was not surprised when they slept the clock around once, but he became increasingly alarmed as they continued to sleep coma-like for the next three days. He was hesitant to leave them in Olympus while the team moved on to a two-game stand in Valhalla, but Jove and Enlil assured Hawk that they would be well-cared for. Their health, however, wasn't Hawk's only concern.

The team's morale was dropping with every loss and a two-man bullpen was ridiculously shallow even by Celestial League standards. Two-faced Isimud was a strong starter, and could easily go seven or eight innings several days in a row, but Ninshubur was proving to be a typical saver. He could throw a ball with lightning speed and, given a lead, he could probably bring the game on home, although the Lamassu had yet to set him up for a win. After three innings Ninshubur's arm began to tire, but, fortunately, his stamina was so great that he could probably repeat that performance all season. Enki, however, was still the team's star pitcher and could easily pitch an entire game three days out of five if needed. Without him in the line-up, both Isimud and Ninshubur were starting to show signs of long-term fatigue as they went into their first game against the Valhalla Vikings without a day off since their loss against the Cubs.

The Valhalla stadium was bleak. Cold, dark stone benches, stacked twenty-two high, lined the baselines under a streaky gray sky. The dirt sections of the diamond were a dark gray too, only slightly lighter than the stone of the stadium so that the only splashes of color came from the speckled grass that Hawk insisted on calling AstroTurf and the Lammasu away-uniforms.

"Depressing," Hawk muttered looking out at the field while the grounds-keepers swept the field.

"It's good battle weather," Ratatosk squeaked. "That's how the heroes of Valhalla would see it. A bracing cold to get the heart started after a night in Odin's mead hall. A stiff breeze at your back and the smell of snow in the air."

"It's bloody cold, if that's what you mean," Gilgamesh grumbled.

"Yes," Ratatosk agreed readily. "That's what I mean."

"Good thing we brought Uttu along. She promises woolen undergarments by game time."

"Hope they're warm enough," Hawk commented. "I wonder if we're allowed to use self-warming gloves?"

"Never heard of those," Ratatosk admitted.

"I just made them up, but I imagine they would use some form of divine magic."

"It's a good idea," the squirrel told him. "Would they improve your players' abilities?"

"Only by keeping them from suffering from frostbite."

"Then that should be legal. Enki should know how to cast such a spell."

"So should Inanna and Marduk," Gilgamesh added, "and they're here. I'll ask them." He left the dugout for the warmth of the clubhouse.

"Is it going to snow, Ratty?" Hawk asked with a shiver.

"In Valhalla? Eventually, but I wouldn't be surprised if the place warms up to shirt-sleeve temperature in the next hour. This is an aspect of Heaven after all, so it would never be cold any longer than the locals find enjoyable."

"Maybe I should stop the production of the woolen clothes?"

"Nah," Ratatosk disagreed. "Around here you never know. And they'll be good for other trips here."

"I hope Enki and Ninhursag can catch up to us soon," Hawk changed the subject.

"They're still resting comfortably. We just have to let them sleep it off."

"Can't any of the healing gods we have do anything?" Hawk asked hopefully.

"They already have, but the only way to heal exhaustion is to sleep. Right now we ought to be worrying

about the Vikings."

"You've already told me about them," Hawk replied testily.

"I was talking to Sigrud an hour ago."

"Who?"

"A Valkyrja. Anyway, she tells me that Odin's been rearranging the batting order."

"Odin? You mean he isn't giving his manager a free hand?"

"Odin is the manager."

"You're kidding! What's the old guy know about baseball? From what I hear the Norse pantheon hasn't had much more recent contact with the mortal plane than the Mesopotamian one."

"Try telling Odin anything," Ratatosk grumbled. "He says that if he was good enough to command at Ragnarok, he's good enough to run a baseball team."

"Hmm! So maybe we have a chance here."

"Maybe," Ratatosk conceded uncertainly, "but they still have a .500 average this season and their morale is high after coming off a three-game sweep of the Memphis Crocs."

"All right, you've brought me back to earth, or where ever we are. Tell me about the new line-up."

"New line-up?" Marduk asked from the doorway to the clubhouse. He, Inanna, Dumuzi, and Utu were just coming out for their warm-up exercises.

"Not for us," Hawk informed them. "The Vikings." They nodded, but remained to listen.

"Old 'One-eye' has been playing with his line-up strategy lately," Ratatosk began again. "He's not doing so badly for a complete novice, but then with the power he has behind him it would be hard not to. He's finally learned why most managers start out with their power hitters and that's just what he's done."

"Frey, their third baseman, leads off now. A consistent hitter, but really excels at one and two-baggers. He has trouble hitting low and inside so keep pressing him unless he steps back in the box."

"And then paint the outside corner?" Marduk asked.

"You got it," Ratatosk nodded. "Next is the catcher, Heimdall. He's got the best eyes in the league and even if he was blind he could hear where the ball was. Forget about striking him out; it ain't gonna happen. Instead, lob him slow balls. Make him work to get them out of the infield and hope you can throw him out at first. If he does get a hit just remember that he fancies himself a stolen base artist, but actually he's not fast enough in this league to make it. Let him take a long lead and if you don't panic you can put him out easy. Baldur plays at second base and will be batting third. He's a switch hitter, but the weakest of the first four. Just keep changing pitch speeds and you'll probably trip him up."

"And the bad news?" Hawk asked promptly.

"Funny you should ask," the squirrel replied drily. "Batting clean-up is Thor. He's probably the biggest muscleman short of Odin himself in the entire pantheon. If he connects with the ball there's no telling which of the nine worlds it'll land in. Don't let him connect."

"Easier said than done," Marduk replied.

"Easier than you might think. The hammer-thrower's never been known for his sense of humor. As a matter of fact, I think he had it removed at birth. Someone said something about being circumcised and he thought they said circumspect." Ratatosk chuckled at his own joke, but the others only gave him a set of grim smiles. "Anyway, he's easy to razz. Keep the pressure on him with tough pitches and snide comments and he'll go down. As for the rest of the team, well watch out for Thialfi in centerfield. He's almost as fast as Mercury and you'll remember that Wingfoot could have handled the outfield all by himself. The other danger, of course, is that if Thialfi hits the ball on the ground he's going to be at first base before anyone can catch it and if it rolls into the outfield he'll be at third. Try to make him hit it up in the air. He doesn't have the power to put it out of the park and you can play the outfield shallow. He often hits into double plays."

"Anyone else?" Utu asked.

"Just the pitcher. Odin's going to let Loki start today. He and the Trickster came to terms just the other day and this will be his first start. I can only advise you in terms of his non-baseball record. He's a sly one; they sometimes call him the Fox."

"El Zorro?" Hawk mused.

"Not hardly," Rattatosk scoffed. "Most religions have a trickster god of one sort or another. Some are basically good but mischievous, like Enki or Pan; others have a more sinister reputation - Satan for example. Sorry, Marduk."

"My devil aspect has that reputation," Marduk acknowledged dryly.

"Right. Well, Loki is the very worst sort of trickster. He tries to play both sides off the middle and by the end of a cycle you can bet the farm that he'll be working against you. In the case of the game I'd say keep an eagle-eye out for greaseballs and corked bats. Even if he plays it straight, expect more screwballs than the market will bear. I doubt he could throw a straight pitch if his life depended on it."

"So," Hawk summed up for his scout, "they're just another typical Celestial League team."

"You could say that." Ratatosk shrugged.

Isimud had a rocky start but with only Ninshubur for relief, Hawk was hesitant to pull him. As Ratatosk predicted, Frey led off with a first pitch single through the hole into left field and Heimdall followed suit by swinging on a bad pitch in order to help Frey steal second and then hit a single of his own to leave runners at the corners.

Balder patiently waited out Isimud's knuckleball and walked to first, loading the bases as Thor stepped to the plate. Marduk kept Ratatosk's advice in mind and signaled for pitches to throw the Thunderer off his guard and backed them up with an annoying chatter, but while Thor's face darkened visibly, he still managed to bring his bat around to hit a low pitch with a golf swing that sent the ball on a journey only a ballistic computer could track. Thor's trot around the bases brought Hawk to the mound to confer with Isimud and Marduk.

"You're looking a bit stiff out here today," Hawk noted. "Maybe that arm of yours is starting to give out?"

"I don't think so," Isimud disagreed a little too readily. "It's just too cold out today."

"It's warmed up a bit since we started," Marduk commented. "It's still cool but not too bad."

"I'll leave you in for now," Hawk told the pitcher. "I don't really have much choice, but if you give up another run this inning I'll have to pull you." Isimud looked stricken, giving Hawk an insight into what might be wrong. "Look, Izzy. You've been under a lot of pressure since Enki went down. I know we haven't won any games yet, so another loss or two isn't going to make much of a difference. Try to have a little fun out here. You know, relax?" Both of Isimud's faces were grim as he nodded. Hawk saw the umpire approaching to end the conference, but decided to try one more thing. "Come on," Hawk pushed with all the charm at his disposal. "Give us a smile. Now with the other face." Under the friendly assault, Isimud couldn't help but grin in response.

"Break it up and play ball," the umpire grunted at them as he reached the mound. All three made a great show of ignoring the man while silently returning to their places. Isimud retired the next three batters and finally brought the first inning to a close.

Loki threw his obligatory eight warm-up pitches and Ishkur stepped up to the plate. He swung at the first pitch and tapped it into the corner of deep right field. The hit should have been a double at least, but Thialfi came streaking across the outfield and fired it back inward fast enough to hold him to a single base.

Then Marduk took his turn and Loki decided to try out his best curve ball. He took a step toward the middle of the first baseline and let fly. The ball flew out of his hand with so much spin that it curved forty-five degrees to sail right over the plate.

"Balk!" two out of three umpires cried in unison. "Take your base," Marduk was instructed.

"What!" Odin screamed, his voice filling the stadium. The owner/manager of the Vikings came storming out on to the field, looking, with his black eye patch, like a kid who wanted to be a Halloween pirate, but got stuck with last year's baseball player costume.

"I said 'Balk!'" the umpire repeated himself. "Your pitcher threw at the plate while stepping away and that entitles the opposing batter to one base."

"Puny mortal," Odin growled threateningly, "that is the way Fox throws a curve ball!"

"If he does it that way again, the bases will be loaded," the umpire replied calmly, not at all fazed by Odin's anger. Hawk looked on from the third baseline and chuckled. For only the second time since the season began he wasn't the one arguing a call. Odin ranted and raved a little longer but he cooled off quickly when the official gave him a warning. If he continued, Odin would be thrown out of the game.

With Odin's departure from the field, Nergal stepped into the batter's box carrying his ebony-black bat. His fair features and curly blond hair were more appropriate for a god of the sky, a position he had been born to rather than King of the Dead, which became his fate. His clear blue eyes darkened as he locked glares with the Viking pitcher until they became gloss black orbs studded with a thousand miniature stars. His brow creased and he stood statue-like waiting for Loki to make his move.

The Trickster blinked first and paused to rub his eyes for relief. Then, keeping only the home plate in mind, he wound up and fired the ball in. It was tight inside, but Nergal casually leaned back out of its way, moving just back enough to keep the ball from hitting him. Then he swayed back into place and stood motionlessly awaiting the next pitch.

"You're a cool one," Heimdall noted from his catcher's crouch.

Nergal gave him no reply beyond a tight smile as he kept his attention on the pitcher. Loki wound up and threw the best curve he could under the umpire's restriction. It caught the outside corner of the plate to even up the count, but Nergal swung on the next pitch and knocked the ball high and deep into right field where Thor merely had to take one step to his left to catch it. However, given the depth of the field, the sacrifice was enough to give Ishkur a chance at coming home.

Thor threw the ball hard back toward the infield where Baldur relayed it to Heimdall. To the untrained eye, the ball and Ishkur seemed to arrived at the same time, but the umpire clearly saw that the Mesopotamian storm god was, "Safe!"

"Out by a league, mortal!" Odin stormed, charging back on to the field. Out of habit, Hawk followed suit and approached the umpire as well to argue the other side of the coin.

"He was safe!" the umpire insisted.

"You're blind!" Odin screamed.

"He's not the one wearing the eye patch, Odie," Hawk commented. The taunt was too much for the King of the Norse gods and, without thinking, He picked Hawk up and tossed him over His shoulder.

Hawk flew with none of the grace his name implied and, instead tumbled head over heels until he hit something that felt like a brick wall.

FOURTEEN

That Light At the End of the Tunnel...

Hawk woke up in the Valhalla visitor's locker room to find a concerned Nin-ti sitting beside the bench he was sprawled out on. Words failed him for an instant. He wanted to ask if she got the license number of that truck, but decided that the joke was not only feeble but was probably older than she was. Instead he merely whispered, "What happened?"

"Marduk caught you and Odin was thrown out of the game."

Hawk looked around and noticed that several of Nin-ti's sisters, healing goddesses all, were clustered

around them "How long have I been out?" he asked trying to sit up.

Nin-ti pushed him back down and replied, "Just a few innings. The score is tied at twenty runs each."

"Twenty?"

"It appears that both teams are currently strong on offense and weak on defense."

"Wait a minute," Hawk said suddenly, forcing himself to sit in spite of Nin-ti's protests. "If you and I are here in the locker room, who's managing the team?"

"Hey!" a squeaky voice shouted in from the dugout, "Is Hawk up yet? I can't hold this team together forever!"

"The rodent is in charge?" Hawk asked sternly. "Wrong!"

"I'll say it's wrong," the squirrel agreed. "I'm a damned good scout, but the players need a manager they can respect. You gotta get out there, Hawk!"

"Hawk is not yet fully recuperated," Nin-ti informed the strife-bearer.

"It'll have to do," Hawk told her firmly, standing up. "Actually I feel much better. What inning is it? Why are you even allowed on the field, for that matter?"

"Top of the ninth," Ratatosk informed him calmly. "And this isn't like the mortal leagues. Anyone associated with the team can fill in any position deemed appropriate. So when you needed another coach on the field, I filled in. You can play any of your coaches in a pinch too. Didn't you know that?"

"It's news to me. So this is it, then," Hawk replied as he walked purposely from the locker room and back into the bracing cold of the dugout. The players stood in tribute to him and applauded loudly for a minute while he noted that Loki was still taking his warm-ups. Then Hawk waved his team silent so he could ask, "Who's up?"

"Marduk," Ratatosk informed him.

"Good. Very good," Hawk grunted. "So it's almost like having the top of the order. Nin-ti, dear, would you run out to the bullpen? Tell Ninshubur to start warming up. If we manage to get ahead I want to send him in as a saver."

"It's about time he got that chance," she replied, smiling.

"How's Loki been looking the last two innings?" Hawk asked.

"Well, his earned run average won't win him any Cy Young Awards."

"His average is even worse than mine now," Isimud laughed.

"I'll try not to recruit him," Hawk muttered sourly as Marduk looked to him for instructions. "Just get a hit," he told the god-hero simply. Then Hawk jogged out to the third base coach's box and the inning began.

An odd murmur swept the cold stone grandstand as Hawk crossed the field. It was mixed with a smattering of applause that slowly grew into a thunderous cheer. At first Hawk wondered how many of the Anunaki of Dilmun had traveled with the team after all, but then he realized that many of the spectators cheering him were locals. The warriors of Valhalla really appreciated someone who could come back from his wounds to rejoin the battle. Hawk tipped his hat to the crowd and the roar grew louder still. The Viking players joined the cheers, all except for Loki who stood on the pitcher's mound looking somewhat shaken. Finally the umpire signaled Marduk to take his place in the batter's box and Loki did his best to screw his determination back down.

The first pitch came in wild, flying high over the catcher's glove and into the back stop. Heimdal walked the ball back to the mound and said a few words to Loki. The Trickster nodded and tried again. This time his sinker managed to fool Marduk into swinging at an otherwise low pitch. His next pitch, didn't have enough drop on it and Marduk put all his might behind the swing.

There was an odd crack as the bat met the ball and Hawk had to duck as the fat end of Marduk's bat flew past him. The ball itself traced a lazy hyperbola into the middle of centerfield. Thialfi was as fast as Ratatosk had warned, but even he couldn't retrieve the ball before it bounced once on the grass. He fired it in to Thor at first, but his aim was bad and Thor had to step off the bag to keep it from getting past him.

With Marduk safe on base, Hawk gave Nergal the sign to bunt. The King of the Dead nodded and stepped up to the plate. Loki wound up and fired in a curve that caught the outside corner of the plate for strike one. Nergal, however, smiled tightly and without bothering to take so much as a single practice swing waited for Loki's next pitch. He didn't have long to wait and the next pitch looked to be a carbon copy of the first. His bat came down and intercepted the ball as it clipped the plate, sending it gently down the first base line.

Marduk was prepared for the move and had started running with the pitch. Nergal sprinted for first and had to hop over the ball he had sent in the same direction. Loki was right behind him and retrieved the ball and fired it in to Baldur at second, but Marduk had taken too long a lead and was safe. Seeing that, Baldur wasted no time in relaying the ball to Thor just barely in time to beat Nergal.

Gilgamesh was up next and tipped twelve pitches off into foul territory before finally sending one directly into Thialfi's glove. That brought Inanna to the plate.

The Goddess of Love and War had been having a tough season so far with a batting average of only .156 coming into this game. Loki quickly brought the count to no balls and two strikes and then after flashing the goddess a lecherous grin, threw the third pitch in high and tight. It was the worst mistake he could have made.

Inanna snarled as she picked herself up from the dark gray dirt just outside the batter's box where she had landed face down. Among the gods looks could, indeed, kill and Loki clutched his abdomen for a moment until the umpire gave Inanna a warning for the use of offensive magic. It would have been cause for throwing her out of the game, but the offense had not been committed while the ball was in play so the official had some discretion in how he should call it. Inanna nodded her recognition of the warning, but continued to glare at Loki as she readied herself for the next pitch.

She was the perfect portrait of monomaniacal concentration as Loki's next pitch approached the plate and she brought her bat around to meet the leather-clad spheroid. The crack of the ball against the bat echoed throughout the cold stadium and the ball sailed up into the dismal gray sky never to be seen again. The Lamassu were ahead 22-20.

Utu struck out to end the top of the ninth inning, bringing the Vikings to the plate and Ninshubur to the mound as Hawk had planned. Thialfi was up first and his speed on foot was matched only by his eye-hand coordination. He swung on Ninshubur's first offering, a split-finger fastball that streaked across the strike zone. The ball lined straight into right field just out of Ninurta's reach to bounce just prior to reaching Nanna-Sin's glove. By the time the patron god of Ur retrieved it, Thialfi had already rounded first and was better than half-way to second, but Ratatosk had been making suggestions in between innings and instead of trying to beat Thialfi to second, Sin flung the ball toward Inanna at shortstop. She caught just as Thor's right-hand man flashed by her and she fired the ball to Gilgamesh who caught it as Thialfi slid feet-first toward the base. The umpire hesitated as a cloud of gray dust obscured his view and the stadium went silent waiting for his call.

"Out!" he shouted with the signal. The call was greeted by an angry set of boos and catcalls and Odin's assistant coach, Braggi, god of poetry, immediately protested the decision vehemently. In the world of baseball, the gods, however powerful, were amateurs compared even to the youngest Little Leaguer and the official's greatest challenge was to keep from laughing at Braggi's feeble although dramatic attempts to cajole him into changing the call.

It had begun to snow gently when Braggi finally gave up. Now it was Frey's turn at bat. Ninshubur, at Marduk's prompting, served up a variety of curves, fireballs, and offspeed pitches, but quickly built up a full count. Then on the third 3-2 pitch, Frey tapped a grounder through the gap into right field for an easy trot to first base.

The gentle snow became a little thicker, and the umpires called time-out while they considered suspending play until the weather cleared. When they spoke to Braggi and Hawk, Braggi agreed that it would be best to continue the game in the morning, but Hawk argued that visibility was still not particularly impaired and that the game was only two outs from being over. The chief umpire thought about it another minute or two while the snow began to stick in a few places around the outfield. Then he decided to let the players finish the game.

"If the Vikings tie up the score at the end of this inning, we'll suspend play for the day," he told them.

Feeling the pressure, Ninshubur took five shots at picking Frey off at first before making his first pitch to Heimdall. The attempt was futile and the pitch, when he finally threw it, was low and tight. Heimdall hopped up and over the ball as it came in hard beneath him. The second pitch was outside and the gold-haired watcher just stood and passively regarded its path for ball two. Against all Ratatosk's advice, the third pitch was Ninshubur's finest fastball that caught the outside corner of the plate. Heimdall swung and blasted a line drive straight back to Ninshubur. The Lamassu pitcher brought his glove up between the ball and his chest in a reaction born more of self-defense than training. The force of the impact drove Inanna's vizier back several feet until he fell over backwards. He rolled with the fall and came up with the ball still in his glove. Then from his knees he threw the ball to Nergal at first for the double play before Frey could tag up.

As though the weather had only been waiting for the game to be decided the snowfall abruptly became heavier and started piling up faster than the Valhalla grounds-keepers could spread the protective tarpaulins out over the diamond. They also tried shooing the Lamassu players off the field, but that proved far harder than the muscle work required to lay the tarps themselves down.

For the first time that season, the team from Dilmun knew what it was like to win a game. Never having won anything more than a scrimmage game against themselves they didn't quite know how to react until Inanna let loose with a primal scream of victory and ran forward to kiss Ninshubur passionately. Nin-ti sprinted across the whitening field to congratulate Hawk similarly and after a brief moment he shelved any

thoughts about teaching the team about the more conventional victory rituals.

FIFTEEN

... Is Only the Glow From the Fires of Hell

They were all wet and cold by the time they reached the showers but somehow that only increased the pleasure. Unlike mortal ballparks all Celestial League clubhouses were equipped with his and her sections, so Hawk was shocked when the victory celebration that began on the field between the male and female players and coaches continued in one mass unisex shower.

Embarrassed by the glimpse he had of Inanna and Ashnan "partying down" with the rest of the team, he turned away to find Nin-ti behind him with playfulness in her eyes. The women's showers were unoccupied so they moved there and indulged in a more private celebration.

Enki and Ninhursag arrived too late for the initial revelry, but they were on hand in Odin's mead hall that evening. In spite of the Alfadur's ire on the field that afternoon, there was nothing but the fabled comraderie of Valhalla where the day's warriors, healed from their wounds, could feast with the gods until dawn or they passed into a collective drunken stupor to rise the next day and begin the cycle again.

The snow shower that began falling at the end of the game continued to grow into a blizzard that continued to distract Hawk through his alcoholic haze. As nobody seemed to be bothered by the raging storm, however, Hawk tried to ignore it as well. The last thing he remembered of the evening was a badly off-key rendition of the Maid of Amsterdam being sung by Thor and Heimdall.

And he woke up wondering where they had ever learned that song. Then he opened his eyes and all the photons in the world tried to get in at once. Instantly his eyes snapped shut again as they did the next two times he tried to open them.

"Good morning, dear," Nin-ti called far too cheerfully for Hawk's taste. He opened his eyes to narrow slits and looked about. The room was being kept adequately warm by a fire that filled the large fireplace on the far wall. It was the bright yellow-orange light of those flames that had been besieging Hawk's optic nerves. "Hangover?"

Hawk quickly turned his gaze toward the window where Nin-ti sat comfortably with a large mug of something that steamed. Just as quickly, he regretted the motion as it pulled the threads of pain that connected his head to the now spinning room. He groaned his best attempt at an answer.

"I warned you about that stuff Heimdall kept filling your horn with, dear," she told him, still sounding much too cheerful. Hawk sat up and pushed his feet over the edge of the bed. Then he noticed that there was a second mug sitting on her table and he shambled over to the window and sat across from her. She filled his mug with hot black coffee and waited for him to take his first sip. He felt immediately better, deciding that Nin-ti had slipped something into the cup to cure his hangover. He still felt a nagging pain in his left arm. Not a pain exactly, he corrected his thoughts, more like a tired soreness. He decided that he must have slept in a position that partially cut off circulation to it and turned his thought back to the mug,

proceeding to drain it.

"God, I needed this!" Hawk croaked at last. Nin-ti nodded mutely and inclined her head toward the window. Hawk followed the motion and saw a vast expanse of white stretching out from just beneath the windowsill. "Got a few feet of snow last night," he commented.

"Hawk, dearest, we're on the second floor. We got a few yards of snow last night."

"Shoveling out the stadium's probably going to take some time then. Maybe I should go back to bed."

"If you wish," she replied, but her tone implied he ought to do anything but.

Hawk took another sip of coffee, wondering vaguely why such a beverage was even known in Valhalla when it hadn't been available in Dilmun until he requested it. He decided that maybe the Norse gods hadn't been quite as cut off from the mortal plane as Enlil's pantheon after all.

"Watching them clear out the stadium in time for the game ought to really be something to see," Hawk said a few minutes later.

"Not today," Nin-ti informed him. "I went downstairs an hour ago and it seems that the storm is going to continue most of the day and Odin won't allow the grounds-keepers to get started until the storm is finally over."

"I don't understand," Hawk admitted. "Couldn't Odin just order up some decent weather?"

"I suppose he could, but the gods of Asgard prefer to let weather run its natural course."

"This is natural?"

"We are north of the Arctic Circle, dear, and it is only mid-May. Snow is not unknown here in the late spring. Anyway, you might as well get dressed and we'll go downstairs for breakfast. Then you can talk to Odin and the officials and make this cancellation official."

"Since when does Odin need me to call a rain... I mean a snow-out?"

"In the Celestial League, both managers must agree on a cancellation. Besides, the sooner we clear this up the sooner we can leave. We have a four-game stand in Hell starting tomorrow. If we arrive early, we can watch how they handle the Eagles."

"Good idea," Hawk admitted grudgingly. Within the hour the team was treading the branches of Yggdrasill. While traveling vertically on the tree the squirrel showed the team how, by a simple force of will, one could shift from one aspect of the Tree to another.

The purplish flowers of the giant ash were dropping off as the team returned to the branches of the Tree and there were hints of green on most branches where foliage was beginning to develop. Nin-ti commented on the rapid changes that had taken place since they had last visited the Tree.

"Spring comes late in the North," Ratatosk snapped, "and a plant has to get through its cycle quickly or it dies." The squirrel seemed troubled as he led the way down the super highway that was just another aspect of the massive trunk of the World Tree. "There's something wrong here," he admitted when Enki asked.

The God of Wisdom opened his divine senses but after a minute announced, "Everything seems just fine to me."

Ratatosk rolled his eyes and muttered sourly, "Right. Bloody gods! Think they know everything." He turned around and shouted, "Yo! Nature!"

"Yes, strife-bearer?" Ninhursag asked flatly from about twenty feet behind. As there was no particular reason to hurry, they were strung out in irregular clumps along a half mile of the great tree's trunk.

"Something's wrong with the Tree, but I can't place the problem. Can you?"

"I'll try," she replied patiently. A moment later her features darkened and her brow creased in anger. "Somebody's wounded Yggdrasill."

"Somebody's always wounding the Tree," the squirrel snapped at Her. "Nidhogge feasts regularly on the root that grows in Niffleheim, and that snake is just the major irritant to this aspect of the Tree. There's at least one for each aspect. It's one of the great principals of Creation, I think."

"A rodent and a cynic," Ninhursag commented dryly. "That sort of damage is part of the normal balance between Light and Darkness. The wound I'm referring to is not in one of the usual places."

"Where is it then?" Enki asked.

"Ahead of us."

"I don't like the sound of that," Marduk commented, catching up to the lead trio. "Maybe we ought to let Enlil know."

"Good thought, son," Enki agreed, "but Enlil's still in Odin's hall. Remember?"

"Perhaps we ought to wait for Hawk to catch up," Ninhursag suggested. "He and Nin-ti should be here any minute." As she spoke Gilgamesh and Inanna joined them and Marduk quickly recapped what they had learned so far.

"Hawk?" Inanna asked. "He knows his baseball, but what use could any mortal be here?"

"Hawk isn't just a ballplayer," Mother Nature pointed out. "He's also our leader and Enlil has ordered us to obey him."

"On the playing field, yes, but..."

"Actually I don't recall that Enlil specified that," Enki commented with a smile.

"But I'm sure he didn't have something like this in mind," Inanna protested.

"Orders are orders," Enki shrugged. "Besides, without him none of us have a track record for team work."

"True enough," Ninhursag allowed. "We haven't worked together since that night you got me drunk and we started inventing new creatures." She smiled, but Enki only grimaced at the memory. Ninhursag had

cursed him for his behavior the next morning, thereby inventing the hangover.

A few minutes later Hawk had been brought into the ranks of the informed, but life on the mortal plane had not prepared him for the largely anarchistic world of the gods. "Isn't there someone we can call to take care of the problem so we can be on our way?" he asked innocently.

"Yes and no," Enki nodded. "There is someone to call, but it's us."

"That's right, dear," Nin-ti added. "We can call for help if we need it, but the responsibility to deal with the problem falls to any of us who encounter it."

"Then I suppose we had better continue on and find out just what the problem is," Hawk shrugged. He started off, but after two steps he stopped abruptly causing a minor pile-up. "Uh... which way?"

"Follow me," Ratatosk replied.

They continued on for another half hour until they reached a branching road and turned off the highway. As they did so their perspective abruptly twisted around as they instantly shifted back to the giant ash that comprised the Yggdrassil aspect of the World Tree.

"That's odd," the squirrel noted. "This would have been our turn regardless of the damage."

"I don't like the sound of that," Hawk grumbled. Most of the others muttered agreement. Their suspicions were born out a few minutes later when the wide branch ended abruptly in a ragged break. The gods stared out across the gap silently while Ratatosk swore vilely.

"What the hell happened here?" a soft raspy voice asked from behind and to one side of them. They turned to see a large red hart on a nearby branch.

"Durathror," Ratatosk greeted him coolly.

"Oh. Are you handling this, Ratatosk?" the deer asked seeing the squirrel for the first time.

"Actually I'm on my way to Hell," Ratatosk replied.

"Doesn't surprise me a bit," the deer replied, nonchalantly nibbling on a nearby bud.

"Ha ha," the squirrel snarled back sourly. "Why don't you take over so we can be on our way? And while you're at it find out why neither Sam nor Vethrfolnir noticed this happening. Birds!" he spat disgustedly. Durathror vanished into the dense pinnate foliage of the Tree and Ratatosk continued, "There. That ought to make you happy, Hawk. I've managed to palm off the responsibility."

"Our route's been cut off, though," Enki noted.

"There is another way," the squirrel informed them, "but I had planned to avoid it. Using Hell's front entrance is never pleasant."

"Do you mean to say there's a service entrance to Hell?" Hawk asked disbelievingly.

"As a matter of fact," Ratatosk nodded, "yes there is. Drops you off right into the administrative offices, clean air, air conditioning, and good food. Ah well," he sighed. "Nothing worth doing ever seems to be

easy. Let's go."

He led them back to the trunk and then onto the highway aspect which seemed to be heading toward a majestic mountain range. Another hour later they followed the road into a cavernous tunnel where, after a few minutes walk it proceeded to split off into thousands of smaller tunnels.

"I hate following the roots," Ratatosk announced to anyone who cared to listen.

"Because they all lead to various aspects of the Underworld?" Nin-ti asked gently.

"Nah," he replied. "Claustrophobic tendencies. These tunnels get smaller and smaller as we travel."

"So in a way," Hawk noted, "the world really is closing in on us."

"I'd rather not talk about it," Ratatosk shuddered.

More walking eventually brought the party into a wide, arid rocky valley. The dull red sun overhead shed a very eerie light on the dry scrub brush that dotted the landscape and Hawk suddenly realized that they were outside again. He looked back to see that there was no sign of the tunnel they had come out of. Instead they were coming out of a box canyon in a maze-like terrain that Hawk could only think of as badlands.

"What aspect of the Tree is this?" he asked out loud.

"No aspect," Ratatosk replied. "We're in that region that Dante described as Hell's Vestibule. Depressing, isn't it."

"Warm too," Enki noted.

"Especially after the blizzard in Asgard," Dumuzi added.

"My people have lived in worse," Martu commented appraisingly. "These plants, if edible, would be fair grazing for the flocks, so as long as you can find a well or an oasis often enough..."

"No oases here, Bedu God," Ratatosk interrupted, "and the leaves would kill your goats faster than your butcher's sharpest stone blade."

"Stone?" Hawk wondered aloud. "I thought you guys were the gods of a Bronze Age civilization."

"We were, dear," Nin-ti replied, "but the Bronze Age was the long period during which bronze gradually replaced copper and stone as the primary material for tools and weapons. Bronze weapons were expensive; a mark of one's wealth or the sign of a rich man's favor. Still the soldiers of any civilized army had a bronze-tipped spear at the very least, but with all that metal tied up in weapons, household knives continued to be made out of flint and obsidian.

"Besides, a stone knife has several advantages. It's cheaper, sharper, and harder than its bronze counterpart. All bronze knives have going for them in that respect is that if you drop one, it isn't likely to shatter. People to whom a blade's sharpness was the primary concern preferred stone. Flint and obsidian, in fact, were still being used deep into the Iron Age, at least in the Near East."

"I didn't know that," Hawk mumbled, realizing, not for the first time, just how little he knew about the

background of his team members.

"No reason why you should, dear," Nin-ti said soothingly. "It doesn't seem to be common knowledge in the modern world."

Hawk grunted and looked around. He soon lost track of all the twists and turns their path took, but the squirrel evidently knew where he was headed for it was not long before they found themselves near what looked for all the world like an entrance to the largest theme park in the universe.

A tall stone wall stretched out to either side of the entrance. As far as Hawk could tell the wall had no ends but faded out of sight as an invisibly thin line at the horizon and there seemed to be other entrances set at irregular intervals in both directions. While nobody else was approaching the same entrance Hawk and his team were, there seemed to be countless people headed toward the other gates.

But what really caught Hawk's eye more than anything else was the giant television screen over each gate. They were only close enough to see the nearest, but the show was the same on each one. There was a picturesque view of an entire range of volcanoes in full eruption over which were superimposed some words in bright yellow. However, Hawk was unable to read them.

"Any idea what that says?" Hawk asked Nin-ti.

"Sorry, dear," she replied. "Until a few weeks before we contacted you I was only literate in the languages of ancient Mesopotamia. It took me months to get fluent in English. Oh there, now it's changed. Probably says something else now."

"No," Marduk disagreed. "It always says the same thing. Watch. The English translation ought to come around any time now."

True to his prediction, a few seconds later the message was printed in English; "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

"I never read the Inferno," Hawk muttered after a brief pause, "but I seriously doubt that this is what Dante envisioned."

Marduk replied, "Always give the customer what he wants." Hawk turned to face the ancient hero god and noticed for the first time that there was, indeed, a strong resemblance between Marduk and his later aspect, Lucifer. "Dante Allegheri had very specific expectations and we went way out to meet every last one of them, including a total renovation of a large percentage of Hell's territory in order to match his visualization of the place."

"We?" Hawk questioned the term.

"My staff and I. Lucifer and I were one and the same at that time remember. Anyway, we threw in a few surprises for him, but my strongest memory of the tour was of supervising the work crews who, on several occasions, had just barely managed to finish up as Virgil escorted Dante into an area."

"That wasn't just fiction?" Hawk asked.

"It was by the time he wrote it up. To tell the truth, none of us ever thought of having him meet the souls of people he knew. Of course, some of the souls he wrote about weren't dead yet, but that wasn't any of our concern."

"So maybe you can get us past the gates without a hassle?" Ratatosk suggested hopefully.

"That all depends on who's on duty," Marduk demurred. "Only the oldest demons would remember me in this aspect and they don't get assigned to gate duty very often."

"The other gates have long lines at them, but we seem to be the only ones near this one," Ishkur noted.

"How many errant souls make their way here by way of the roots of the Tree?" Nergal countered. "I must say, though, that this is quite an impressive set-up. My own realm doesn't have any of these outlandish modern trappings."

"It's sufficient for its purpose, I'm sure," Marduk told him. "The souls who end up here expect a certain degree of sophistication. Hell, like every other realm, has its purpose and the denizens of Hell find it far easier to accomplish it if their clients are sufficiently impressed."

"Clients?" Hawk asked.

"That is how the so-called lost souls are viewed. Hell, you see, is the ultimate reformatory. Here the souls of mortals are punished for the sins they committed in life. It's a rather long and involved procedure, but eventually repentance is achieved and those souls are allowed to continue on. Of course, some cases are harder than others and while some rare souls are allowed to go directly to Heaven, there are others who have been here for thousands of years. The average stay, though, is a bit less than a century."

"It doesn't seem so bad," Hawk opined.

"Excuse me?" Marduk asked, clearing his throat, "Did I hear you correctly? Hell isn't so bad?"

"It sort of reminds me of DisneyWorld without the castle. I've always liked DisneyWorld, especially in the off-season."

Marduk stared at Hawk with an unfathomable expression as the team strolled under the paint and neon arch that framed the gateway and through a set of automatic-opening glass doors. The room just inside the immense structure, however, would have been more at home in any major airport. The walls were carved out of a gloss-finished granite and the floors were tiled with a textured, light gray ceramic. The pure white ceiling was studded with inset floodlights that gave the area a cheerfully sanitized look.

"Now where?" Hawk asked Ratatosk.

"Beats me," the squirrel replied, "I've never been this way before."

"Follow me," Marduk told them confidently.

About fifty feet ahead sat a bored looking demon in a dark blue uniform that clashed horribly with his bright red complexion. He perked up a bit as they approached until taking a second look at the group.

The demon adjusted his cap so that it sat comfortably between the small, pointed horns sprouting from his temples, smiled to show his mouthful of yellowed fangs, and said, "Passports?"

"What?" several gods asked at once.

"Passports" the demon repeated. "Documents telling me who you are and where you come from. And if you don't know that much, you'll probably have even more trouble showing me your visas."

Hawk opened his wallet and pulled out a colorful credit card and flashed it at the demon.

"Funny," the demon replied flatly.

"Never mind all that," Marduk cut in at last. "This party must pass. It has been willed where that which..."

"Ha!" the demon shouted mirthlessly, cutting The Devil's better half off in mid-quotation. "That's a hot one! Haven't had anyone try that line around here in decades. Look, Bozo. If you want to get past this station you're going to have to show me the right papers. Otherwise you can use one of the regular customer entrances."

"That doesn't sound like a comfortable option," Hawk opined.

"It isn't," Marduk agreed, "and we're going through right here." He turned back to the demon. "What's your name and ID?"

"Teshub, son of Teshub," the demon replied calmly, "ID number 0008493-AR3T-6702QQ-L3754, and who in Hell are you when you're up and dressed?"

"In Hell?" Marduk reported, chuckling. "The name's Marduk, Teshub. I share the same ID number with your boss' boss' boss - Numero Uno," Teshub's eyes bugged out when he heard that and studied Marduk closely while he continued, "and unless you like the notion of being put on clean-up duty in the Pit for the next few millennia, you will let us continue on."

"Of course, sir," Teshub replied in a sudden reversal of attitude. "Just answer a few questions and I'll have a visa for you and your friends in a few minutes." He looked up hopefully. Marduk never let his fierce expression soften, but he nodded microscopically to indicate that Teshub should get to work. "Right," the nervous demon muttered. "Names?"

"The Dilmun Lamassu," Marduk supplied.

"Funny," Teshub replied. "You don't look like reptilian doggies."

"It's the name of our team," Enki informed him.

"Team? Oh! You're one of the baseball teams this season? Sorry I didn't recognize you all, but I've been on duty here for the last month and haven't had the time to keep up. You're supposed to use the service entrance around back."

"The way's been blocked," Marduk replied.

"Really?" Teshub was shocked. "I'll look into it after I get you inside. Your visas ought to be in the system somewhere." He pulled a dark gray keyboard out from under his desktop and a small screen rose up out of the desk and activated. "Yes, here you are. You weren't due until tomorrow."

"Today's game was snowed out," Nergal told him sourly.

"Won't happen here," Teshub replied quickly. "Our field is under the Earthdome."

"Earthdome?" Hawk asked.

"Just the opposite of Toronto 's Skydome," Teshub replied.

A few minutes later they learned why an underworld realm needed its stadium under a dome. Whoever had planned the structure had set it in the middle of a subterranean volcanic field, enclosed within an immense cavern whose impossibly high ceiling arced a mile overhead. The cinder cones were surrounded by a wide plain of smooth basalt. Some of the cones were spewing ash and flame while volcanic vents on the plain spat tall fountains of lava. The rest of the plain was speckled with glowing red pools of cooling lava. The eerie red and orange light of the hot lava might have illuminated the landscape sufficiently by itself, but it was greatly supplemented by the clear white light that erupted from within the crystal-domed stadium and bounced off the dark cavern ceiling.

The stadium building itself was the very antithesis of its environment. As they approached Hawk noted that he would have expected that the building might have been built from the same black basalt of the volcanic field it sat in, but instead its architect had chosen a green-streaked white marble for his medium and trimmed it with gray granitic stone.

They were met at the gate by the demoness Jael. Her clothes were her favorite deep blue tincture, although instead of tight-fitting spandex, this time she was wearing jeans and a tee shirt. She also wore a navy blue baseball cap with a bright red visor and a thick, block letter "B" embroidered across the front seam in white. Hawk mentally reviewed the roster of Celestial League teams, trying to identify her favorite team as she warmly greeted Enki, Ninhursag, and Nin-ti. Lost in thought, trying to solve this riddle, Hawk nearly missed it when Nin-ti introduced him to Jael.

"Pleased to meet you," he responded automatically, his eyes never leaving the embroidered letter.

"My cap is not the piece of clothing most men stare at," Jael commented dryly.

"Your cap," Hawk said uncertainly.

"Boston Braves," she replied. "One hell of a team. I was sorry when they moved to Milwaukee . You're here a day early, so we haven't got your rooms ready just yet, but that ought to be corrected by the end of today's game."

"Have we missed much?" Marduk asked.

"Five one-two-three innings," she replied with a shrug then continued as she led them into the ballpark "Good action if you like watching a pitchers' duel. Astoret and Xolotl are both pitching perfect games so far."

"Who?" Hawk asked.

"Astoret is a relatively young demon, about eight hundred years old, from the accounting department. I don't think he's known at all on the Mortal Plane. As for Xolotl, I may not be saying his name correctly. Most of those Mesoamerican gods have unpronounceable names. Anyway, Xolotl is one of Quetzalcoatl's brothers, if that means anything to you." Hawk shrugged. "I have to admit," Jael continued, "that I wouldn't have thought either pitcher was up to five perfect innings, not in this league."

"From what I've seen," Hawk disagreed, "I'd say that all of the pitchers in this league are capable of a perfect game."

"On the mortal plane, yes," Ratatosk nodded, "but there are just too many power hitters in the Celestial League, or so I'd have thought."

"Doesn't matter," Jael responded. "I was wrong and Xolotl and Astoret are proving it. Just goes to show you that anything can happen. Some game, huh?" she grinned.

A cheer went up at the same time that Hawk and his team found their seats when Astoret finished his sixth perfect inning. The inside of the Earthdome was as spectacular as its exterior. The crystal dome afforded the spectators a virtually unrestricted view of the volcanic fireworks taking place outside. Inside, the seats started at ground level, towered to fifty rows high and circled three-quarters of the way around the field, giving the Earthdome more seating than any Celestial League stadium except for Angels Stadium at Elysium Fields. Seeing the Lamassu's reactions to the ballpark, Jael explained that Heaven and Hell had been competing for well over a century so they needed the room for resident fans.

"You mean lost souls?" Hawk asked.

"They're not lost," Jael replied quickly. "We know exactly where they are, but you're right. Hell, contrary to our public image, uses both positive and negative conditioning. Attending the games is just one of the rewards we offer."

The stadium was almost filled, but Jael bought Hawk's team directly to a block of empty seats on the first base line.

"It's no miracle," Enki admitted smugly when Innana and Martu commented on the prime seats. "I called ahead before we left Valhalla ."

They were several seats short, however, when they found a group of minor demons at one end of the row. "These are our seats," one demon who may have had one or two too many beers replied aggressively. He snarled at them, but remained seated.

Several of the Mesopotamian team bristled at that and Inanna looked like she was about to give the brash demon a quick flying lesson, but Marduk merely smiled as he stepped forward, holding the rest of the team back.

"Nice try," he told the squatters smoothly but firmly. They stood and tried to stare him down, but gave up when Jael pulled a stack of tickets from her purse and waved them from just behind Marduk. The spokesdemon shrugged and the small party strolled off to another section of the park.

"What was that all about?" Dumuzi asked perplexedly.

"It doesn't matter how large or small the stadium is," Jael laughed, "there's always someone who wants better seats so if they see an empty section, they'll just move in and take the seats, but everyone knows it's all reserved seating here. Normally all you've got to do is flash your tickets and they'll move."

"And if they don't?"

"Call an usher." She smiled and waved at an eight-foot-tall, horned monster in a dark blue suit and a cheap imitation of the local team cap. The behemoth grinned, exposing a couple dozen inch-long fangs,

and waved back at her.

Dumuzi shrugged, musing, "The things you miss as a player. Does that sort of think go on at Tiamat Field?" he asked Utu. The sun god merely shrugged.

The perfect pitchers' duel progressed into the top of the eleventh inning when Quetzalcoatl stepped up to the plate with two outs and still nobody on the bases. Astoret served up a first-pitch fastball that the Toltec god swatted almost casually into the right field bleachers for the one and only hit of the game. Xolotl ruined his perfect game as well when Dagon hit a single in the bottom of that inning, but the damage was contained and the Eagles won 1-0.

SIXTEEN

Turning the Play

"Something wrong, dear?" Nin-ti asked concernedly after hearing Hawk groan as he levered himself over the edge of the bed they shared in the Hades Hilton.

"Just feeling my age," he groaned, trying to stretch out the stiffness in his limbs. His arms were especially sore again this morning.

"Are you sure? You haven't been looking well these last few mornings."

"I'm fine," he assured her. "I've got to remember that I'm not a kid anymore, that's all."

"Well, you were rather excited at the game yesterday evening," Nin-ti admitted uncertainly. "Perhaps you should take it a little easier."

"When we're winning?" Hawk countered. "And our third game in a row?"

"The second two of which were against the West Division leaders," Nin-ti agreed. "Yes, dear, I know. But it will do no good if you excite yourself into a collapse. I'm a healing goddess, you know, and I can tell when you're in pain."

"Maybe, but you specialize in ribs, and mine are just fine. Don't worry, dear. I've been living with these aches and pains to one extent or another for years."

Nin-ti said nothing but determined to keep an eye on him today. What she said was true; Hawk had been over-exerting himself for the past few weeks. Ever since Spring Training had begun and "these aches and pains" had become more frequent, especially during the past two game days, and it seemed to Nin-ti that they had become more acute, but whenever she questioned him, Hawk had waved her off. She wished, not for the first time, that the focus of her healing powers extended beyond the rib cage, but she was a very minor goddess after all - just a step above the demigod level in fact.

Thinking about it, she decided to talk with Ninhursag before the game. No, she changed her mind, better make it after the game. If I do it before, I may not be able to keep it from the rest of the team. Hawk would never forgive me if I blew the streak we're on.

Hawk was looking much better by game-time, as he always did, and with his encouragement, the Lamassu looked to be cruising to their fourth consecutive victory until the bottom of the eighth inning when three runs ahead, Isimud walked the first two batters.

"His knuckleball is going sour," Hawk told Nin-ti grimly. "Tell Ninshubur to start warming up. I'll stall as long as possible." He signaled to Marduk that there would be a new pitcher and the catcher walked the ball out to the mound.

"Relief's on the way," he informed Enki's messenger, holding the ball just out of the pitcher's reach. "Give Ninshubur as long as possible to get his arm going."

"How do I do that?"

"Try pitching Rimon out at second. Two or three attempts for every actual pitch. I didn't like the way he stole second anyway. Maybe it'll keep him from trying for third."

"I don't have Enki's fastball," Isimud admitted.

"Doesn't matter," Marduk replied. "Pitching him out would be nice, but we're only playing for time." Isimud nodded. Three half-hearted lobs toward second later he threw strike one across the plate leaving Lilith looking.

"Not bad, hey babe?" Marduk chuckled.

"You just wait 'til we get you back here," she snarled in return.

"If I return, I'll still be the boss," he replied lightly. "Remember that."

"Huh!" she snorted and waited for the next pitch. She had a while to wait while Isimud made four pick-off attempts at second, the fourth of which was close enough that the umpire had to think a moment before making his call.

The next pitch was wide of the plate and Marduk had to stretch hard to keep the ball from getting away from him. Rimon broke away from second as the ball dropped out of Marduk's glove and a tremendous cheer filled the stadium. The ancient hero-god picked the ball back up quickly and fired it off to Gilgamesh at third base. Rimon broke off his steal attempt, but it was too late and found himself in a squeeze play between Gilgamesh and Inanna. The nature of the cheering changed as the squeeze tightened up, but on the third toss back and forth, the goddess bobbled the ball and Rimon scrambled back toward second. He almost made it amid renewed enthusiasm from the fans, but Inanna stooped to pick up the ball and snapped it off to Ninhursag who was waiting at second and tagged Rimon out. The Stadium went abruptly silent and the next sounds were hoots of derision both at the umpire and at Rimon as he left the field.

Isimud tried to pick off Dagon, the first base runner and then served up an offspeed pitch to Lilith who pulled it into a ground ball single into right field. After loading the count on Rahab, Isimud managed one last strike out before walking Astoret on four straight pitches. With Azazel, the top of the batting order at

the plate, Hawk knew that it was time to bring Ninshubur into the game.

With time called, the manager walked to the mound with a deliberately casual pace. Marduk jogged out to meet them, but the other basemen were waved back. This wasn't a major conference, after all.

"You did well, Izzy," Hawk commended the pitcher, "but we've been riding you a little hard lately." Isimud nodded and left the field. There was a smattering of applause for what even the demons of Hell had to admit was a well-pitched game. A moment later Ninshubur joined Hawk and Marduk.

"If you can't strike this guy out," Hawk instructed Ninshubur, "then at least try to make him hit grounders. Any out now will close out the inning."

"Got ya, skipper!" Ninshubur replied cheerfully. Hawk merely shook his head and walked away, but Marduk had something to add.

"Ninshubur, you've always been known for your spectacular saves. You saved Ishtar from Hell once, now let's see if you can do likewise for the rest of us." The pitcher nodded even as the umpire walked out to break up the conference.

Eight warm-up pitches later, Azazel entered the batter's box and tapped the first pitch straight out over the center field wall, putting the Hall of Flames ahead by one run. It was far too late when he struck out the next batter.

Hawk's mind was working furiously as they went into the top of the ninth inning. Astoret struck out the lead-off batter, but finally showed signs of fatigue by walking Ninshubur and Ninshubur. The next batter due up was Nanna-Sin, but he had been hitless for two games so Hawk sent Martu in to pinch hit. The ploy was successful and Martu hit a single past Hell's shortstop and into left field.

Now it was Durocher's turn to send in a new pitcher and he chose the veteran fireballer, Chemos. The new pitcher swaggered to the mound with little goutts of flame dripping off his three-inch fangs and an occasional miniature lightning bolt that sparked across the gap between his foot-long horns.

Ishkur watched this hellish apparition climb the mound and looked to Hawk for some comforting word. Hawk's face had gone white and his jaw had dropped in an almost comical parody of shock. "Hawk? Are you all right?" the storm god asked concernedly. Hawk just continued to stare at Chemos.

"It's a cheap parlor trick," Marduk informed both of them. "All demons can do it, or some equivalent. Don't let it concern you. If he tries it while you're at the plate, he'll be in violation of the anti-magic rule."

"But," Hawk tried in vain. He felt his heart in his throat and knew for certain it was there since the pounding in his ears was so much louder than it might have been had that organ still been safely ensconced in his chest.

"Just a trick," Marduk repeated. "Look."

Hawk continued to stare and Chemos' fangs and horns shrunk down to the much smaller demonic norm. The pounding in Hawk's ears faded out and he became aware for the first time of a now-slackening pressure in his chest.

"You okay?" Marduk asked.

"Better, yes," Hawk replied with a nod. He stepped back up to the third base coach's box and watched Chemos finish warming up.

Chemos fired in his first shot that left Ishkur watching as it streaked across the plate. The Mesopotamian storm god nodded with a grim smile before setting himself for the next pitch. The next pitch was a slider that Ishkur practically screwed himself into the ground trying to hit. Rimmon, the catcher, chuckled mercilessly and signaled for a curve. Chemos shook off the sign and waited for Rimmon to call up a fast ball. Ishkur swung and popped up an infield fly that sailed straight into Belial's glove.

Marduk was the Lamassu's last out, but he walked confidently to the plate, causing his image to grow with each step until, just before entering the box, he was thirty feet tall. He paused to face Chemos and flashed him a nasty grin with his supernaturally bright teeth. The gleam temporarily blinded the pitcher and by the time the spots in his eyes faded Marduk was back to his normal size and taking practice swings.

Chemos pitched his best, but Marduk had his measure and, with the count loaded, smashed a line drive that hit the right field wall hard and bounced back over the fielder's head. The runners scrambled around the bases and Hawk excitedly waved them in even as he felt the pressure mount up in his chest again. Ninhursag and Ninshubur made it home easily but Azazel in right field finally recovered the ball and made a prodigious throw directly toward the plate where Rimmon caught it on the bounce and spun to tag Martu out ending the inning with the Lamassu ahead again by one run.

Nin-ti gave Marduk a happy thumbs-up sign and started back to the dugout, but the concerned look on the faces of the team caused her to turn around in time to see Hawk collapse to the ground of the coach's box.

"Hawk!" she screamed, sprinting across the diamond. The rest of the team followed her and gathered around their fallen leader as she and Ninhursag knelt on either side of the elderly ballplayer.

"I have him," Mother Nature whispered softly, tears flowing from her eyes that were excelled only by the streams that poured out of Nin-ti's. "I have him, but he's so weak. So weak."

"We can save him," Enki added confidently, but the bravado left his voice as he added, "can't we?"

"We'll sure as hell try," Ninhursag returned grimly, "but we'll have to go at this very slowly. Any major shock, even of healing magic, would kill Hawk right now. There are still some healers among the Anunnaki, aren't there? Get them here now!"

The game was held up for an hour while they waited for all the healing deities in the Mesopotamian pantheon to arrive and go to work. Finally, Ninhursag declared that Hawk was strong enough to be moved and he was gently lifted and carried back to the dugout where room had been made for him on the bench.

"Play ball!" the umpire cried at last and the Lamassu players reluctantly went to their places on the field.

Ninshubur walked the first batter, and was only saved when Melkarth hit into a double play. The next two batters were walked, bringing Lilith to the plate. Marduk called for time and walked to the mound.

"Pull yourself together," he told Ninshubur. "We only need one out to win the game, but if Lilith hits a double now the game's over."

"That's not very likely," Ninshubur remarked. "She doesn't really have the power to drive the ball that far

out."

"Maybe," Marduk allowed, "but even a single would tie up the game and all of us are too worried about Hawk to get the run back. This game's entirely in your hands." Ninshubur nodded grimly and signaled that the umpire was on his way to break up the conference.

Ninshubur seemed to have turned himself around and quickly put Lilith behind in the count 0-2. She swung on his third pitch even though it was low and away, but Marduk failed to keep it from getting past him and Lilith managed to steal first before he could retrieve the errant spheroid. Now the bases were loaded.

In the dugout Nin-ti fretted, watching Ninshubur throw three straight balls to Rahab. Marduk was conferring with Ninshubur once more when Nin-ti heard Hawk whisper something behind her. She turned and knelt at his side as he repeated his suggestion. Ninshubur managed to throw a strike that Rahab hit foul and Nin-ti called for time signalling for the entire infield to meet at the mound for instructions.

"We need an out now," she began with the painfully obvious.

"I'll do my best," Ninshubur responded instantly, but without much hope.

"You want the infield to play shallow to get the out if Rahab manages to hit a ground ball?"

"If Hawk's ploy doesn't work," she replied. "Yes." Then she explained. A minute later the players returned to their positions while Ninshubur stood resolutely on the mound in front of the rubber, shrugging off half a dozen signs from Marduk.

It seemed like forever, but finally Gilgamesh noted that Rimmon had taken his foot off the third base bag and started leading toward home. In a flash Gilgamesh reached and tagged the runner out, exposing the fact that he, not the pitcher, had been holding the ball. The Lamassu took the game 4-3, but not without protest.

"Hidden ball play?" Leo Durocher exploded as he stormed angrily across the field. "It was a balk!" The umpire merely smiled and shook his head at the veteran manager. "What the hell kind of bush-league stunt was that anyway?" he demanded of Nin-ti.

"One that won the game," she responded smugly.

SEVENTEEN

Night Game

Even before Hawk opened his eyes, he became aware of the sound of bird-song. Morning? a part of his mind wondered as he awoke to a darkened room. No. That's evening song, but it shouldn't be this dark yet. He tried to sit up and found that he had been tied to the bed. Strangest damned hospital I ever saw,

he concluded erroneously. Wonder what I'm in for. "Nurse!"

The door opened, flooding the room with a mild light that was still too bright for Hawk's dark-accustomed eyes. He blinked away tears as the familiar figure in the doorway entered the room. "Yes, dear?" Nin-ti responded.

Hawk blinked, remembering the events of the past few weeks. For a brief moment he had been willing to pass the whole thing off as the fantasy of an old man, but while it may have been a fantasy, it had also actually happened. "Where are we?" he finally asked. His voice sounded strange; not weak or raspy as he might have expected, but stronger and clearer than it had been in years.

"Dilmun," she replied easily. "You've been very ill, dear."

"I feel pretty good now," Hawk replied, struggling mildly against his bonds.

"Well, I should hope so! You've had half a dozen gods and goddesses caring for you for the last three days. We did almost lose you, however, to a massive heart attack."

"Thought so," he nodded, "but why am I tied down?"

"The final step of your cure is a bit of a shock to the system. We didn't want you hurting yourself."

"What? Electroshock to get my heart started again?"

"Electro...? No, dear. I'm not sure what that is, but keeping your heart beating was only the first step. Here let me untie you. You're out of danger now in any case."

"I can just get up?" he asked.

"Carefully," she recommended. "Sitting up too quickly might cause you to black out, but aside from that you should be just fine."

"All right. Could we open the shutters? Or do I have to stay in the dark?"

"I'll open them. We kept it dark in here, hoping you would rest more comfortably. The sun is now longer shining directly in the window, so it shouldn't be too bright if I open the one or two."

"I certainly do feel well-rested," Hawk remarked as he sat up and swung his feet down to the floor. "Haven't felt this good in years, in fact." He was bewildered by Nin-ti's sudden giggle, but pushed himself up and wandered into the modern-style bathroom he had insisted on having installed in his Dilmun home. There, still a bit bleary-eyed from his long sleep, he bent over the wash basin and splashed some water over the smooth skin of his face.

He started at that, and looking sharply at the mirror in front of him saw a ghost from out of the distant past - himself in his mid-twenties. His white hair now had dark brown roots and the paunch he had finally given up on reducing after years of dieting was gone. He was feeling his flat, tight stomach as Nin-ti snuck up behind him.

"We had been saving this as a surprise bonus in case we had a successful season," she told him from the door to the bathroom, "so I guess now you'll have to at least lead us to the pennant. Hmm?"

"I'm so thin!" Hawk remarked wonderingly. "I don't think I was ever this thin, even back when I was this age the first time."

"The transformation took a lot out of you. If you hadn't been overweight it might have killed you unless you were conscious and able to eat constantly to keep up your strength. For that matter you must be starving now."

"I am a bit hungry," he admitted. Actually he was famished, not having eaten in days, but was unable to take his eyes off the image in the mirror. "How old am I?" he asked at last.

"As best as we can determine," Nin-ti replied, "your body has been restored to the state it was when you were twenty-six - one year more or less."

"Twenty-six," Hawk mused. "I played on three teams that year. Started with the Columbus Clippers, got traded in May to the Harrisburg Senators and finished up the season back in AAA with the Portland Beavers. What a year! The only other year I played on more than two teams was in '72 and then only because I got sent to The Show at the end of the season." Hawk rambled on while Nin-ti answered a knock at the front door. She soon returned with a large tray full of food. "Eh? What's that?"

"Breakfast," Nin-ti replied, smiling.

"Oh good," Hawk replied, taking one last look at his young self in the mirror, "I'm starved."

"And after breakfast," Nin-ti continued, "we can go to batting practice."

"In the morning?" Hawk asked.

"Actually it's just past noon."

"Really?" She nodded. "Who are we playing today?"

"The Memphis Crocs."

So far most of the teams the Lamassu had played were composed mostly of players who looked completely human; exceptionally well-endowed and with an aura of divinity they could never quite lose, but human regardless. The only two major exceptions were the Lamassu's Isimud and the Cub's Janus who literally had eyes - indeed, complete faces - on the back of their heads. Even the horns and the deep red complexions of hell's team did not detract from their basic humanoid appearance, although the leathery black wings of their outfielders came close. The team from ancient Egypt, however, was quite different.

From falcon-headed Horus to Anubis, the jackal god, the team was a veritable menagerie. While they all had humanoid bodies, at least half of Re's crew had the heads of birds and animals. Seth had the head of a snake as did one of the other players on the bench and there were three genuine bovines in the bullpen. There was even one player who Hawk mistook, at first, for the team mascot, Sobek of the Fayyum,

whose head was that of a crocodile. Even the entirely human members of the team at first appeared on the field wearing all manner of strange headgear, which Enki explained were their divine crowns. The oddest had to be the ornate chair that Isis wore as a hat denoting the fact that she was symbolically the "Throne of Egypt".

"How does she expect to play with that rig on her head?" Hawk asked while Enki was doing his warm-up stretches. Several Crocs were already on the field doing wind sprints.

"Oh I imagine she'll take it off now that she's made her grand entrance. See several of the others have already replaced their crowns with baseball caps. That bunch always did posture a bit too much for my taste," Enki told him wryly.

"Old friends?" Hawk asked.

"Contemporaries," Enki replied, conveying a universe of meaning with that single word. "We never did have much in common except a mutual dislike."

Hawk made a point of meeting the Crocodiles' manager, but the man was, surprisingly, nobody he knew or had even heard of, a one-time catcher for the St. Louis Browns turned coach. He had never managed, but most of his coaching experience had been in the big leagues. He used the name Pat Burke, but for all Hawk knew it might have been an assumed name. In all, Hawk didn't like him. He and his team had an attitude that made the Yankees of the 1950's and 60's or the A's of the 1980's look quite humble. They didn't speak long. Hawk rapidly tired of Burke's monologue concerning how unstoppable his team was.

Ratatosk arrived a few minutes before game time. "Sorry I'm late," the squirrel apologized, "but the Eagles-Green Sox match-up went to the eighteenth inning. This is the only night game today so I decided to attend in person. Watching from the Tree is all well and good, but it's like watching television; no substitute for being in the stadium."

Hawk nodded, sitting beside his scout on the bench. "So what do you have for me on the Crocs? Are they as good as they seem to think?"

"Their record is good to date. Top of the division at the moment, although the season is still young. Still have another few days left to May so September is a long way away. Anything can happen, but at the moment their record is something to be proud of."

"And we're still in the basement," Hawk muttered.

"Cheer up, Hawk!" Ratatosk told him slapping the manager as far up on the back as possible, just above the waist, "As of a few minutes ago, we're tied for last with the Green Sox."

"You mean it isn't as lonely at the bottom as it is at the top?"

"Not at the moment anyway. Of course, if you don't want to lose the distinction of being the worst team in the division we can always throw this evening's game." Hawk glared at the squirrel. "All right," Ratatosk sighed with a shrug. "The important thing to remember about the Crocs is that there is a strong dichotomy among them..."

"A strong what?" Hawk asked sharply.

"They are divided into the forces of Light and Darkness," Ratatosk replied quickly. "Horus, Isis, Osiris,

Ptah, and some of the others are definitely identified with Light while Seth, Nut, Anubis, and Apophis are gods of Darkness. Aton is a sun god and a force of Light, although I'm surprised they let him play considering that he briefly supplanted Amon-Re, the team owner of record, during the Eighteenth Dynasty."

"Never heard of him," Hawk muttered.

"Heard of King Tut?" Ratatosk countered.

"Of course."

"Well, Tut's daddy worshipped Aton, the first case of monotheism in Ancient Egypt. It's probably what got him killed."

"Really?"

"Mortals take religion even more seriously than most of the gods they worship, but we're getting off the subject. The Egyptian pantheon is so sharply divided between Light and Dark that Burke has taken to using two basic starting line-ups depending on whether they're playing a day or a night game."

"Sounds reasonable," Enki opined.

"Unusual, though," Hawk commented. "I've seen plenty of managers who structure line-ups depending on whether the starter is a north or a southpaw, but not on the time of day." He paused and thought about that. "Some players do play better under the lights than others, however," he added.

"If you think that's odd, here's something I'll bet you've never seen; the pitcher tonight is their lead-off batter."

"Who's pitching?" Enki asked.

"Anubis. He's five and oh so far this season, all night games, of course. He has only a so-so fast ball, but more than makes up for that in the motion of his curve, and every so often he'll hurl a slider that nobody can touch. He's damned good, but I've been keeping notes and four times out of five he'll try to strike a batter out with an off-speed pitch if the count is full. If we look for that we ought to be able to score a run or two before someone catches on."

"I'm surprised nobody else has noticed that yet," Hawk remarked.

"Maybe they have," Ratatosk shrugged, "but I doubt it. I'm the only full-time scout in the league. Most of the managers would like to have scouts, but the owners have yet to see the need. It isn't like there's a chance of finding a hot new rookie out on some college or farm team."

"You have a point," Hawk conceded. "What about the rest of the team?"

"Osiris is on third base and second in the batting order. He's a first ball - fast ball hitter. Start him out with a curve and don't serve up anything twice in a row. Next up is Nut. She may be the weak link on the team. In spring training her average was an impressive .483, but since opening day she's only been batting .195. She has trouble dealing with inside pitches, but has long enough arms to belt anything low and away into the far reaches of the stadium. Seth bats clean-up at night and after sunset his average jumps from .187 to .378. You may want to walk him if there are one or two outs. Horus is next and his

day-night batting averages are nearly the reverse of Seth's. He's hit into double plays two times out of five with a runner on base. If he does manage to get a hit, watch out. He's their fastest runner; stolen twenty bases so far this season. He's also one of their closing pitchers. Don't be surprised if Burke moves him in from the outfield in the ninth inning.

"Isis, on the other hand seems to be a solid .295 hitter day or night, but Aton's only hit once at night. They keep him in, though because he's still the best catcher in the league. Well," the squirrel verbally back-pedaled, " actually I think Marduk is the best catcher in the league, but Aton's performance just seems a little stronger because of his team's better record. Geb and Ptah have been batting in the mid .200's although nobody expected them to do so well.

"On the field they're a well-oiled machine; had only one error all season. They excel at turning a double play. In fact, I swear that when Kamuthis pitches he likes to let the first batter get on base just to set the next batter up for a double play."

"That's living dangerously," Hawk admitted.

"He obviously isn't looking for a no-hitter. In any case we'll find out tomorrow whether we can use that quirk to our advantage. That's the next time his turn comes up on their rotation and not our problem tonight."

"Any fielding weaknesses?" Enki asked as Hawk absorbed Ratatosk's briefing.

"Ptah in right field is a much slower runner than either Nut or Horus. If you make him run for the ball, he may not get under it in time. Then again, he might," the squirrel added after a moment.

"Thanks," both Hawk and Enki replied sourly in unison.

"Just doin' my job," Ratatosk grinned. "Well, if you need me, I have a seat right over the dugout." The squirrel turned and scampered into the clubroom, nearly running over Marduk.

"Now that my catcher's ready, I'd better warm up my arm," Enki noted as the stadium began to fill. Hawk nodded and sat back on the bench to watch those Crocs that were still warming up on the field. There didn't seem to be anything special about them, but practices could be deceiving.

All too soon the umpire cried, "Play ball!" and the game began. Hawk felt his heart leap as Anubis, Nergal's Egyptian counterpart, stepped up to the plate. It was a healthy sensation - fire and passion - of youthful vigor. Lightning pulsed through his veins with a force that usually fades as one grows older and wiser. To feel that intensity again after so many years was almost more than he could take. It was as though a second Hawk Wilton were inside his skin and threatening to burst out. He shut his eyes and took a deep breath and concentrated on harnessing his emotions so that he missed Enki's first pitch.

"Strike!" Hawk's eyes flicked open in time to watch Anubis pick himself up out of the dust he had practically screwed himself into trying to chase Enki's fastball.

Marduk was so pleased with the results that he called for another of the same species, but Enki recalled Ratatosk's last minute briefing and shook the sign off, nodding only when Marduk called for a curve.

This time Anubis led the ball and sent it into the stands along the third base line. Ahead in the count, Enki threw the next one away, low and just outside the plate. Anubis, however, wasn't fooled and refused to chase a ball. Enki's next serving was a sinker with a little too much drop and Marduk missed the ball as it

skidded under him between his legs. With no runners on base he didn't need to scramble for the ball, so he merely got a new ball from the official and tossed it out to Enki.

With the sign on, Enki threw a split-finger fastball. It wasn't his strongest pitch and Anubis clipped enough of it to send the ball rolling out toward the gap between Ninhursag and Inanna. Inanna made an heroic dive for the leather-clad sphere, but a chance bounce sent it glancing off her glove and into left field. Before Ishkur could back her up Anubis was safe on first.

Osiris didn't waste any time and bunted Enki's next pitch perfectly. Marduk whipped off his mask and sprinted toward the ball even as Enki recovered from his pitch and headed in on a convergent course. Hawk, watching from the dugout, instinctively shut his eyes and winced as the two hero gods collided with a thunderous crash. When he opened them again the two dazed deities were flat on their backs with the ball resting between them even as Anubis was rounding second. There being no way to tag Osiris out at first, Nergal dashed in from first to where Enki and Marduk lay groaning on the turf, and in a fluid motion picked up the ball, spun around, and fired the ball off toward third where Gilgamesh stood waiting.

Tiamat Field went silent as the ball and Anubis seemed to arrive at nearly the same time. Had Gilgamesh managed to tag the Egyptian god out? Even the official paused to consider his call and then amid an increasing buzz of confusion the announcement was heard loud and clear.

"Safe!"

Hawk shrugged microscopically; it was as he expected. Then he saw Enki and Marduk just starting to sit up and he realized they would need time to recover. "What!" he shouted at the umpire, almost too late to be believable.

Hawk walked purposefully out on to the field and started arguing with the official, while Nin-ti and Ninhursag ran to check on how Enki and Marduk were doing.

"Uh!" Enki moaned, then looked over at Marduk. "Son, we've got to stop meeting like this."

"I don't recall ever starting," Marduk replied distractedly.

"Sure you do; just a few seconds ago," Enki prompted him. Under Nin-ti's and Mother Nature's gentle ministrations he and his divine son were recovering rapidly. A sudden roar of indignation went up from the grandstand. "What happened now?"

Ninhursag looked up to see Hawk still shouting at the umpire while the dark-clad man was making a gesture vaguely toward the horizon. "Nothing much," she replied sourly. "Hawk just got himself thrown out of the game again."

"Terrific," Marduk muttered flatly. "Well, Nin-ti, you're in charge. Now what?"

"How do you feel?" she asked both of them after a moment of hesitation.

"I'll live," they replied in unison.

"Physically, you're both fine," Ninhursag informed them, "but you might experience what the mortals call mild psychosomatic symptoms."

"Ghost pains?" Marduk asked.

"Or a little dizziness," she added clinically. "Just remember that they're all in your minds. We are gods, after all, and should have the mental discipline to ignore such distractions. You, on the other hand, I recall," she continued turning toward Enki, "were always a bit of a whiner."

"I was younger then," the water god replied indignantly.

"Weren't we all. Let's hope the millennia have added to your maturity," she retorted and then softened the remark by winking. Enki grinned and turned to Nin-ti.

"Play ball," the assistant manager said with a shrug.

The players returned to their positions and Nin-ti to the dugout. Hawk, she discovered was just inside the clubhouse door. Officially he had to sit the game out, but he would keep himself as nearby as possible in case he was needed.

"They all right?" he asked Nin-ti.

"Just had the wind knocked out of them," she replied. "Any instructions?"

"I signaled to Ratty to get on down here on my way in," Hawk informed her. "You didn't hear his report, but according to him Nut is next and Enki ought to be able to strike her out. It's Seth I'm worried about." As he explained Enki proceeded to strike Nut out with three consecutive inside fastballs.

Seth, on the other hand was all Ratatosk claimed. Even as the squirrel joined Nin-ti in the dugout, the Egyptian god of the desert and murderous heat swatted Enki's first pitch out beyond the right field wall. It was the last hit Enki gave up that game. Unfortunately the Lamassu still lost 3-0.

EIGHTEEN

Honeymoon's Over!

One of the certainties of baseball is that any team can beat any other team in the same league at least some of the time. Hawk's team proved this over the next two days by taking the Crocs handily in both remaining games of the home stand. That brought the Lamassu out of the basement for the first time since opening day

However, to win in the long run requires a finely tuned mixture of talent and management. Hawk knew that his team had more potential than any he had ever been associated with, but was he the manager they needed? The great managers didn't finish up their careers scouting, even for a strong major league team like the Braves. There was no fooling himself. Hawk knew he was hardly in the same class with Stengel or Durocher. He didn't even dare to compare himself with his contemporaries - Tommy Lasorda and Sparky Anderson. It took a lot to have the staying power of those men and Hawk knew he had reached the pinnacle of his coaching career with the Columbus Clippers. It was just a step from the majors, but

one he had never made. That one and a half days as the Yankees' manager during the off-season didn't count.

Hawk's doubts, however, vanished or at least went on vacation over the next three weeks as his team went on a winning streak. Fifteen out of the next eighteen games were chalked up to the Lamassu's victory column. Their stats now placed them firmly above average in their division, although it was still a long way from average to the top.

Even the attacks centering on Yggdrassil ended as mysteriously as they began. Hawk and the others had asked around and all the teams had been attacked, or at the least inconvenienced, during the first three weeks of the baseball season by various incidents. To date, only Ratatosk had been kidnapped, but three major limbs of the World Tree had been severed and several others had been redirected. Nobody could account for that; nobody even claimed they knew it was possible, but branches that had for eons been known to lead to one world suddenly started leading elsewhere. On the mortal plane there were several sightings of mysterious groups of people in unknown baseball uniforms; usually just outside major league stadiums, although one such group was seen to walk across the top of the Miami's "Teal Tower".

These incidents became gradually less frequent and almost forgotten in the heat of the Celestial League competition. Then the one problem Hawk had most feared finally presented itself.

Professional sports are filled to the brim with ego problems, but those are just small time disorders compared to the potential among the players of the Celestial League. The strength of the gods of pantheistic religions may not be infinite but their egos are.

During spring training Hawk had managed to fend off the potential intra-team conflicts by showing that none of them were perfect, but that with hard work they could be the best. The message was not unlike an old "good news - bad news" joke. They had trouble swallowing the first half, but the second half coincided with their own self-images. Hawk urged them to think in terms of cooperative efforts; demonstrating that only by working together could their own personal excellence manifest. For a while it worked.

Once the team started winning games, however, several players naturally felt the credit was theirs alone. Innana was perhaps the worst case on the team but everyone except her erstwhile husband, Dumuzi, had a similar problem. Marduk, as the only catcher, was Hawk's leader on the field and perhaps had a right to take the credit for a winning team, but he had developed a tendency to gloat after the games and that bothered the rest of the team especially when they felt that their own performances were pivotal to the game in question. Ninhursag, the most powerful member of the team, started making thinly veiled threats and Marduk, so drunk on his own ego-trip failed to notice. Nergal was only slightly more subtle when he offered to take Marduk on a guided tour of the Mesopotamian underworld. Inanna laughed nastily at that while Dumuzi blanched. Even Enki began to chafe from his son's boasting.

But while Lucifer's hero-analog may have started the bickering, he was far from Hawk's only problem. Each of the Lamassu had done his or her own share and deserved credit, but in their scramble for recognition they forgot the first and most important principal of teamwork; the whole is greater than the sum of all its parts. The post-game arguments were still only a matter of letting off steam, however, until the first game of a four-game stand against the Indus Karma.

To describe that game as the Lamassu's most shining moment would be vaguely akin to referring to the trench warfare of World War I as a pleasant outing. There was a giant, black-skinned female goddess warming up in the Karma's bullpen, when the Lamassu came out for batting practice. Her bright red tongue served to accentuate the sharp fangs that protruded from her mouth, but what grabbed Hawk's

attention most were her arms. They kept moving so he had trouble figuring out how many she had, but however many there were, she never used the same arm twice in a row.

"Who the hell is that?" Hawk grumbled.

Unaware he had said that out loud, Hawk started when Enki chuckled, "Ninhursag on a bad day."

"Very funny, water god," Mother Nature growled. Twin flashes of lightning sparked through her eyes.

"Why, Ninmah," Enki continued, grinning, "do you deny Kali as one of your aspects? Not the gentlest one, I'll admit, but..."

"That's enough, Enki."

"Wait a minute," Hawk interrupted their squabble. "Kali is one of your aspects?"

"Technically speaking, yes," Ninhursag admitted, "but I've never merged with her, or my other Hindu analogues."

Hawk gave Nin-ti a confused look so she explained, "Those of us who have more than one aspect in currently active religions, usually keep those aspects discrete. Ninhursag is Mother Nature in many religions, but the one on our team is a compilation of those who do not have contemporary active cults."

"If you say so," Hawk muttered, looking around the Indra Stadium. After visiting some of the other Celestial League fields, he had expected the Karma to play in a structure that resembled the Taj Mahal. Instead, Indra Stadium bore a fair resemblance to Tiamat Field save that the carvings in the stones of the grandstand depicted some of the more lurid scenes of the Kama Sutra instead of lapis-blue lamassu.

Batting practice and warm-ups proceeded smoothly enough, but the internal tensions among Hawk's players began to erupt soon after the game began.

Ishkur and Marduk each went down on three strike pitches from Kali. Nergal managed to hit a looping single into left field and then stole second, but was left stranded there when Gilgamesh's pop-up was caught by the Karma's catcher, Buddha.

That brought the Karma to the plate. Isimud's knuckleball was off that day and after striking out Brahma, he served up back-to-back homers to Rudra and Rama.

After Krishna had been walked Hawk strolled out to the mound and gave Isimud what few encouraging words he could think up, concluding with, "Maybe you should try some of your other pitches today." The pitcher nodded.

Isimud struck out Buddha with three consecutive pitches, but when Ninhursag bobbled the ball, Sita made it to first base. Ganesha hit a neat one-bagger into shallow left field and the bases were loaded when Inanna lost Karttikeya's pop-up fly in the sun.

That brought Kali to the plate. Hawk had feared, on watching her warm up while on deck, that she might swing three bats at once, to match her pairs of arms. He wondered if that would count as a strike-out should she swing all three and miss just once. Instead she used a single, maximum-size bat, but gripped it with six hands. She was not the best batter in the league, but Hawk recalled Ratatosk's briefing. With the power of six divine arms on the bat, eighty-nine percent of her hits were home-runs.

Isimud threw everything he knew at her, but the count was soon full and on his fifteenth pitch to the multi-armed goddess, she finally connected firmly enough to send the ball to Never-Never-Land.

Brahma grounded out to end the inning, but two hours later Hawk found himself wishing that had been the end of the game. The Lamassu remained hitless for the next two innings, repeatedly knocking fly balls to Sita and Krishna in the outfield. This would have been bad enough, but the bottoms of those innings were worse.

Rudra belted a solid hit through the hole and into center field, followed by another by Rama. Next up, Krishna tapped a light bunt down the third baseline. The rolling ball started out a few inches inside the line but as Gilgamesh and Isimud converged on it, it showed every intention of rolling foul. Isimud waved Gilgamesh off and together they watched as the ball slowly moved toward the foul line. It seemed like an eternity, and then a mere fraction of an inch from its the goal, the ball stopped clearly in fair territory. The bases were loaded with no outs.

When Buddha knocked a slow grounder out to Innana, she over threw it to Marduk, who had to leap upward and several feet to his right to stop the ball. With Brahma safely home, Marduk attempted to throw the slow-running Buddha out at first. The ball would have made it on time, but Nergal lost his balance slightly, and in attempting to regain it, dropped the ball.

Then Sita hit the ball into Indus Stadiums, far right corner, causing the ball to bounce off the wall just above Nanna-Sin's reach. The right fielder landed and recovered it, and with a mighty heave threw the ball most of the quarter-mile distance back into the infield. By then, however, two runners had scored and Buddha was rounding third and being waved in. Ninhursag bent over to snatch up the ball as it bounced off the grass, but lost her balance and fell flat on her face. Innana, backing her up, retrieved and fired the ball in toward Marduk. The catcher caught it handily and tried to tag out the runner, but Buddha rolled right over him and, as the dust settled, it turned out the ball had slipped out of his glove. Meanwhile Sita was headed for third base and, in his excitement, Marduk threw the ball too high for Gilgamesh to catch. By the time he recovered it, Sita had successfully completed an in-the-park homerun.

The Karma scored another three runs before the end of the inning. The third proved even worse. Not one player on the team escaped without committing at least one error as runner after runner scored, bringing the score to a disastrous 25-0. The Mesopotamian gods were all blaming each other as they returned to the dugout.

"What the hell kind of playing was that?" Hawk heard Nergal demand of Ishkur as they came within earshot. "The runner had already rounded first and was half way to second, and you throw to me?"

"An honest mistake," Ishkur replied defensively. Nergal continued to berate the Storm God, but Hawk's attention was on the squabble between Gilgamesh and Inanna. The two had collided twice, while trying to field ground balls and had been shouting insults at each other off and on ever since. Beyond them, he was vaguely aware of Marduk arguing furiously with Utu and Nanna-Sin while Nin-ti did her best to distract Ninhursag from butting in. Ashnan and Enkimdu just stood there, much as Hawk was doing, helplessly looking on. Even the initial frictions they had dealt with during spring training had failed to prepare them for this.

Nin-ti broke away from Ninhursag and confronted Hawk. "You've got to do something!" she urged him. "You're the manager!"

Her plea managed to break through his wall of indecision and he stepped into the crowd of wrangling

gods and shouted, "Shaddup! All of you, just SHUT UP!" A dreadful silence descended on the dug-out as all eyes turned, smolderingly toward Hawk. Nin-ti, Ashnan, and Enkimdu fell in behind Hawk. The players faced them and each group attempted to stare down the other.

"We need a batter up here," the umpire informed them calmly, interrupting the silent contest.

Hawk shifted his eyes quickly toward the man and nodded curtly. "Top of the order," he grated. "Ishkur, you're up. Marduk, on deck. Everyone else, sit down." Grudgingly, they obeyed, but the tension was thick enough to eat and give them all a case of terminal indigestion. "We're having a bad day," he continued as Ishkur stepped up to the plate. "That's all it is, a bad day. Don't let it get to you. We're supposed to be a team, but we won't be much of one if we keep blaming each other for our own mistakes. The last three innings don't mean much; they're in the past. Put them behind you and think about how we're going to spend the next six innings."

"Losing," Ninurta muttered bitterly from the far end of the bench.

"You think you can do better?" Gilgamesh challenged him. "You can have third base."

"Knock it off and think team work," Hawk growled. Then he had an intuitive insight into the divine competitive mentality and added, "The enemy is out there, standing on the field, doing everything they can to keep you from running the perimeter of a ninety-foot square. Your job is simple; don't let them."

The team looked surprised at first, then their faces registered thoughtfulness and understanding. They nodded and more than half flashed predatory grins.

Kali's third pitch was a forkball that failed to drop on schedule. Ishkur clipped it and it sailed neatly into the hole in shallow right field. Next, Marduk knocked her first pitch into deep right. Ishkur moved to third, but Sita's prodigious throw cut Marduk off, forcing him to stay at first. Marduk took big leads and Kali made several pick-off attempts to no avail. That shook her a bit and after ten pitches, she walked Nergal, loading the bases and bringing Gilgamesh to the plate.

The Lamassu players in the dugout started shouting encouragement to the ancient hero and jeers at the Indian pantheon. Kali sneered and threw two consecutive strikes before beaming the batter. Gilgamesh was knocked cold and the benches were unloaded as the Mesopotamian team ran on to the field to protest the action. The Karma followed suit and several fistfights broke out between the players. The umpires were not putting up with any of that nonsense, however, and by the time the dust settled, half of the Lamassu's starting line-up had been ejected from the game. It was no consolation that an equal number of the Karma had been treated similarly.

With Marduk, Nergal, Utu, Inanna and Nanna-Sin ejected and with Gilgamesh too groggy to continue, Hawk had to use his entire bench and bullpen to fill the field and found himself wondering if he could get away with using his coaches if it became necessary.

On the bases Ninurta pinch ran for Gilgamesh, Enki filled in for Marduk, and Dumuzi for Nergal. Ninshubur would play center field for Utu and Martu was the new batter in Inanna's place. It was a bad situation for nobody was playing in his strongest position, but at least they might finish the game.

Hawk's secret prayers went in another direction, however, and for once they were answered. Thirty minutes and two innings later, the Indus Stadium grounds-keepers were rolling out a large tarpaulin across the diamond to protect it from the driving rain.

"Did you do this?" Hawk whispered suspiciously to Ninhursag.

"Of course not," she replied, "but I knew it was coming."

"Will it keep up long enough to call the game?"

"That depends on how long the umpires figure they can wait before calling it a day, and on how quickly the groundsman can drain two inches of rain from the field."

A few minutes later the game was officially over and the Karma had won 53-27. A victory would have been better, but Hawk felt it was preferable for the game to be called while they were doing well than to lose after a full game. This way they could tell themselves that they could have won if only the weather had held off.

NINETEEN

Dem Ole Basement Blues

It was good to be home again, Hawk decided, although he was startled to find he thought of the Mesopotamian paradise as home. Fort Myers was literally a universe and two months away, and the challenge of managing the Lamassu rarely afforded him the time to reflect on that.

He had been horribly wrong about minimalized damage, for example, and the Lamassu morale took a nose-dive as they lost the next two games to the Karma, and then went on to be swept in a three-game series against the Indians. They lost once more in the first three of four home games versus the Cubs and with each loss their place in the league cellar seemed all the more permanent. Hawk had been on losing teams before and had never liked it. This time was the worst, however, because the Lamassu had more potential than any team he had ever been associated with, but since the blow-up at the first Karma game they were barely talking to one another except to find fault.

Hawk felt the need to be alone after the latest disaster at Tiamat Field, so shaking off the ever-attentive Nin-ti, he went for a walk through the gardens of Dilmun. Between spring training and the first two months of the main season, Hawk had never really had the chance to get to know his way around here and by the time he had walked himself out, he was also totally lost. Another few minutes' wandering brought the path he followed to a wide gravel beach.

Hawk breathed deeply and was about to turn back when he realized that the path did not end at the beach, but instead ran right up to the water. Curious, he walked to the ocean's edge and noted that the path continued on beneath the waves. Normally, he would have shrugged and returned to his search for familiar surroundings, but he was standing too close to the water's edge and a chance wave splashed over his shoes before he could jump back out of the way.

Then he noticed that his feet were still dry. Kneeling, he put his hand into the sea water and it too came

out dry.

"I'll be damned!" Hawk muttered. Then he recalled his brief visit to the ocean bottom with Enki and took a few steps forward. He was up to his neck in salt water, but it felt like he was walking through air. Then he took another step forward and he was totally submerged. He held his breath as panic set in. Hastily, he turned around to get back out of the water, but tripped on a rock and landed face first. Gasping, he suddenly realized that he could still breathe and when he stood up again he turned back to follow the path into the sea.

He walked over a mile under water and the path remained well lit, although the surrounding water was black as midnight. There was high-order magic involved here and Hawk dared not stray off the path. Finally the path branched and another minute down the right fork brought him to the small shrub that was Dilmun's aspect of the great World Tree. This was the first time he had walked here, however. He touched the bush and thought of Yggdrasil and instantly found himself standing on a wide branch.

"Hey, Hawk," he heard Ratatosk's voice from behind, "watcha doing here?"

"Needed to walk," Hawk replied simply.

"You've crossed an entire universe," the squirrel remarked. "Had enough?"

"I suppose," Hawk sighed. "We haven't been doing too well lately, have we?"

"We stink lately. Hawk, you've got to do something to bring this team together or we'll stay right where we are, at the bottom of the league."

"Maybe we're just not good enough to do any better."

"Nonsense! The Lamassu is the most balanced team in the league, when we act like a team, that is. We're not the most powerful, nor the fastest, not even the best hitters, but together each player's strengths cover for another's weaknesses."

"When we act like a team," Hawk agreed sourly.

"Yeah," Ratatosk replied, sadly shaking his head. "Hey, I want to show you something. Follow me." With that he scampered off, forcing Hawk to jog behind him. The scenery around the tree changed several times and Hawk suspected they were jumping between universes even faster than they jumped between branches. A few minutes later they stood on one of the Tree's outer branches and Hawk was dazzled by the view.

Except for the branch they were standing on, a seven-foot long section that seemed to be attached to nothing at all, the only thing in sight was a vast, three-dimensional network of light. As his eyes adjusted to the sight, Hawk noted that the lines of the net were actually composed of billions of miniscule points of light.

"That's a lot of stars," Hawk whispered reverently.

"Galaxies, Mr. Wilton," Ratatosk corrected him in a voice just as awed. "Each dot you see is an entire galaxy. From this point you can see the entirety of creation in a single vista. Every point on the Tree corresponds to a location in the multiverse, but this is the only place from which you can see it all, and you're the first mortal to ever see this."

"Can't make out much detail, can you, Ratty?"

"That's not the purpose of this place," the squirrel corrected him. Hawk shot him a questioning look. "From here you can see that creation is a single artifact and that we're all parts of that whole."

"The ultimate team."

"Exactly!" Ratatosk agreed.

"Wish I could show this to the Lamassu. Maybe it would remind them of our own purpose this summer."

"They've seen it, those who were interested. No, Hawk, you're going to have to give them an insight of another sort." They watched the universe for a long while in silence then Ratatosk continued, "Come on, I'll take you back to Dilmun."

More accurately, Ratatosk led Hawk back to the junction point that corresponded to the "Food of Life" plant on the enchanted submarine path, where he was instantly transported back to the ocean floor. The path didn't seem familiar as Hawk retraced his steps, however, and instead of arriving at the beach, Hawk found himself at the foot of a massive underwater ziggurat.

"Must have taken the wrong turn at the fork," he muttered, turning around, but two minutes of walking in the opposite direction, brought him directly back to the ziggurat. A third try to leave brought the same results and Hawk finally got the point. "Gods!" Hawk swore. "If someone wanted to talk, he should have come to me." He sighed and started climbing the long staircase.

"I did first go to your house, Hawk," Enki told him, materializing beside the manager, "but Nin-ti said you had gone for a walk, so I summoned you here. You took your own sweet time getting here though. I expected you an hour ago."

"Sorry. It seems I had a date with the universe first."

"What?" Hawk explained. "Oh, nice view from there isn't it? And you went there in spite of my summons? That's very strange, you should have come straight here. Someone with more power than I have must have wanted you to see that. I wonder who."

"Damned if I know. Have there been any problems while I was gone?"

"None that I'm aware of," Enki replied, "and I would probably know."

"Then maybe you just didn't summon me loudly enough," Hawk concluded.

Enki looked like he was about to say something about that, but hastily changed his mind and instead asked, "Want to take the short cut to the top?" Without waiting for an answer, Enki waved his hand and they were instantly transported to the door of his temple-home at the peak of the large, pyramidal structure. "Come on in. Can I get you something to eat? Drink?"

"Anything," Hawk replied, as they entered.

There were only two rooms inside and Hawk never saw the inside of the second room, but assumed it was where Enki slept. The first room, however, was obviously an all-purpose living room. There were

various bits of statuary around the room and some woven wall hangings in various colors, all highlighted with gold thread. In the center were two wooden benches with woven seats and between them an artificial pool of water about three feet across.

"Welcome to my home," Enki said at last, having materialized a platter full of baklava and a silver pot of coffee. "Babylonian delicacies."

"Thanks," Hawk replied automatically. "Is this really Babylonian food?"

"Not really," the Water God admitted easily. "Coffee was an unknown beverage in my time, although there were confections similar to baklava. Different seasonings, mind you, but I thought I'd stick to something you're used to." Hawk nodded silently.

They sipped the black coffee for a while before Enki continued, "Hawk, we have to get this team back together. This constant bickering is most unseemly."

"Fine talk from the one who spent the entire seventh inning trying to pick fights with Ninhursag and Nergal. I thought you were supposed to be the god of wisdom. How wise is it to bait both Mother Nature and the King of the Dead?"

"A perfect example," Enki agreed ruefully. "Wisdom requires thought, especially before speaking or acting and I haven't been doing that in the right order lately. None of us has. Remember how we played together at first?"

"Not quite as badly as we're playing now," Hawk retorted, but he took the edge off the remark by forcing a smile.

"Not quite," Enki agreed, "but close. That, of course, was before you taught us how to play. The caliber of errors we're making now can only come with skill and experience."

"Oh good," Hawk commented dryly. "I can't wait to see how we'll do by the end of the season."

"Hawk, this is not easy for a god to admit, but as a team we're nothing without you. I've said this many times before, but it's still true. None of us has ever had much aptitude for long-term teamwork. We didn't even work together to create our universe. Each accomplishes his own task and somehow it fits together most of the time." Hawk shrugged, deciding not to argue over which god or God created the universe. It wouldn't serve any decent purpose.

"I'm not sure what more I can do."

"Be our leader," Enki told him firmly. "GreatMountainEnlil has ruled that for the duration of the season you command us. You managed to lead us well enough at first, but some time in the last few weeks you've started letting your control slide. Remember how we all deferred to your judgment on our way to Hell, when the limb to the back entrance was broken? That wasn't just a ploy Ninmah and I worked up to keep us all from squabbling. Enlil's decree has invested you with his power to rule. In a limited way, you, Samuel Edward Wilton, are a god."

"Until October," Hawk remarked.

"Until October," Enki agreed. "If you give us a direct command, we must obey. We may argue a bit, but if you stand your ground, we will obey."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Hawk, you don't understand. When you give a command, it is with Father Enlil's voice. We are compelled to obey. What we want has nothing to do with it, we don't have the power to resist."

"I didn't know that. I don't feel very godlike."

"What's being a god feel like?" Enki countered. "Personally, I've never been mortal so I don't have any basis for comparison. You can try asking Gilgamesh. He died during the first cycle."

"Alright. I'll try anything at this point, but this better not be some prank on your part. Nin-ti's told me about you."

"The trouble with having a reputation," Enki laughed.

"Well," decided Hawk, "we'll see tomorrow. I'll call a team meeting first thing after breakfast."

"I'll pass the word on. You want to meet in the clubhouse? Good. I'll send you home now." Hawk stood up in preparation. "Oh, Hawk, a word of advice," Enki added even as a bubble formed around the team manager, "we have to obey, but we don't have to like it, so don't let this new-found power go to your head, hmm?" A moment later the bubble burst and Hawk found himself outside the house he shared with Nin-ti.

Twenty

Nowhere to Go But

Hawk would never exactly remember what he said to the team that next morning. For that matter he hadn't bothered to plan his remarks; he just started talking and kept going for over two hours. The long speech started out berating them for acting like children and somehow made its way toward the virtues of teamwork. He spent a fair percentage of the time reviewing the season so far, with a special emphasis on key plays and what they had done, right and wrong. He concluded the entire oratory with a long winded command to get out on the field to practice for today's victory.

Most of the team went screaming joyously out of the clubhouse, but Enki hung back for a moment. "Nice speech," he commented dryly, "but all you really had to do was to order us to stop losing games. The results would have been the same and you'd still have a voice." Then he chuckled and ran to join his teammates.

"It was a nice speech dear," Nin-ti told him gently and gave him a light kiss.

It wasn't quite as easy as Enki implied. The attention span of gods is extremely variable and while they

were able to listen to Hawk's exhortations raptly for whatever length of time he chose to talk, they would only remember what he said for as long as he kept reminding them. In the end, however, Hawk noted that they weren't really different from any other team he had coached. Because they were unfathomably older than anyone he had ever encountered, he had erroneously assumed that they would behave like adults. If he had ever studied the mythology of the ancient world he would have known better. These were very powerful children who had never grown up and who, in comparison, made Peter Pan appear to be a mature and sober young man.

Hawk kept after the team all during batting practice. He put the entire infield through a series of intense fielding exercises and with the help of one of Nin-ti's sisters, a healing goddess who specialized in throats, he kept talking all the time. After practice, he pulled Enki and Marduk aside to discuss strategy, and then, while they changed into clean uniforms for the game, he reviewed the practice with the rest of the team. He encouraged them when they were correct and warned them when their responses were wrong, so that by the first pitch they were thinking of nothing but the game.

The Olympus Cubs, under Boyd Hunter's management, stood firmly at the top of the Eastern Division, some nine games ahead of the second place team, The Memphis Crocs, and twenty-one games ahead of the last-place Lamassu.

Hawk had, at first, been glad to remake the acquaintance of his old colleague, but discovered that Boyd had an unforgivable tendency to gloat. Boyd's gloating, on the other hand, was caused by his own jealousy on discovering that Hawk's team had youthened him back to the prime of his life, while the Cubs were holding that gift back in exchange for a winning season. Still they had been friends of old and Boyd had found that the Olympian gods, while they respected his expertise as a manager, weren't disposed to be chummy with him after hours. The result was that Boyd was getting lonely and Hawk was one of the few people with whom he could just sit and have a beer with after a game.

Hawk did not seem to have that problem. Nin-ti was gorgeous and was utterly devoted to him, and when Boyd grumbled about the snobbishness of gods, Hawk admitted that he hadn't noticed. Certainly he rarely saw Enlil. The King seemed content to let Hawk do his job without interference, a situation without precedence in his experience. However, most of the rest of the team showed none of the aloofness Boyd complained of. Team members often stopped by Hawk and Nin-ti's house during off-hours or invited them out to a favorite temple-home or garden. Such activity had grown sparse since the Lamassu's losing streak had begun, but it was depression not snobbery that was the cause.

Hawk's admission, however, had only rekindled Boyd's jealous fires, and the evening, two nights previous, had come to an unpleasant conclusion when Boyd had gloatingly predicted his team would conclude the current series with a crushing sweep over the Lamassu.

At the time, Hawk could only sigh, and keep any unkind retorts to himself, but now, after this morning's lecture and practice, he was ready to put his old friend back in his place in the only way that might make an impression.

It wouldn't be easy, however. The top of the first inning saw Isimud giving up twelve hits including two grand slams, leaving the Cubs ahead 10-0 with only one out.

"What am I doing wrong?" Isimud asked Hawk worriedly when the manager finally walked out to the mound and took the ball from the pitcher's grasp.

"All depends, Izzy," Hawk replied calmly. "Are you throwing a knuckleball or a curve?"

"Knuckleball?" Isimud answered uncertainly. Hawk raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Curve?"

"Want to try again?" Hawk countered. "No, don't bother, we don't have the time. Problem is, you're putting spin on the ball and with that pitch, you aren't getting much speed on the ball either. The Cubs think they're at batting practice. Look, make up your mind about what you're throwing and then throw it. You know how. Right?" Isimud nodded and Hawk tossed the ball back to him just as the umpire told them to break up the conference. "Oh, one more thing," Hawk added with a tone of command. "Strike the next two guys out!"

"Right!" Isimud replied, grinning. Hawk shook his head as he returned to the dugout, wondering whether it was really just this easy. Maybe it was, for as soon as play resumed, Isimud proceeded to throw six consecutive strikes.

"Thanks, Hawk," the pitcher said, beaming, as he came within earshot. Hawk returned the smile reflexively and turned to study the Angel's pitcher's warm-ups.

Eros, an almost girlishly pretty god with long wavy bronze hair, was Boyd's starter. The Cubs were quickly building up a reputation for perfection, but although Hawk couldn't pin it down, there was something wrong with Eros' pitches. He seemed to have excellent control of his release point, and although each warm-up pitch was a blazing fast ball that hit dead center of the strike zone, there was still something that nagged at Hawk's mind. Whatever it was, however, it didn't prevent Ishkur, Marduk, and Nergal from going down in order.

The next three innings were perfect for both teams, but something about Eros' performance continued to nag at Hawk's mind. It wasn't until the bottom of the fifth inning that he finally figured out what it was.

Gilgamesh took a wild swing at Eros' fastball and, by luck, connected hard enough to skip a high-bouncing ball into shallow left field just behind Ares, the Cubs' third baseman. Inanna stepped up to the plate as Hawk gave her the signal to bunt. Gilgamesh took the biggest lead he dared, prepared to use the sacrifice shot to his best advantage. The lead was too big a temptation for the pitcher, however and Eros attempted to pick Gilgamesh off.

"Balk!" the first-base umpire called. Gilgamesh looked puzzled. "Take second," the umpire clarified. Meanwhile Boyd Hunter was charging out of the dugout to argue the call and Hawk chuckled, now realizing what had been catching his eye. Pitchers are required to keep one foot in contact with the rubber at the top of the mound until they have released the ball, but that usually meant keeping the side of one foot against the front edge. Eros had the habit of standing on the rubber and he performed an unusually high kick as part of his wind-up. He almost could not help flinging that foot behind the back edge of the rubber and once that was done, he was required to throw to the batter. Failure to do so was a balk. The Lamassu now had two runners on base.

Eros tried to adjust his position, but he was obviously used to throwing from atop the rubber and uncertainty caused him to walk Utu, loading the bases. That brought Ninhursag up to bat. Hawk winced inwardly. Mother Nature was one of his best fielders, but so far her batting average was in the low .200s. Worse, she was the team leader at hitting into double plays. She looked to Hawk for guidance and he was tempted to give her the "bunt sign," but on a hunch he told her to put everything she had into her swing.

She did and connected on Eros' fireball. There was a tremendous crack as her bat broke cleanly in two as the ball flew out toward the left-centerfield in a high, lazy arc. Hawk's heart sank as the ball rose. On the mortal plane even that hit would be out of the park, but here the fence was a quarter mile away. Then

the miracle happened.

There were gusty winds high above the stadium and as the ball flew upward, a sudden strong gust gave it a bit of extra distance so that it continued on perilously close to the outfield wall. Below, Hermes and Pluto were speeding back toward the wall, but all the while keeping their eyes firmly on the dirty white ball. So intent were they on following its flight path, that they completely ignored the sandy crunch of their feet against the warning track until both had crashed full-tilt into the stone wall in left field. The ball completed its journey and bounced off the top of the leftfield wall and back on to the turf.

Hermes bounced also before becoming motionless on the ground while Pluto managed to get back to his feet before completely losing consciousness. Apollo sprinted toward the ball from right field, but before he could retrieve it, Ninhursag was already most of the way to third base.

Apollo fired the ball back to the infield where Faunus stood ready to relay the ball to Hephaestus at homeplate. Ninhursag, meanwhile had rounded third and was bearing down on home. The play was close, but after a brief hesitation, the umpire cried, "Safe!" to the delight of the home crowd.

"Why don't you go see what you and Nin-ti can do to help," Hawk suggested to Ninhursag after she completed her trip around the diamond.

"No need," she replied after staring toward the fallen Cubs a moment. "Their own healers are already at work, but I think we'll have two new outfielders for the rest of the game."

"Major injuries?" Hawk asked. There was a trace of sympathetic worry in his voice.

"No, but they're badly shaken. I certainly wouldn't be much good for a while after a crash like that, would you?"

"I'd be dead." Ninhursag let that pass without comment.

The rest of the Cubs were nearly as shaken as Hermes and Pluto, and Isimud made it to base on four successive balls. Then Nanna-Sin made it to base on an error by Apollo. Ishkur struck out, but Marduk smashed a line drive out of the park. Nergal doubled to right and Gilgamesh drove him home with a deep drive that bounced off the centerfield wall. Inanna singled to left leaving her and Gilgamesh at the corners, but they were left stranded when Utu's line drive was caught by the shortstop. The score at the middle of the fifth; 10-7 in the Cubs' favor.

The game proceeded smoothly after that, but until the ninth inning, the only hit by either team was a solo homer by Inanna in the seventh. In the ninth inning Eros was finally retired and the Cubs sent in their closer, Pan.

Hawk stoically watched the woods god warm up. However there was no obvious weakness in this pitcher. According to Ratatosk, Pan had pin-point control and was capable of placing the ball exactly where he wanted it almost every time.

Nanna-Sin started off the bottom of the ninth by striking out, but Ishkur caught enough of an inside pitch to pull out a single. In response, Marduk bunted. Against most teams such a move might have been a sacrifice, but Ares bobbled the ball just long enough to give Marduk time to reach base.

Nergal was up next. The Mesopotamian King of the Dead, had been hot lately. In spite of the team's losing record, he had hit at least once in each of the last twelve games, so Hawk was hopeful as the

fair-haired god approached the plate. His hopes were well-founded and Nergal hit a deep line drive into the right field corner.

The score was tied at ten runs each when Gilgamesh took his turn at bat. With Nergal on third with only one out, a hit by Gilgamesh would drive in the winning run. Even a deep sacrifice fly would do the job. However, the ancient hero went down on three straight pitches bringing Inanna up to bat once more. The goddess of Love and War had been swinging hot and cold all season and as she had already hit twice earlier in the game, Hawk had little hope of her hitting a third time. He waved her back and called Martu in to pinch hit for her.

The Bedu god promptly shoved everything he had been taught about patience at the plate aside and put all his muscles into his swing on Pan's first pitch. The contact of the ball against the bat sounded like a thunderclap and Hawk could have sworn the ball emitted a trail of smoke as it left the stadium. He blinked his eyes and decided it must have been a trick of the late afternoon light, but although he spent several hours searching the next morning, he never did find the winning home-run ball.

Twenty-one

All-Star Break

The next few weeks fulfilled Hawk's every dream of baseball. He was not only managing a great team but one headed toward the championship. It was, he had to admit to himself, almost as good as playing in the big leagues.

Marduk, Gilgamesh, Inanna, Martu, and Ninhursag established themselves firmly as power hitters while the rest of the team learned their batting limits and started bringing in the singles. The team batting average swiftly rose from 1.97 to a respectable 3.12. Hawk made some adjustments to the batting line-up and suddenly the Lamassu dominated in every game they played. There were still a few bugs to work out on the fielding side of the game, but the other teams in the Eastern Division of the Celestial League were worse.

The team went on to sweep both the Karma and the Indians twice, the Vikings, the Green Sox, the Crocodiles, and even the Angels once each, and took three out of four games from the Hall of Flames. All told, they won thirty of the next thirty five games, putting them three and a half games behind the first-placed Olympus team. It was a far cry from the bottom position they had occupied just a few weeks earlier, so it was not particularly surprising when Jael showed up with a special message in the visitor locker room in Thunderbird Stadium just after the Lamassu's victory over the Teotihuacan Eagles.

"Nice game," she commented sincerely, sauntering through the door, "although you nearly blew it, Enki, when you served up three consecutive heaters to Quetzalcoatl in the bottom of the ninth. What were you thinking?" Only a prodigious leap by the sun god, Utu, had prevented a game-winning, two-run homer.

"Talk to my catcher," the water god replied flatly. "He called the game. I just threw the ball."

"Marduk?" she asked archly.

"I don't recall claiming perfection," the erstwhile Devil replied, then added, "recently."

"Jael!" Nin-ti exclaimed as she spotted the pretty demoness. "What brings you here?"

"Business," Jael replied with a wink. "As Deputy Commissioner of the Celestial League I have the honor of bringing you the good news." She reached upward and pulled an envelope out of thin air then handed it to Hawk. He read the letter inside silently several times. "A problem, Mr. Wilton?"

"No, it's just a bit flowery - all those 'thees' and 'thous'."

"Would you like me to translate?" Jael offered. Then, before Hawk could reply she continued, "What it says is that Gilgamesh, Enki, and Inanna have been elected to the East Division All-Star team for the game to be played in three days time at Enderby Park."

"Where?" Nin-ti asked.

"Thought I knew all the ballparks in the League by now," Hawk commented at the same time.

"Hey, guys!" Ratatosk shouted from the doorway. "Heard the good news yet? We got three players in the All-Star game! Oh, hiya, Jael. Guess you told them already, huh?"

"Good guess, Ratty. Well, I've got to get going. Still have to notify Valhalla and Memphis. See you there!"

"Where?" Hawk shouted at her retreating back to no avail. She vanished silently as she passed through the doorway to the field. "Ratty, do you know?"

"Yeah, Enderby Park. Why?"

"Where the hell is Enderby Park?" Ratatosk told him. "You're kidding!" was Hawk's only response.

Hawk would have thought there was no place on Earth where a Celestial League-sized stadium could be built without being noticed. He said as much.

"Wrong!" Ratatosk corrected him bluntly as they walked along the limbs of Yggdrasil with Nin-ti. "Enderby Land was only one of five proposed sites. Personally, I favored the Kalihari or even Iowa. Certainly the climate would have been better, but the owners decided that Enderby could be used once a year indefinitely, while other locations would have to be eliminated after a single use."

"But the middle of Antarctica? It's mid-winter down there and sunrise isn't due for months."

"We've all been to night games before," Nin-ti reminded him.

"Mortal plane games, yes," Hawk agreed. "But the Lamassu's games have all been in daylight."

"We'll be playing a double-header next trip to Valhalla," Ratatosk reminded him. "The second game is bound to be under the lights, at least for an hour or so. Besides, this is a very special game and the only one that will be played here until the Series this fall. For that matter, what are you complaining about, you're just a spectator this time. One with a really great seat, I might add, and you don't want to know what sort of strings I had to pull to get it for you, and those for the rest of the team. If we ever get there, that is. Hope we didn't take a wrong turn."

"I thought you knew your way around the Tree," Hawk commented suspiciously.

"I do," came the defensive reply, "mostly. You have to understand my limitations. My job, in theory is - or was, actually - to carry strife all across the world. In practice, however, I rarely got outside of Europe. My bailiwick, and that of the other Norse gods, was wherever the Vikings roamed. That's a fair chunk of real estate; North America to Russia and south into the Mediterranean region, even parts of Africa and Asia, but they never made it to Antarctica. Trust me, I'd know."

"In any case until recently there was no one down there to carry strife to, save a few thousand penguins. So I haven't had much occasion to visit, not even on vacation, which, by the way, I don't get."

"Have you actually been there before?" Nin-ti asked.

"A few times," the squirrel admitted. "Once, earlier in the season, to do a story on the construction of the stadium. Before that, well, out of five billion odd humans there are still one or two practitioners of the old religion floating about here and there. Ah! Here we are."

After three and a half months of traversing the limbs of Yggdrasil, Hawk had grown accustomed to the sudden and, on the whole, silent transformations of scenery that took place whenever he reached his destination. They arrived on a narrow flat of dark gray stone in a valley between two great hills. The terrain was dimly lit by the indirect glow of stadium lights mounted along the top of the hill in front of them. At the base of that hill a large, cave-like door had been built. In the dim light it might have gone unnoticed, but dim marker lights had been mounted along its rim.

A cold wind was blowing at their backs and Nin-ti turned around to look at the hill behind them. She gasped and Hawk spun around to see what had caused her reaction. The steep hill behind them was made entirely of ice, a glacier.

"You ought to see it in daylight," Ratatosk told them. "It's blindingly bright and the shadows are blue. Good thing this is a night game; I hate glaciers."

"You? But you live in the far North," Hawk pointed out.

"So? I'm used to it, but I don't have to like it. You mortals don't know how lucky you are. Don't like the place you're living? All you gotta do is move. Gods, even minor ones, maybe especially minor ones, like me cannot. Some of us can visit other places from time to time, but our homes are permanent."

"It's not so easy for mortals to move either," Hawk pointed out. "Many can't afford to simply pack their bags and relocate."

"True enough," Ratatosk allowed, "but how many would sicken and die merely because they did?"

Heimdall tried it about twenty years ago. Got an apartment in New York and settled down to a life of ease. Took in a play or two a month, ate deli for lunch and every ethnic food you can imagine for dinner. That lasted about three years before he started getting headaches. Aspirin works as well on a god as it does on a mortal and he managed to hold out another ten months before coming down with influenza. After barely surviving that, he got the message and returned home to Asgard. Took him over a year to recover. Now when he wants a night out he commutes. Bifrost isn't all that long, after all. Now, if you don't mind, it's a bit cold out here. Let's go inside." They started walking toward the stadium gateway.

"I'm surprised it isn't colder," Hawk remarked. "Nighttime this near the polar - temperature ought to be sub-zero. It's cool here, but I doubt it's much below fifty."

"Divine providence," Ratatosk replied. "The stadium is being kept at what you would call shirt-sleeve weather - at least until after the game. Then the ice and snow will be replaced until the next time this place is needed. Hey!" he protested as another party materialized directly in front of them.

"Watch where yer walking, rodent!" one of them, a large, red-skinned demon snapped in a voice like shredded glass. "Or I'll use ya fer a handbag." The others laughed.

"Ya?" Ratatosk sneered, mocking the demon's accent. "Ya can't e'en catch a fly, how do ya expect ta catch a squirrel."

"Why ya little," the demon started.

"He's got a point, Dagon" one of his companions noted. "You bobbed the ball twice last week."

"Yeah?" Dagon retorted. "Who're ya ta talk? Leo keeps ya on the bench 'cause ya can't even make it ta base on four balls!"

"Watch it, mates," a third demon warned, stepping between the two. He pointed at the grinning Ratatosk and the others took the message.

"Nice trick," Dagon told the squirrel grudgingly, then turned toward Hawk. "Yer the Lamassu manager, aintcha?" Hawk nodded. He expected trouble from the bothersome demon prince and tensed himself to be ready for whatever might come next, but that proved unnecessary when Dagon merely nodded in return and added, "Nice job. See ya in the Series." With that, Dagon flashed a horrifying grin, that Hawk later decided was supposed to be a friendly smile, and turned with his friends to enter the stadium. After another moment, Hawk, Nin-ti, and Ratatosk followed.

Just inside the temperature was as Ratatosk predicted - warm and comfortable. Also, once inside any trace of natural scenery disappeared. Instead the place looked like any number of airports Hawk had been in, only larger. Dozens of beings manned counters, handing out tickets on a first-come, first-served basis.

"We're pre-ticketed," Ratatosk told Hawk, tugging at his arm. "This way."

They quickly found their seats, two rows back from the third base line. The park had been built by hollowing out a large hill so that there was a wide, horseshoe-shaped field inside. Unlike the other Celestial League ballparks, this one had seating deep into the outfield sections with multicolored stadium seats arranged in rainbow order so that the red seats were closest to the field and the violet seats rimmed the top, blending with the night sky.

Hawk took note of some of the more technical differences between this Enderby and Tiamat. Enderby was wider in the infield foul territory and maybe a bit narrower in the outfield. There would be more playable foul shots in Enderby than any other park in the League. The outfield was asymmetrical, slightly deeper to right field than left. He suspected this would not be a high scoring field.

"I don't think I'd like to play on this field," he told Ratatosk and Nin-ti.

"Why not?" Nin-ti asked.

"I agree," Ratatosk replied simultaneously. "Too much foul territory and the outfield is skewed against righties. Told 'em as much when they asked, but who listens to a squirrel? You'll notice, however, that they'll be playing on natural grass. None of that star-studded stuff here."

"That is a plus," Hawk allowed, "but why?"

"When the gods created that stuff they made certain it would survive in any environment. That had to include the fields of Valhalla, which means it would continue to thrive under a glacier. Besides how often are we going to need this place? we can always force-grow fresh grass."

"Easy for you to say," a familiar voice said from the row behind them. They turned around to see a stately goddess in a pale-green, flowing, Greek-style chiton. Her green hair and eyes seemed familiar to Hawk but it was Nin-ti who recognized her first.

"Mother! I thought you were sitting with Persephone and her court along the first base line."

"Traded with Athena. She wanted to spend some time with friends, and I wanted to sit in one of the red seats."

"Ninhursag," Hawk identified her at last, "I haven't seen you in that guise since the day we met."

"A girl likes to dress up every now and then," Mother Nature replied, smiling. "I just wonder who I'm sitting with."

"Well," Ratatosk replied thoughtfully, "since Athena, one of two deputy commissioners of the League was supposed to sit there, I'd say the aisle seats must belong to Jael and Marcus."

"Marcus?" Hawk asked at the unfamiliar name.

"Jael's mortal husband," Ratatosk explained.

"Taking my name in vain, Ratty?" Jael asked, arriving just then. Behind her stood a man in his early twenties carrying a cardboard tray full of ballpark food. He had brown hair and eyes and stood just under six feet tall, but Hawk found himself staring at the man's baseball cap.

"Arkansas Travelers," he told Hawk after realizing that they weren't quite making eye contact. Jael performed a set of introductions then promptly traded seats so she could sit next to Nin-ti, leaving Hawk with an aisle seat.

"Ever play ball, Marc?" Hawk asked conversationally. Out on the field the players were warming up.

"Not since high school," Marcus replied with a shrug. "Junior varsity bench warmer. Actually, I don't get

to attend many games these days. I'm an archaeologist, specializing in Near Eastern civilizations, so I'm usually out of the country during the heart of baseball season. I've become a real fan of pre and post-season play, however." Hawk nodded, not knowing what else to say, but Marcus was a good conversationalist and soon brought their conversation around to Hawk's own career.

By the time the first pitch was thrown out, Hawk was describing an exhibition game during his final spring as a player for the Indians' organization when he played all nine positions over the course of the game. "I hadn't pitched since college," he confessed. "Hadn't played any position except catcher in seven years, for that matter, but Charlie Tibbs, our manager that year, was having fun. We were playing Kent State during Spring Training in Arizona so it was really just a shakedown game for us. They scored six runs off me," Hawk laughed, "but I made up for it with a game-winning RBI in the ninth."

Marcus smiled politely and they continued talking pleasantly as he kept a score card.

"You forgot the assist," Hawk commented in the middle of the second inning.

"Scuse me?" Marcus asked. "Oh! Is that what the 'A' column is for? I never did know how to use that."

"It's no big deal," Hawk replied. "A lot of casual score-keepers ignore that stat. But if you want to keep a complete card, you should credit the right fielder, Apollo I think, with an assist on that last play. I'd have mentioned it sooner, but that was the first assist of the game."

"Excuse me, Mr. Wilton," a deep voice interrupted suddenly. Hawk turned to see a tall, transparent gray figure dressed in animal skins. His face was nearly identical to that of Gilgamesh and Hawk remembered seeing him once before.

"Your name is Enkidu?" Hawk replied uncertainly.

"Such it was in life, according to the scribes of the city," the ghost replied enigmatically. "I would beg a boon of you, sir."

"A what? Oh, you want me to do you a favor, right?"

"My brother," Enkidu continued hollowly, "is in great pain."

"Gil?" Hawk asked, remembering what Nin-ti had told him of Gilgamesh's life. Enkidu had been the ancient hero-king's beloved companion. He had saved Gilgamesh's life on several occasions and, in the end, had been killed by Inanna's machinations.

"It has been many cycles and still his pain persists," Enkidu continued.

"What pain?"

"He still mourns my death."

"After what? Four thousand years maybe? I would think he'd have grown used to the fact by now."

The ancient savage hero smiled humorlessly. "Gods are not particularly adaptable."

"He has a point, Hawk," Marcus added. "I've never met Gilgamesh, but as an archaeologist I know his story. After the death of Enkidu, he embarked on an almost suicidal quest. In the end, he died a broken

man, according to the legend. For that matter," he continued on, talking to Enkidu, "you ought to be residing eternally in the Netherworld."

"The House of the Dead could not contain me beyond the cycle," Enkidu explained. "I am free to roam the Earth, but only as a shadow. I have attempted to meet with my brother on numerous occasions, but even after all this time, my presence causes him pain."

"Maybe you should leave him alone then," Hawk suggested.

"Ah," Enkidu replied, "but his absence causes me pain. Please, Hawk, speak to my brother and heal this ancient wound."

"If he still can't deal with this after all this time, what makes you think that a few words from me would do any good?"

"My brother respects you, Hawk. Everyone says so. He would listen to you. Please. Do this for us and you'll have my eternal gratitude."

Hawk shrugged helplessly. "I'll do what I can," he promised a moment later. Enkidu merely nodded, then turned and walked away. "Somehow I expected him to fade out," Hawk commented to Marcus.

"He probably has a seat in the upper deck," Ratatosk opined.

"This stadium has an upper deck?" Marcus asked, looking upward. "I thought that was the roof."

"It is, but ghosts don't weigh much, so most of the noncorporeal entities are sitting up there.

Hawk looked back at the stadium roof for a moment and then shrugged and turned his attention back to the game. Enki was called in to pitch for the Eastern Division during the third inning. As per his usual performance, he quickly loaded the bases on two hits and a base-on ball, then just as quickly struck the next three batters out.

The next few innings seemed normal to Hawk except for the fact that the outfield distances were measured in yards rather than feet. Half a season, he mused, must be enough to make me used to just about anything. If I can get used to an artificial surface, I can get used to anything, he thought confidently. Of course, he was mistaken.

The stadium lights flickered as the seventh inning stretch commenced and the divine crowd grew silent. Then a cloud appeared over the pitcher's mound, a small puffy thing at first, but it soon grew until it covered the better part of the infield.

"Some sort of visual extravaganza?" Hawk asked Jael lightly. "More in keeping with football than baseball, but..." He stopped, seeing that Jael's face had grown pale and her mouth had opened slightly as she stared, frozen, at the field.

"Nothing I know about," she choked out at last, "and the planning was all my responsibility."

"Something unexpected then," Nin-ti mused.

"It has a familiar feel," Ratatosk grumbled. The cloud was beginning to darken from the puffy white it had started out as to an ominous slate gray.

"Familiar?" Hawk asked.

"Yeah. The force at work here feels like the same one that trapped me inside Yggdrasil."

"Are you sure?" Jael asked.

"How can you tell?" Hawk inquired simultaneously.

"Absolutely," he replied to Jael first, then grimly to Hawk, "I know."

Several small flashes of lightning coursed through the cloud and thunder filled the stadium. Suddenly the cloud exploded, sending puffs of white outward in all directions at hurricane force. As the storm cleared, it became apparent that a group of people were standing proudly on the diamond. They were all tall, averaging well over six feet but perfectly proportioned. Larger than life, was the phrase that passed through Hawk's mind.

"Who the hell are those guys?" Ratatosk snapped at nobody in particular.

But Marcus replied, "Isn't that Babe Ruth? Maybe?"

"Sort of looks like him," Hawk agreed, "but even from here he looks far too tall. Although that looks like Don Drysdale next to him. And Lou Gehrig, Shoeless Joe Jackson, Honus Wagner, Ty Cobb, and..."

"The spirits of the greatest dead players?" Marcus speculated.

"Not just dead ones," Hawk corrected him. "Look! There's Ted Williams, Joe DiMaggio, Mark McGwire, Micky Mantle, Roger Maris..."

"Roberto Clemente, Pete Rose, Roger Clemens, Nolan Ryan," Marcus added as Hawk ran down, "and those are just the ones we can recognize from here. There are enough players down there to make up several all-time All-Star teams."

"WE," a deep voice boomed out from the midst of the crowd, "ARE THE TRUE GODS OF BASEBALL! BY WHAT RIGHT HAVE WE BEEN EXCLUDED FROM THIS LEAGUE?"

TWENTY-TWO

A League of Their Own?

"I'll say this much, whoever they are," Hawk noted, "they were neither chosen by the Baseball Commissioner nor by the Hall of Fame."

A flash of lightning and a clap of thunder filled Enderby Park and Zeus appeared on the field before the Baseball Gods. He was soon followed by Odin, Enlil, and several other Celestial League "Owners."

"I agree," Jael told Hawk as she eased her way to the aisle, "but they may be the figures who personify all that is great in Baseball in the minds of mortal men. Excuse me, but I'm needed on the field." She ran down the aisle and jumped the rail with perfect Olympic form, but in mid jump she disappeared in a puff of brimfire only to reappear in similar fashion near the owners. From the stands, Hawk could see Athena join Jael as they both stood between the self-proclaimed Gods of Baseball and the irate team owners.

"I wonder if God himself will arrive in person," Hawk mused out loud.

"He's there already, dear," Nin-ti informed him. "See that patch of cloud just above Jael and Athena?"

"That's what God looks like? A patch of cloud?"

"He may appear in any manner he chooses, Hawk," Marcus replied. "A patch of cloud, a burning bush, a still small voice, whatever. You think there really are Baseball Gods?"

Hawk shrugged. "Great sports figures have always had their fans," he replied noncommittally, "but as I understand it new gods are created through the worship of followers."

"I thought God was supposed to be eternal," Marcus pointed out, "and the creator of the universe."

"He is and did," Nin-ti informed them both. "He also came into being several thousand years ago when his first followers began to worship him. And at that time he was created retrospectively, sort of."

"You mean he came into being and then went back and created the universe?" Hawk asked.

"No, he came into being having already created the universe and all his previous works as well. It's rather complicated. The universe was also created and ordered by members of every other pantheon as well. You see, almost every religion is valid."

"Almost?"

"Well, there are always a few small cults that never turn out to be more than short-term affairs, but most religions that last more than a single generation gain validity and, with validity, all their beliefs become true as well." Seeing their confused looks she continued. "Explaining multiple reality really isn't what I'm best at. Modern mortals have an expression, 'Living in a world of his own.' In a way, each culture lives in a world of its own. So the world was created by your God, by Apsu and Tiamat, and every other deity creation has been attributed to. It also came into being some fifteen billion years ago in an event modern scientists call the Big Bang. What we are talking about is a single universe with many different sets of reality. Understand?"

Hawk and Marcus looked at each other, then turned as one, to reply, "No."

"Well, that's the best I can do," she countered with a shrug and a smile.

"Ratty," Marcus asked, "do you understand any of that?"

"Of course." the squirrel replied maddeningly. Hawk and Marcus looked at him expectantly, so he added, "It's really quite simple."

"Well?" Hawk prompted.

"Well what?"

"Nevermind," he let it drop. "Wish I knew what was going on out there."

"They're talking," Ratatosk replied.

"Thank you so much," Hawk retorted acidly. "I don't suppose you can hear what they're saying?"

"Can you? My hearing may be a bit better than yours, but Heimdall I'm not. I can't hear the falling of a feather fifteen leagues away, especially over this crowd." He waved his furry arms at the stadium in general.

Even as he said that, however, a heavy fog covered the infield and then a moment later it faded away. When it had disappeared only Jael, Athena, and the owners were in sight. They, too, left the field in the manner they had arrived and a few minutes later Jael returned to her seat, carrying a large cardboard tray full of cups of beer.

"Here," she told them, offering the beer, "I think you're going to need this. Actually something stronger is probably in order, but the park's concessions don't run to whiskey."

"So long as they don't run to sushi," Hawk replied, taking a cup.

"Don't talk dirty," Jael retorted. "This is Antarctica, not California."

"Right. So what's the problem? We have a new team in the league?"

"Actually they want to form two new teams, American and National League All Stars."

"Won't that screw up the League's schedules?" Marcus asked.

"It'll invalidate the first half of the season," Ratatosk pointed out. "Baby gods! That's all I need."

"Fortunately, they are willing to wait until next season to be part of the regular schedule," Jael informed them.

"I hear a big 'but' in there," Nin-ti commented.

"My, what big ears you have, Grandma," Jael replied, grinning, "but your hearing is as accurate as ever. Athena came up with a compromise and they have the right to challenge the league champions to a three-game series with the championship at stake."

"Post-post season play?" Hawk scoffed.

"Think of it as pre-winter league play," Jael suggested.

"We have a winter league?" Hawk asked. "Who plays? The so-called 'Elder Gods?'"

"No, we don't have a winter league. Even gods need an off-season. Oh, I nearly forgot, they will also be allowed one exhibition game with each team between now and the play-offs. I get to work those games into the schedule. It will give everyone a chance, however slight, to see what they're up against."

"Remind me to play our second string," Hawk told Nin-ti.

"We'll need to hold something in reserve," she agreed, "but we don't want to be obvious about it, dear. Maybe just give some of our power hitters the day off."

"You don't think they won't do the same?" Ratatosk countered. "They have a lot more players to draw from than we do. Fortunately you have the only team in the league with a full-time scout. Hey, cutie!" He turned toward Jael. "Where do those guys practice?"

"I haven't the faintest," Jael shrugged.

"Terrific," the squirrel replied sourly. "No matter. If they practice anywhere in the known universe, I'll find them from the branches of Yggdrasil. They do practice, don't they?"

"I suppose they must," Jael agreed. "But I'm damned if I know where. Come to think of it," the demoness added with a smirk, "technically, I'm damned anyway."

The remainder of the All-Star Game was an anti-climax of monumental proportions. While the players continued on, over three-quarters of the spectators left the stadium by the end of the seventh inning.

"I've seen folks leave a game when it was a foregone conclusion," Marcus commented, "but the score is tied and both teams are coming up to the top of their batting orders. Where's everyone going?"

"Home to make plans," Hawk replied. "The appearance of these so-called Gods of Baseball has changed the Celestial League's situation and they're all worried about what that will mean for the rest of the season."

"How would they affect the rest of the season?" Nin-ti asked, confused.

"It shouldn't," Jael told her quickly. "Their games will be strictly exhibition until the games against the league champs so they won't affect team standings."

"Baseball doesn't work that way," Hawk disagreed. "Players are some of the most superstitious people in the world. So much of the game depends on luck after all."

"I always thought skill was the deciding factor in the game," Marcus objected.

"Yes and no," Hawk equivocated. "Look at the major leagues. Just to get there a player has to be one of the very best. Do you know how many major league players there are?"

"Before or after late-season expansion?" Ratatosk asked."

"Either. The point I'm making is that there are only a few hundred major league baseball players out of the thousands of minor league players and the hundreds of thousands of hopefuls who never make it in pro-ball. Now those who do make it to the Game are the elite. If they all played up to their full potential, games would probably average seventeen innings long and there would be more than thirteen perfect games in baseball history as well. So why aren't there?"

"They're only human, Hawk," Marcus pointed out.

"Right. None of us is perfect, so we're going to make mistakes. The difference between a ball and a strike is the edge of a razor. The difference between a stolen base and a put-out is the same. And the difference between a superstar and a career in the bush leagues is only one or two hits per week. What's the deciding factor then?"

"The umpire's cataracts?" Marcus ventured after a moment.

Hawk chuckled. "I hate to admit it, but umpires are actually right far more often than not and, in spite of a few spectacularly bad calls, video tape usually proves the umpire out. No, the difference is a matter of percentages. We talk about batting averages, earned run averages and all sorts of other stats. But if your usual batting average is, say, .300 and during the month of June you only manage to hit for .187, then you figure that you're just on a streak of bad luck. Similarly, if your average suddenly goes up to .379 the next month, you chalk that up to spectacularly good luck. Either way, many players start looking for reasons why their luck changed. Actions and situations that seem to bring good luck continue and those that cause bad luck are avoided. After a while, no matter how good a player you are, when something happens you think is bad luck, your playing goes to hell."

"But it's all in your head," Marcus observed.

"What's your point?" Marcus was at a loss for words. "Luck in your head," Hawk continued, "or in reality, the results are the same."

"Just because a player's average reaches the high or low point of a bell-curve?"

"You got it."

"In any case," Jael chimed in, "the entry of these new gods is going to leave a lot of the older gods worried and when you're worried you don't play your best. Also I think it's pretty obvious by now that it was the emergence of these Baseball Gods that has been causing all those mysterious events from Ratatosk's kidnapping to the strange sights at the Earthly ballparks."

"Maybe even that blizzard that cancelled that last game we played in Valhalla," Nin-ti added.

"Maybe," Jael allowed.

"Not to mention all those broken branches on Yggdrasil," Ratatosk added.

"Definitely!" Jael agreed. "Maybe now that they've appeared on the Celestial League's plane those inconveniences will stop. That's what the Commissioner says."

"Inconveniences?" objected Ratatosk. "Hey, cutie, you call major damage to the World Tree an inconvenience?"

"So I understated the situation, but I would be surprised if that damage didn't start healing rapidly now. The birth of gods always shakes the world up a bit, but such divine births are usually followed by periods of creation."

"We'll see," Ratty snorted, unconvinced.

"I'd like to see the end of this game already," Mother Nature remarked, "so we can all get back and start assessing the rest of the season ourselves." It was the first time she had said anything since the start of the

game.

"Oh! So you can still speak," Ratatosk snapped. "I was starting to wonder if you were posing for a new statue."

"Don't start on me, rodent," she retorted sharply. "You'd have trouble climbing the Tree as a melon."

Ratatosk looked like he was about to say something and then quickly bit it back. She could be teased and even fooled with a bit, but no entity reached his or her first millennium without learning where Mother Nature drew the line. Then she whispered something to Nin-ti.

"Yes, Mother," the healing goddess replied as she stood up and started toward the aisle.

"Where are you going?" Hawk asked.

"I'll be right back," she told him with a wink.

"Care to enlighten us, Ninhursag?" Hawk asked the Mother Goddess. Her green eyes returned his regard solemnly for a moment even as she gave him a mysterious smile. Then she turned her attention to the bottom half of the ninth inning.

Loki was pitching for the Western Division and Krishna was at the plate for the East with runners on first and second and two outs. The Indian hero-god's eyes were sharp so while he kept fouling off every pitch that came over the plate, he eventually brought the count full. In all Loki threw twelve pitches before giving up a base-on ball.

That brought the mighty volcano goddess, Pele, to the plate. She swung and connected on the first pitch to smash a long drive forty feet over the rightfield wall. It would have been a game-winning grand slam, except that the winged archangel, Gabriel, shot upward and intercepted the ball. As he caught it the momentum drove him backward through the air. According to Celestial League rules, a ball must be caught within the confines of the stadium, and the remains of the stadium crowd held its collective breath, waiting for the umpire's call. If the force of impact was sufficient to push Gabriel past the wall then the game would be over. However, the umpire ruled that the angel had made a legal catch and the game progressed into extra innings.

Nin-ti returned a few minutes later with Nergal, Nanna-Sin, Dumuzi, Martu, and Ashnan in tow. "The rest will be along presently," Nin-ti informed Mother Nature.

"What's going on?" Hawk demanded.

"Team meeting," Nature informed him. "I figured we could start planning right here. Why wait? Did you get word to our All-Stars?" she asked Nin-ti.

"Yes, Mother. They'll be up just after the game."

"Don't you think I should have been the one to call a meeting?" Hawk asked irritably.

"Didn't you want to?" Ninhursag countered.

"Sure, but after I knew what, if anything, to say. Right now, I think we should wait until Ratty here has a chance to scope out the new team, although if they play like they did in life, they'll sweep the league."

"Then you can say just that," Nature informed him and then returned her attention to the game, refusing to be drawn into discussion until it was over.

The game came to a sudden halt when Inanna came to the plate at the start of the second half of the tenth. She swung on Chemos' first pitch, sending the ball over the left field fence just out of Israfel's reach.

"I'd have been sorry to miss that," Jael commented. "That was her only hit all game."

"Inanna's batting tends to be a bit streaky," Dumuzi informed her.

Jael nodded. "Well, Marcus and I will leave you to your meeting. Try not to still be here when they replace the snow," she advised, grinning.

TWENTY-THREE

Exhibition Play

"The way I see it," Hawk had told his team just after the All Star game, "we have to play out the rest of the season as though this new Baseball Gods team doesn't exist."

"Easy for you to say, Hawk," Enki pointed out.

"Maybe, but it's the truth anyway. Look. We still have half our schedule to play through and the only change is a single exhibition game with the Gods of Baseball." He paused a moment. "I hope they come up with a shorter team name. A guy could choke saying that too many times."

"They'll probably keep it then," Ratatosk muttered. "It's damned intimidating."

"Except we know the truth," Gilgamesh stated a little too confidently.

"What truth is that, Gil," Hawk prompted.

"They're just another bunch of gods, just like us. and if they're just like us, they're no better and we can beat them!"

Except, Hawk thought silently, they're the gods of the game. Enki's the god of water, Inanna of love and war, Gil's a dragon-killing hero. That's what you all are best at. These guys are best at baseball. Can anyone in the league beat them even once?

Three and one half weeks later, when Ratatosk brought in his scouting reports, Hawk asked the same question again out loud.

"Debatable," the talking squirrel snapped back. They were sitting in the adjoining garden of the Dilmun home Hawk had been given. Ratatosk stuck his paw into a bowl full of salted nuts and proceeded to stuff his face. He chewed for a while and swallowed before continuing, "Although if they were fielding two teams like they want, I'd give them even odds against each other."

Hawk gave his scout a sour look. "Ratty," he replied at last, "I could have told you that a month ago, and that was before we even knew these guys existed. Give me something to hope for here."

"Dammit, Hawk," Ratatosk retorted heatedly, "I'm a scout, not a faith healer! I could paint you a pretty picture and tell you everything you'd like to hear, but come game time you'd know it for the betrayal it would be. You weren't there, but I was. The Bambino hit one clean out of the stadium!"

"Not the first time," Hawk countered, "for anyone in this league."

"Out of the Earthdome? Hawk, the ball went through the roof and as best any of us can figure it landed in one of the nearby calderas. The Earthdome was supposed to be impregnable! His next shot was intercepted in midflight by Hell's center fielder." Ratatosk paused for effect. "He was slammed up against what was left of the dome. Melkarth's now on the 15-day disabled list; the first in-game injury in the league. Zebub will be filling in for a couple weeks at least."

"So the Babe has power," Hawk concluded.

"And an even better eye than he did in life," Ratatosk added. "Here's worse news; Babe Ruth is not their best hitter. Aaron, DiMaggio, Wagner, and Williams are all hitting more consistently. They beat the Hall of Flames 100-3, and I don't even want to talk about their shut-out over the Green Sox."

"Who are they playing next?"

"The Angels, next week." As he replied, Nin-ti entered the garden quietly with a pitcher of modern-style beer - Hawk wouldn't touch the lumpy, warm brew favored by the ancient Sumerians - and filled three beakers before sitting next to Hawk on his bench.

"Don't we have a series with the Angels next week?" Hawk asked, taking a sip.

"Just after their game with the Baseball Gods."

"All right, I'll make it a point to talk to Casey about them while he's here. He ought to have a good solid perspective on them, both from life and from his exhibition game. When are we scheduled against the Baseball Gods?"

"September 5th. We have about one month to get ready, and five more games during which I can study them for weaknesses, although I doubt I'll find any."

"Why not?" Nin-ti asked innocently. "None of us are perfect."

"Because they're not the actual spirits of legendary ballplayers," Hawk answered her. "As far as I can

figure, they're the idealization of the very spirit of Baseball."

"That's very good," Enki's voice came from behind him, "for a man who didn't believe in ancient gods just last March." They all turned to see Enki and Ninhursag enter the garden arm-in-arm.

"However," Mother Nature continued for the Water God, "you're absolutely right. These gods are not the spirits of mortal players, and they do seem to be unbeatable."

"But," Nin-ti objected, "that doesn't make sense."

"I'm still not sure any of this makes sense," Hawk noted.

"No, dear, I mean that if they are, as you put it, idealizations of Baseball, then they almost have to be beatable."

"How do you figure that, cutie?" Ratatosk inquired.

Nin-ti smiled false tolerance at the rodent and explained, "Errors are an essential part of the game." Hawk rewarded her with a twisted grin of understanding, but the others looked at her blankly. "We may not like them..."

"Now there's an understatement," Enki interrupted.

"But," she continued without pause, "without the occasional error, it's just not the same game."

"She has a point," Hawk admitted to the rest. "Many player strategies are based on the hope of an opponent's mistake. When we attempt to steal bases, we're counting on the pitcher not throwing heat and the catcher not reacting in time. It's a matter of timing. For that matter, a batter has a split second to figure out what sort of pitch has been thrown and where it's going. A perfect player could never be struck out since he would always make contact with anything in the strike zone."

"I hadn't even thought of that," Nin-ti admitted. "What I had in mind were official errors; bobbling the ball, missing the cut-off man, actions that cost. They're every bit as much a part of the game as the grand-slam homer."

"I see what you mean," Enki said thoughtfully. "As the Gods of Baseball they ought to be as susceptible to the strengths of the game as the weaknesses."

"But how do we work that to our advantage?" Ninhursag asked pointedly.

All eyes turned to Hawk and he was forcibly reminded that regardless of his mortal status he was a leader to these gods. In many ways - talent, temperament, and maturity - they were no different than the young minor league players he had spent so much of his career coaching. They needed direction, and in spite of the fact that he had no idea what they could do, he would be damned if he admitted it.

"Don't worry about it too much," he replied with more confidence than he felt. "I have a few ideas. We'll try them out in practice starting tomorrow."

They all nodded and sat back comfortably at the good news, but later Nin-ti started to wonder just what Hawk had in mind. She asked him after their guests had left.

"Haven't the slightest," Hawk admitted.

"Then what will we be doing differently tomorrow?"

"Oh that. We'll start using a new warm-up routine for a while and I'll try switching some of the players around, give the bench some more experience. The amazing thing is we haven't suffered any long-term injuries yet."

"Gods heal quickly, dear."

"Not quickly enough should they pull a tendon in mid-game. The secret to beating the Baseball Gods, if they can be beaten, is going to be surprise. We're going to have to do stuff they don't expect."

"Hit 'em where they aren't?" Nin-ti asked with a grin.

"Have to do that in any game," Hawk replied seriously. "No, this time we'll have to be really creative."

The next month went by all too quickly for Hawk and the Lamassu. Hawk's various ploys, while they did almost nothing toward actual preparation for their game against the Gods of Baseball, were a tremendous boost to the team's morale.

Each and every team member played up to his or her full potential and for the first time Hawk felt the same thrill he had in his brief career in the Majors. Individually they were batting and fielding as well as any Hall-of-Famer. Collectively they played with near-flawless precision and twenty-five wins in thirty games brought them to the top of their division one game ahead of the second-place Wolf Cubs. It was a heady position and they met the Baseball Gods at the head of a seven game streak, all of which led Ratatosk to a well-considered conclusion.

"We haven't got a prayer," he told Hawk disgustedly during batting practice. "You know that, don't ya?"

"Do I, Ratty?" Hawk countered smugly.

The squirrel studied him carefully. "Ya have a plan?" he asked hopefully. Hawk flashed him a tight grin. "Oh, stop playing this so close to your chest, man! Next to you, I'm this team's leading expert on the game. At least give me the chance to advise you."

Hawk glanced quickly at the field. He knew Ratatosk was nervous. The squirrel could speak grammatically perfect English, but usually used his annoying accent except when he was excited. "All right," Hawk conceded. "See anything different out there?"

Ratatosk studied the field. At first he saw nothing out of the ordinary, but on a second look he started to see what Hawk was talking about. "Inneresting," he admitted at last. "Except for Marduk, nobody's in his or her regular position. Yer trying to lose!"

"I wouldn't put it that way."

Ratatosk cocked his head to one side and gave him a dirty look that could only mean, "Want to run that past me again?"

Hawk chuckled. "Ratty, what I'm not doing is showing them any of our strengths. So I have Enki playing left field and Ninurta at third, Ninhursag at first and Martu at shortstop."

"But Inanna pitching?" Ratatosk protested. "I could hit off her. That's not going to fool anyone."

"I don't intend it to fool anyone. Ratty, Inanna is not going to pitch this game."

"Oh? Good."

"She'll be coaching at third. Nin-ti will pitch." Hawk pointed out toward the bullpen where Nin-ti was just starting her warm-up exercises.

"Are you mad?"

"Ever seen her pitch?" Hawk countered.

"Well, no, but..."

"She's really quite good," Hawk assured his scout, then added, "for an inning or two. After that she falls apart, but I'll bet you a steak dinner she'll give us two perfect innings before I have to pull her."

"Yer bluffin'," Ratatosk told him after a telling pause. "Still, yer on! No backing out now."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Hawk chuckled. "You'll also notice that Ashnan is playing at second. She might be our most accomplished hitter."

"So why haven't you ever played her before instead of using her as your batting coach."

"She takes no joy from playing the game. She originally tried out because Enlil ordered the entire pantheon to do so. She has the talent but prefers to teach and direct. I'd never get her best by forcing her to play so I gave her a job she can really enjoy."

"So how'd you get her to bat today?" Ratatosk asked.

"I mentioned my plan at a coaches' meeting last night and she volunteered."

"Wait a moment. Isn't there some rule against using anyone who isn't on the official team roster?"

"Not in the Celestial League," Hawk replied with an evil grin while flourishing the small pamphlet that was the Celestial League Book of Rules. "I looked it up. You know, I'm really getting to love this rule book," he gloated. "According to this, each team is made up of one manager and up to twenty-eight players. So while my coaches have not played a single game so far, they are still eligible."

Ratatosk took another look out at the field where Dumuzi had just popped up to Enkimdu, the farming god and Hawk's pitching coach in center field who promptly dropped the easy catch. "Sorry, Hawk," Ratatosk said, shaking his head sadly, "ya still haven't got a chance. You've never seen the Baseball Gods play."

"Oh yes, I have!" Hawk replied earnestly. "I grew up watching them play. I've watched tapes and films of all the great games and plays. Hell! I've played with some of those guys."

"They're not really the players you knew," the squirrel reminded him.

"No, they're the embodiments of those players' full potential."

"And you still think you can beat them today?" Ratatosk pressed.

Hawk smiled. "Not today, but when we win the League Championship..."

He won that steak dinner from Ratatosk when Nin-ti pitched six consecutive strike-outs, but had to pull her from the game when she loaded the bases and served up a grand slam to Ty Cobb in the third inning.

"There goes my no-hitter," she joked when Hawk and Marduk met her on the mound.

"It's all right," Hawk told her. "You did just what you were supposed to do. This is the first game in which they failed to get a hit in the first inning. Have a seat and then you can go back to your usual job as first base coach." She nodded and left the field.

"Nice move, Hawk," Marduk noted dryly, "but there's nobody warming up in the bullpen. Who's going to pitch?"

"You want a shot?" Hawk shot back.

Marduk's eyes widened dramatically. "I do hope you're kidding," he replied.

"I am. Actually it's time we got some mileage out of our pitching coach." Hawk turned and waved Enkimdu in from the outfield. As Enkimdu trotted in, Ishkur went to take his place in center field.

Enkimdu yielded six hits over the next two innings but only one run. Meanwhile the Lamassu were kept hitless by Baseball God pitcher Satchel Paige. All that changed at the bottom of the fourth inning when Nergal came to bat.

Paige was having a bad inning but was battling his way through. He had thrown a dozen pitches each to Martu and Ninhursag before they both grounded out. Nergal faced ten pitches from Paige to bring the count full and then made a solid contact hit to drive the ball through the slot into left field.

"Well, there goes his no-hitter," Nin-ti allowed herself the gloat from the coach's box.

Marduk then stepped up to the plate and knocked the first pitch over the right field fence. The Lamassu's fans went wild as he and Nergal rounded the bases.

"Hold up, Ninurta," Hawk told the player on deck. "Let's give Enlidu a try." Ninurta shrugged and returned to the bench. In his place a tall god with jet black skin and hair picked up a bat and walked to the plate.

"Who the hell's that?" Ratatosk asked Hawk.

"New recruit," Hawk replied. "He's a netherworld demon, highly placed in the court of Nergal and

Erishkigal. This is his first game."

"Why wasn't he at Spring Training?"

"We didn't realize he was eligible," Nergal replied. "As it is, he's the only one of my subjects who expressed an interest in the game."

"Let's hope he can hit the ball," Ratatosk replied sourly.

Ten pitches later Enlidu did, indeed, hit the ball for a second Lamassu home-run. The fans went wild as their team came to within one run of a tie, but abruptly became quiet when Ishkur struck out.

"Not a bad inning," Ratatosk conceded. "What's next on your plan?"

"What makes you think I have a plan?" Hawk countered.

The Dilmun team managed to keep their adversaries down to only one more run but went hitless thereafter until the top of the seventh inning. Satchel Paige by then had thrown over three hundred pitches and Hawk was beginning to despair of ever wearing him out, but hope flared anew when Martu, Ninhursag, and Nergal were each walked in turn.

Marduk walked confidently to the plate but after being allowed a few warm-up swings the Baseball Gods' manager called for time and went to the mound.

The manager was a mysterious figure who seemed to resemble a different legendary manager each game. It was rumored that he was actually several different managers who took turns, but nobody knew but the "Commissioner" and he kept silent, respecting the team's choice. On this particular day the Baseball Gods' manager looked like Connie Mack and at the moment he wasn't looking happy. He kept the conference on the mound going until the umpire walked out to break it up and then announced a pitching change. The Baseball Gods had a very deep pitching staff to call upon and with only one game a week to play they could afford to keep two pitchers warming up throughout most of the game, so their opponents never knew if or when a change might be made.

In from the bullpen, strolled Walter John son, in life the all-time leader in shut-out games. He took his warm-up pitches with the same studied confidence that typified all the Baseball Gods.

Marduk watched his pitching form carefully, seeking some weakness and found none. Finally, the wait was over and it was time to once more play ball.

The ancient god-hero swung on the first pitch, an inside fastball, and fouled it off into the stands. The next pitch he missed completely, but he put so much into the swing that he corkscrewed himself around, lost balance, and landed on his seat to the amusement of the crowd and especially of the Baseball Gods. Marduk dusted himself off and, literally fuming, he stepped back to the plate. He scowled at John son and tensed every muscle in his body, waiting for the next pitch. John son looked to his catcher, Yogi Berra, and shook off the first two signs.

Meanwhile, Marduk maintained his statue-like pose, the only movement produced by the modest breeze as it brushed across his uniform. John son hurled a curveball that came in high and tight, but Marduk refused to move as the ball passed less than an inch from his nose. Nor did he move until the next pitch came in low. Then he exploded into action as he took a golf swing at the spheroid and sent it into the sky. When last sighted the ball was high over the left field fence and still rising.

The cheers were deafening as Marduk finished his lap around the bases. The Lamassu were ahead by two runs as the game went into the seventh inning stretch.

The bottom of the seventh brought another round of line-up changes for the Lamassu as Enki replaced Enkimdu on the mound.

"Want to play musical bases?" Hawk asked Marduk.

"Depends," the catcher replied warily. "What do you have in mind."

"Watch."

As Marduk watched, Utu took his accustomed place in centerfield, Ninhursag moved from first base to second, Gilgamesh entered the game at third base, Dumuzi at shortstop and Enlidu moved out into right field.

"I'm the only player you haven't moved yet," Marduk observed.

"Wait. The game's not over yet," Hawk laughed and walked off, leaving his catcher at a loss for the first time all season.

Enki pitched the next two innings perfectly, but so did Walter John son. However, the Water God faltered at the bottom of the ninth inning, walking the first two batters. Babe Ruth came to the plate, representing the winning run with no outs, so Hawk wasted no time and brought Ninshubur in from the bullpen.

"Save it for us, 'Shubur," he told the new pitcher simply.

"How?" Ninshubur asked, but Hawk was already on his way back.

"Well," Marduk ventured, "you could try striking the next three guys out." Then he briefly went over a set of signal changes before the umpire broke up the mound conference.

Ruth swung on the first pitch for a strike. "That's only one," he shouted out at the pitcher defiantly, pointing at him. Then he repeated the gesture with two fingers. "I've got two left!"

The larger-than-life Bambino got caught looking at the second strike, but that only increased his defiance. "Two! That's only two," he boomed. He pointed his finger at the pitcher again. "Ya need one more!"

Marduk noted the Babe's posture and cracked, "Calling your shot again, Babe?"

Ruth caught himself and then gave the catcher a very evil grin. "Yeah, sure," and very deliberately and clearly pointed out and over the left field fence. The crowd became abruptly quiet.

Marduk decided to imitate Ratatosk and retorted, "Yer gonna look real silly if ya don't make it."

"I'll make it," Ruth replied confidently, and pointed once more.

Marduk signaled for Ninshubur's curveball and the Babe swung at it.

And connected.

The ball blasted its way up and out and over the right field wall. "That's not the way you pointed," Marduk noted sourly.

"Close enough," Ruth chuckled and started jogging.

TWENTY-FOUR

Seventh Inning Stretch

There was a smattering of applause as the Bambino returned to home plate, but the Lamassu sadly returned to their clubhouse rather than stay and watch the joyful celebrations of the Baseball Gods.

"You'd think they'd get used to winning after a while," Gilgamesh muttered, looking back over his shoulder just before stepping into the dugout.

"We never have," Nergal retorted.

"Yeah, maybe..." Gilgamesh's voice trailed off.

Hawk and Nin-ti entered the locker room hand-in-hand with large grins on their faces just after the rest of the team had finished slumping in.

"And what the hell are you two so happy about?" Ratatosk demanded. Several players grumbled agreement.

"Are you kidding?" Hawk replied with a laugh. "You're the scout. Do you know any team that did as well as we did against them so far?"

The squirrel did a double take worthy of a cartoon character. Then understanding began to flash in his eyes. "You expected to lose?"

"Didn't you?" Nin-ti laughed.

"Well," Ratatosk hedged, "I suppose, but with all Hawk's wild strategies and tactics I sort of got to hoping. You know?"

"Ah ha!" Enki cried out suddenly. "I had wondered why you had most of us playing in our weakest positions!"

"And why some of us didn't play at all," Inanna added.

"Right," Marduk agreed. "You wanted to us to know that if we could do this well playing at our worst,

we'd slaughter them at our best."

"That too," Hawk nodded, "although my main concern was not allowing them to know our greatest strengths. All the other teams have been putting their best players out. Frankly, I don't want that team to know any more about us than we know about them. So I decided to play this one as though they had started with a three-run lead and our best players were on the Disabled List."

"It also gave us a chance to re-evaluate your own potentials in a variety of positions," Nin-ti added. "I, for one, was impressed."

"Enki," Hawk elaborated, "you handled left field excellently. I'll probably use you out there again in a pinch situation."

"Or even just to give my arm a rest mid-game," the Water God suggested. "Most of the times when you've relieved me, I was ready to pitch again two innings later. Might be interesting to be both the winning and saving pitcher in the same game."

"I'll keep that in mind," Hawk told him noncommittally. "Enlidu, I used you in the outfield too this game, because you haven't had more than the one session in the batting cage this morning, but I was very impressed by the way you threw the ball all the way in from deep right. It followed a very flat trajectory and went precisely where you wanted it to go. At that distance it shows a lot of power and accuracy. At practice tomorrow I want to see if we can use you as a pitcher."

"Father Enlil knows we could use a deeper pitcher rotation," Nin-ti added.

"You weren't bad yourself," Hawk told her.

"Thank you, but I'm far too erratic a pitcher to be much good. My success only came from the undisciplined nature of the pitches I threw. They really didn't know what was coming. By the third inning, however, they had my measure. I doubt we could ever get away with that again, dear."

"We won't have to," Hawk replied. "Frankly, you're too good a coach to waste out on the field in any case. Enkimdu, however, we might use you in relief every now and then. I have to admit, that I've been letting myself fall into a few traps these last couple of months. Enki, Isimud, and Ninshubur could each pitch twenty straight innings in a normal game. Problem is, we have yet to play a normal game. In this league we probably never will. But I keep forgetting the scale. Some of you can pitch accurately for an inning, and there are many professional pitchers who can only do as well. But since you're all so superpowerful, I've been overlooking possibilities that I would employ with a mortal team."

"So we can expect a lot of line-up changes?" Ninhursag asked.

"Oh yes, indeed," Hawk chuckled. "But if I make the right choices, I doubt we'll lose more than five or six games in this last month of play."

The Dilmun team swept the next seven games they played against the Angels and the Green Sox. Hawk

began to think they were unbeatable, but when they lost both of a two-game stand against the bottom-of-the-league Aztec Eagles, his confidence was shaken badly. He was still brooding over the set-back the next morning when Gilgamesh and Inanna dropped by. Hawk was sitting on a stone bench next to a small pool in his garden as they approached arm-in-arm.

"Good morning, Skipper!" Gilgamesh boomed out. Inanna agreed by flashing Hawk her most disarming smile.

"You two look indecently chipper," Hawk growled over a cup of coffee. Then he remembered his manners and offered, "Coffee?" They agreed instantly and helped themselves from the pot that sat nearby. Nin-ti always made sure there were extra cups available in case of visitors.

The beverage wasn't native to Dilmun, but easily importable by divinities capable of traveling to the mortal plane. Since Hawk insisted coffee was essential to his health, they made sure he had an ample supply. Additionally, many of the ancient gods decided that they, too, enjoyed it, although to Hawk's great distaste they added enough honey to reclassify the liquid as a syrup.

"Tough break yesterday," Gilgamesh said tentatively a few minutes later. Hawk favored him with an evil glare. "Okay, so we played like a bunch of rookies and blew the game worse than a hurricane." Hawk shook his head, something rang wrong with Gil's metaphor. Maybe it was just too modern, but then these gods seemed to be quick studies. Last spring they had seemed a bit stuffy and out-of-date. Now except for their heroic proportions, they could fit in with any mortal crowd.

"Anyone can lose a game," Inanna agreed, "or two, but we wanted you to know that we're all the more dedicated to winning this season and getting into the play-offs."

"Right," Gilgamesh added. "Even with these last two losses, we're only half a game behind the Cubs with plenty of time to make it up."

"If you want," Inanna suggested, "we could give up our day off and have a practice this afternoon."

Hawk considered that for a moment before shaking his head. "No, there is such a thing as too much work and a well-spent day off can break a losing streak."

"Do two games make a streak," Gilgamesh wondered.

"Good!" Inanna replied simultaneously. "That's actually why we came to see you."

"What's that?" Hawk asked.

"Well, some of us have been spending our days off on the mortal plane," she half-explained.

"I suppose that's your privilege," Hawk told her.

"We've been going to various ballgames," she continued. "Major league, the minors, even Little League sometimes. We try to take in as many double headers as possible. Every once in a while we spy on some of the other teams in the Celestial League."

"Watching the competition I can understand, but why the mortal teams? I would have thought you'd have had enough on game days."

"Simple!" Gilgamesh exclaimed. "We learned so much at that game you took us to last spring, we figured we could learn even more if we attended even more. I think it helps to actually see someone else turning the plays."

"It gives us perspective," Inanna added. "Anyway, we figured you could use a day and a night out too. Join us?"

Hawk's first instinct was to refuse, but then changed his mind. "Taking in the pennant race between the Orioles and Yankees?" he asked.

"Enki wanted to," Inanna replied, "but Ninhursag and I have been wanting to take in a pro-game featuring women and since this is the last day of the regular season in the minor leagues..." she left the reasoning hanging.

"Women playing pro-ball? These days?" Hawk wondered aloud. Then his memory kicked in. "Of course, the Silver Bullets. They play in one of the rookie leagues, don't they?"

"The Pioneer League," Inanna informed him. "They'll be closing their season against the Copper Kings in a place called Butte ." Hawk was amazed that she managed to pronounce the name correctly. Then he made his decision.

"Sure. I'd be glad to go along. I haven't been to Montana since the season I managed in Salt Lake ."

"Great, I'll go tell Enki and Ninmah to arrange for six tickets."

The game was all Hawk expected and hoped for. Neither team was in contention for the league play-offs, but they were tied for second in their division, and after the usual closing-game awards ceremonies, both teams played as though the championship was on the line.

To Hawk it was a revelation. Hall-of-Famer Jimmie Foxx had once said that the players of the All American Girls Professional Baseball League were ready to play baseball at any level. Hawk saw first-hand that the same was true of the Silver Bullets. They played their hearts out. Many of them ought to have been playing in double or triple-A teams. One or two might even have been good enough to play in the majors, but until one of the men's teams broke the sex-barrier this was their best and only chance to play pro-ball.

Having spent the season managing both male and female players, Hawk wondered why there had been a forty-year gap in professional women's baseball. He no longer understood why pro-ball resisted the notion of mixed teams. It did not seem to hurt the game at all. It did not even seem to make any difference. In Hawk's world there were only two types of people - players and fans. There were those who did not give a damn for the game, but they were as alien as little green men to Hawk's way of thinking - not a true part of his world.

"Hawk," Enki's voice shook him out of his reverie.

"Hmm?"

"I've been meaning to ask you about some of the strategies we've been using lately."

"You have a problem?" Hawk replied mildly.

"Not really, I suppose. Not yet anyway. It's been working, after all, but I can't see any pattern to what you've had us doing lately. It's almost as though you're making it up as you go along."

Hawk was silent for a moment and then used his reaction to a neat double play by the Silver Bullets to delay answering while he thought out his reply. He chuckled a moment before plunging on with the truth. "I am."

"I thought you said you had a plan," Gilgamesh pressed.

"I did," Hawk affirmed. "I do. I planned to improvise every move we made, just as any good manager should. We were doing pretty well going into the All-Star break, but a lot of it was luck and luck isn't what wins pennants. Also we'd been using the same line-up with very little change since opening day. That might work for some mortal teams but you all are too versatile for that. Well some of you are, anyway. I wouldn't want to take Marduk away from the catcher's place because there's no one on the team who can do the job half as well, and you, Gil, are still our best third baseman, but Inanna is as good in the outfield as she is at shortstop and Enki can play any position on the field."

"And I have," Enki added.

"Right," Hawk agreed. "You're too good a player for me to use only on every third day. So I've been shifting everyone around so that you'll all have experience with a number of positions. We're coming up on the last few weeks of the season and we're still in second place."

"Only by half a game," Inanna reminded him.

"That's enough to keep us out of the play-offs, but we've still got six games left against the Cubs. We ought to be able to take them, don't you think?"

They all agreed so enthusiastically that it was almost inconsequential that the Bullets beat the Kings 4-3.

"So where to next?" Inanna asked as they left Alumni Stadium.

"There's still time to catch the second half of a double header in Dodger Stadium," Enki suggested.

"Who're they playing?" Hawk asked.

"The Mets."

"Veto!" Ninhursag interrupted. "I'm hungry and I want something besides a ballpark hot dog."

"They probably have sushi in L.A.," Enki suggested.

"Have you ever had ballpark sushi?" she countered. The Water God shuddered.

"What have you in mind, Mother?" Nin-ti asked.

"How about borscht and blinis at the Russian Tea Room?"

"In New York?" Hawk asked. "Don't you need reservations?"

"We have reservations," Mother Nature replied, "or we will have by the time we get there." Hawk

looked confused and she smiled mysteriously. "How do you think we got six seats together at a sold-out game?"

TWENTY-FIVE

Pennant Race

Hawk awoke at first light and for the first time since they had met discovered that Nin-ti did actually sleep. He had entertained suspicions that she never really slept since she was always up before him, that she had feigned sleep so he wouldn't be uncomfortable with her divine abilities. Looking down at her, however, he knew that wasn't the case.

He dressed quietly and quickly slipped out of their house. It wasn't Hawk's habit to take early morning walks, but this morning he needed to think. He wandered for a while through Dilmun's well-manicured gardens, but soon realized that he had been heading unthinkingly toward Tiamat Field. Rather than turning around, he increased his pace and arrive a few minutes later at the park.

He walked out onto the diamond and stood on the pitcher's mound just as the sun rose and flooded the field. He studied the park from that vantage point another few minutes and then slowly made his way up into the stands where he found a seat along the first base line. He was still staring out at the field when a high-pitched voice shook him out of his contemplation.

"Three games left to the season," Ratatosk noted, sitting next to Hawk, "and we're still tied with the Cubs."

"Our magic number is two," Hawk replied flatly. The final three games were scheduled against the Olympus team. Whichever team took the best of three would win the division title.

"Vethrfofnir predicts the Cubs will take two out of three," the scout reported sourly.

"Damned, bird-brained writer!" Hawk spat. Ratatosk looked at Hawk a moment, wondering if the pun had been intentional and decided otherwise.

"That ought to have been my line."

"So what are you doing here so early?" Hawk asked at last.

"I'm out here most mornings," the squirrel admitted. "It's quiet here. I'm gonna miss it when the season ends. How 'bout you? What are you doing here this early?"

"Felt like it. Never thought I'd get the chance to manage a good team again. I guess I'm just trying to get as much in as I can before it ends."

"There's always next season," Ratatosk replied.

"Is there?" Hawk countered. "Maybe by then the gods will decide to play shuffleboard. Even if you're right, will I be a part of it? I'd say I only have a one-year contract, but the truth is, I've nothing but a verbal agreement."

"Are you kidding? Enlil wouldn't trade you for anything. He's been bragging about you to all the other chief deities. And even if he did have a lapse of judgement and released you, several others would pick you up in a second. Why I heard Odin crying in his beer just last week, wishing he'd signed you last spring."

"I like it here," Hawk decided after the briefest hesitation. "Valhalla's too cold, and even I can't keep up with their drinking habits. I'm not a young man anymore."

"Ya have a look in a mirror lately?" the squirrel asked sharply, lapsing into the ascerbic accent he often used. "Hawk, ya are a young man agin! 'Bout twenny-five I'd say."

"But I'm a very old twenny... twenty-five." Then he paused and cocked his head to one side for a moment. "Twenty-five? You think so? I'd have thought it was closer to twenty-one."

"Maybe," Ratatosk allowed. "When ya get to be my age there ain't much difference."

"How old are you any way?"

"Old enough to not get carded at a bar," Ratatosk snapped back.

"Sorry," Hawk apologized. "Wasn't trying to hit a sore spot."

"S'okay. For what it's worth, I think Vethrfolnir's wrong. Hermes ignored the warning track at Teotihuacan yesterday and knocked himself into next week when he hit the centerfield wall."

"I hadn't heard that."

"No reason you should have. Only happened a few hours ago. They were playing the second half of a twi-night double header and were in the fourteenth inning. The Cubs are coming into this series one man short, tired as hell, and probably demoralized. They won last night, but only because the Eagles were even more tired than the Cubs. Xipe Totec, the last available pitcher, got tired and walked four straight. Then all the Cubs had to do was hold on for three outs.

"They nearly didn't, for that matter. Dionysus walked the bases loaded with only one out and was only saved when Centeotl hit into a double play. No such thing as a boring game in this league," he concluded.

"I've never found any ballgame boring," Hawk retorted. "So who's Boyd putting in Hermes' place?"

"Don't know for sure, but last night he sent in Momus."

"Momus?"

"God of Laughter," Ratatosk explained. "He's fairly fast on his feet, but he's no Hermes. The Wolf Cubs only have an okay outfield now. I think ours is better and we're all in good shape. We can take these guys."

"They've lost an outfielder," Hawk recapped.

"THE outfielder," the scout countered. "Hermes is the heart and soul of the outfield. Hell, he is a one-man outfield. Apollo and Pluto were there more to fill the roster than play the positions. You noted it yourself during the first game. The Cubs have been playing their left and right fielders wide and deep, mostly to guard the far corners. Hermes has been covering eighty-five percent of the field and Mom us for all his speed can't cover more than his third. Hermes is still actually playing but his speed is way down, a bit less than average at the moment."

"They might be vulnerable to hits that make them run, do you think?" Ratatosk nodded emphatically. "Who's up on their pitching rotation?"

"Janus. You know the two-faced guy who sort of looks like Isimud only not quite as handsome?"

"I seem to remember him, yes," Hawk replied dryly. "Hmm. It's Enki's turn on our rotation, but maybe I should start Izzy instead." He thought about that before continuing, "No. Better not fall into that trap."

"Enki's the stronger starter," Ratatosk agreed, "and we'll have the edge when we take the first game."

"Don't get cocky," Hawk warned.

"Hah!" the squirrel laughed. "Cocky is my way of life."

Game time came all too soon for Hawk, but the team was up for it. Boyd Hunter met Hawk on the field to brag about his Cubs, but the arrogant edge was missing from his voice and when they discussed other matters he seemed almost apologetic. Over the course of the season, Boyd had become increasingly colder toward Hawk as the Lamassu's record improved and threatened that of the Cubs. They had been barely on speaking terms during the period when Olympus had been in second place to Dilmun. Now with the season almost over, Hawk couldn't tell whether his old friend was trying to make up for his earlier behavior, or just bolster his own waning confidence. Giving his colleague the benefit of the doubt, Hawk invited Boyd over for dinner after the game.

Then the first pitch was thrown out and all of Hawk's concentration went into the game. Enki pitched five perfect innings, but while the Lamassu got seven hits off of Janus, three of them were picked off, trying to steal and the other four were left stranded on base. It wasn't until the sixth inning that the Dilmun defense faltered.

Enki shook off Marduk's first call and they agreed on a sinker. Pluto swung his large black bat at the almost perfect pitch and connected to send a hopping grounder through the hole into right field.

"I'd hate to see what he'd have done to that fast ball you shook off," Marduk muttered in a quick conference to change their signs.

"Why do you think I shook it off?" Enki countered with his characteristic grin.

"Well, maybe we can pick him off. Faunus and Janus aren't big threats, but Hermes is on a fifty-game hitting streak."

"Let's see if we can break the streak then," Enki laughed. Marduk smiled grimly, but also shook his head and Enki quickly dropped his smile. His divine son had always been a more serious god, and this was a

strong reminder that the division championship rested on taking two out of three games.

Enki quickly struck out the next two batters, bringing Hermes up to bat. The messenger god fanned on the first two pitches and then waited out Enki's next three balls to bring the count full. Pluto, never a fast runner, waited at first, taking only minimal leads.

Hawk, watching from the dugout, commented to Nin-ti and his other coaches, "Boyd must be going crazy. Hermes can normally stretch a single into a home-run, but now he can't go any faster than Pluto. We should be able to force Pluto out if Hermes hits." Together they watched as Enki threw pitch after pitch, each one a potential strike hit fouled off on Hermes' bat.

"I've lost count," Ratatosk chattered several minutes later. "How many pitches is that so far?"

Ashnan, the batting coach, looked up from a clay tablet she was inscribing and replied, "Thirty. More than he's thrown to all the other batters combined this game."

The squirrel, temporarily distracted, inspected the clay tablet. "What is that anyway?"

"Score card," Ashnan replied simply, keeping her eye on the game as Enki pitched for another foul ball.

"In cuneiform?"

"It's compact, concise, and allows me to record every aspect of the game on a single tablet."

"And I thought Odin's runes were bad," the squirrel muttered and shook his head.

Meanwhile, on the field, Enki was winding up to throw the thirty-second pitch to Hermes. Hermes whipped his bat around and caught Enki's fast ball squarely, sending a blazing line-drive into deep right field. Nanna-Sin sprinted toward the far corner while Inanna dashed outward to the cut-off position. The ball bounced hard off the right-field wall, four hundred yards downrange from home plate and into Nanna-Sin's glove. The moon god quickly snatched the spheroid and hurled it back toward the infield even as Pluto closed in on third base with Hermes hot on his tail. Inanna caught the throw in what in any mortal ballpark would be considered deep centerfield and relayed it on to Marduk at home plate. The ball arrived too late to stop Pluto from scoring, but Hermes had pressed his luck beyond the limit and was tagged out in a squeeze play between third and home.

Poseidon was up next and hit for a home run on the second pitch and Ares beat out the throw to first. Hercules, however hit into a double play, bringing the inning to a close with the Cubs ahead 2-0.

The Lamassu then went hitless until the bottom of the ninth inning. Pan had come in for the Cubs to close the game and it was Inanna's turn at bat.

Pan's pitches were masterful, but Inanna waited him out and eventually made it to base on balls. Hawk then sent Dumuzi in to pinch hit for Utu. Dumuzi bunted, intending to move Inanna to second in a sacrifice, but Ares failed to get a good grip on the ball and bobbled it. By the time he had it under control, Inanna was safe at second and the only throw was to first. It was close and the umpire hesitated before making his decision, but in the end the call was, "Safe!"

Ninhursag drove a high fly into deep left field. Pluto caught it, but it was too deep to prevent Inanna and Dumuzi from advancing to third and second respectively.

Martu pinch hit for Enki and his single drove Inanna in for a run, but just as the spectators began to hope for a Dilmun win, Nanna-Sin struck out and Ishkur popped up for an easy catch by Hephaestos.

Final score:

	Runs	Hits	Errors
Olympus	2	5	1
Dilmun	1	8	0

TWENTY-SIX

End of the Season

"Play ball!" the umpire called. Hawk realized suddenly that this was the last time he'd hear those words in regular season play for another year.

It's been one hell of a ride, he thought to himself as Enlidu threw his first pitch.

The second game of the final stand had been a carbon copy of the first until the ninth inning when luck went the way of the Lamassu. This time Ninhursag's fly ball got a boost from the prevailing wind and found ground on the far side of the wall, incidentally startling a pair of minor Anunaki who, disinterested in the game, were strolling through the gardens of Dilmun.

So, once more the two teams were tied in the standings and this final game would determine who would go on to face the team from Hell in the Worlds Series.

Hermes, now mostly recovered, swung on the first pitch and sent a long lazy looper that landed just ahead of Utu. The sun god scooped the ball up and hurled it back in toward the cut-off man, but Hermes had already stretched what would normally be a single into a stand-up triple.

Enlidu managed to strike Poseidon and Ares out, but Hercules sent the ball out of the park on the 3-2 pitch. Hephaestos backed up Hercules' homer with one of his own, and Apollo got a hit and then stole second base. Pluto drove him home, but then got stranded on base when Dionysus struck out.

Hawk had a sinking feeling as his team went into the bottom of the first behind 4-0, but Dionysus wasn't having any better an inning than Enlidu had.

Ishkur made it to base on balls and Nanna-Sin tapped a ground ball into shallow right field which put runners at the corners. Utu's high fly into deep left field was caught easily by Pluto, but it gave Ishkur time to tag up and head for home. Marduk fanned on the first pitch, but Utu stole second base, putting him in scoring position. He might as well have stayed in place however, since Marduk's next swing sent the ball

out of the park.

Nergal fouled off into the stands seven times before knocking a slow ground ball toward third base. Ares sprinted for it, but the ball took a wild hop as he tried to scoop it up and it went over his glove. By the time Faunus recovered it, Nergal was safe at first. Gilgamesh struck out, but Inanna hit for a triple and Ninhursag's subsequent single brought Inanna home to tie the game. Enlidu walked, bringing Ishkur to the plate for the second time. Ishkur singled to load the bases, but then Nanna-Sin struck out.

The next two innings went the same way so that they went into the top of the fourth with the score was still tied, but at twelve runs each.

"All right," Ratatosk grumbled, "who's been spiking the ball?"

"Huh?" Ashnan asked, not understanding the squirrel's comment.

"I mean what's up? The balls been taking happy pills this game or what? I'd swear the balls in this game are all juiced up."

"You hear things like that in pro-ball too," Hawk added. "Some seasons it seems like everyone's hitting homers. Other years, you gotta fight just to get it out of the infield."

"See?" Ratatosk pressed. "Every so often, just to boost flagging interest in the game the commissioner and his staff have the balls made so they'll hit harder and fly further. I think someone's been doing that here."

"I doubt it," Hawk told him. "I doubt that even happens in the real world. There's just too many people who have to handle the balls in the course of manufacture. After all these years someone would talk, admit they'd been told to make the balls differently."

"Then how do you account for the major differences in pitching and batting stats from one year to the next? It doesn't take much to vary the size of the ball by just a bit or to wrap it a little tighter or looser."

"Account for it?" Hawk echoed. "I don't. A great part of baseball is in the mind of the player. If you think the ball is juiced up, you get more hits. Convince your team-mates, and you win a lot of games. Convince the whole league and every batter wants the balls more active, and you get a lot of high-scoring games. On the other hand, the pitchers want a ball that's harder to hit and by the same token some years they get their wishes while the batters get what they fear the most, but nine-tenths of it is in their heads."

"And the other ten percent?" the squirrel countered, then added, "I may not be much on higher mathematics, but even the Vikings could count to ten, even after losing a finger or two."

"Maybe there's a slight difference in the ball. Perhaps the fibers that go into the string wrapping varies from one harvest to the next, but some of my best hitting seasons were when the ball was supposedly dead. I've never noticed enough difference to matter anyway."

The hitting spree came to an abrupt end in the sixth inning when tied at twenty-one runs, the Cubs sent Pan in to relieve Dionysus. Hawk kept Enlidu in the game and both pitchers threw perfect innings right through the ninth.

"Enlidu isn't going to last much longer," Ashnan reported to Hawk. "He's thrown three hundred pitches so far. Even a god has limits, and Enlidu, good as he is, is only a minor functionary of Nergal's court."

"Who's in the best shape?" Hawk asked. All three of the other pitchers had been played hard in the last few days.

"Nin-ti," the grain goddess/batting coach replied without cracking a smile. Hawk glanced at Nin-ti and she looked back at him lovingly.

"No," he decided at last. "She's been pitching batting practice too much this week. Sorry dear."

"That's alright, love," she replied gently. "I didn't want to admit it if you needed me, but I doubt I could hold on for an entire inning today, judging by how I felt after batting practice this afternoon."

Hawk nodded. "How about Enki?" he asked. "He didn't pitch yesterday."

"That would change the rotation for the Series," Ashnan pointed out.

"If we don't win today, there is no Series for us. Warm him up. If this doesn't go on too long maybe he can open the Series anyway. We do have two days off before it starts."

Enki warmed up slowly and Enlidu allowed a run by the Cubs in the top of the tenth inning before Enki was ready to relieve him.

Hawk sent Martu in to pinch-hit for Ishkur at the bottom of the inning and he hit for a double. Nanna-Sin grounded out, but enabled Martu to advance to third base. Dumuzi, substituting for Utu, brought him in to tie the game up with a sacrifice fly, but then Marduk struck out to end the inning with the game still tied.

Boyd sent Eros in to pitch in the eleventh inning and neither he nor Enki gave up any runs until the 14th inning when Hercules came to the plate with two outs. He swung on Enki's first offering and sent the ball screaming out of the park.

"Bet that one went over the edge of the world," Ratatosk snapped bitterly.

"Hmm?" Hawk asked distractedly, while wondering why it hadn't left a vapor trail.

"This world is flat," the squirrel told him condescendingly, "had you forgotten?"

"What? Oh yeah, I guess I had. Why?"

"Only that it also isn't more than a few leagues across, and given the speed and trajectory that ball left the stadium at, I'd guess it ought to be out over the edge right about now."

"That must be why we've never found some of the home-run balls hit out of here," Hawk concluded.

"Riiiiight," Ratatosk drawled sourly.

"What's your problem anyway?" Hawk asked suddenly. "You've been in one of your moods all week."

"My moods," the scout echoed. "Ah well, I guess it's because I'll be out of a job soon."

"There's always Yggdrassil, Ratty," Ninhursag reminded him sweetly.

"Yeah," he replied. "You know after this summer, the old World-tree seems just a bit boring."

"After a thousand years or so," Utu commented, "almost anything can be boring. Remember all of us have been around even longer than you have."

"Cept for Hawk, of course," Ninurta added.

"So why do I feel older than the lot of you?" Hawk countered.

"Maybe we just never grew up," Enki answered, entering the dugout. "Did you see how I took out old Vulcan? Wham! Three straight pitches."

"Not bad," Hawk told him dryly, not admitting he had missed it. "What about the guy before that?"

"Well," the water god replied, obviously embarrassed, "We can still make that up, can't we?"

"We have three chances, and you're one of them."

Inanna and Ninhursag both struck out, leaving Enki as the Lamassu's last chance. His teammates shouted encouragement, but his eyes, as he stood at the plate taking warm-up swings, were on Hawk's stern face. Hawk made a gesture intended to mean, "Keep your eye on the pitcher," but which Enki misunderstood as, "Hit it out of here." Eros hurled in a flat-line fastball and Enki teed off on it, sending it over the left field wall for only the third time all season. Hawk's hopes began to rise when Martu hit for a triple, but the game was still tied when Nanna-Sin grounded out.

Enki and Eros each pitched four perfect innings but that changed in the nineteenth inning. Enki was fighting an uphill battle. After striking out Faunus and Eros, he walked Hermes, Poseidon, and Ares. Enki now had to face Hercules, the Cub's best slugger.

The ancient god of wisdom and water was visibly sweating as he looked around the field. Marduk called the pitches and Enki rapidly found himself behind in the count 3-0.

Marduk walked the ball out to his father and asked, "Arm going?"

"I've been better," Enki admitted.

"You're trying too hard, throwing every pitch in the book. Just get this next pitch over the plate, but don't put anything on it. Let it come in slow, a real off-speed pitch."

"He'll hit a fat pitch like that."

"Maybe, although after these last few he won't expect a slow ball. And even if he does, it won't go far."

"Famous last words," Enki replied sourly, but he did as Marduk suggested. Hercules did swing and hit but just barely connected, sending it lazily bouncing toward Inanna at shortstop. Inanna sprinted forward and scooped up the ball. Quickly realizing that her only play was at first, she fired it over to Nergal who caught the ball just as Hercules reached the base.

The umpire paused an eternity before deciding, "Out!"

"What!" Boyd shouted, as he raged out across the field. "He was there ahead of the throw!"

"No. He was out," the umpire replied calmly. "The ball was in the baseman's mitt just ahead of the runner's foot."

"You're blind!" Boyd screamed. The umpire had heard it all before and the comment rolled right off him. His only reaction was to smile tightly and shake his head.

Boyd replied with the sort of comment that got managers thrown out of ballgames and the umpire obliged. The manager of the Cubs wasn't finished with his tantrum yet.

"Out?" he screamed between profanities. "You want him out?" He bent over and up-rooted the base, then flung it ten feet into the outfield. "There! Now he was out!" Eventually he was escorted off the field and the game went into the bottom of the inning.

"Tell Izzy to warm up," Hawk instructed before turning his attention back to the field. "We may need him."

Martu sent a line drive through the hole into left field to lead off the inning with a hit, but Utu struck out after a long struggle with a full count. Dumuzi bunted down the third base line and the Cubs' pitcher and third baseman tried to let it roll foul. However the ball stopped short of foul territory leaving the Lamassu with two runners on base. Marduk walked, loading the bases and Nergal approached the plate, with Gilgamesh on deck. Then the potential for disaster struck.

While Nergal faced the pitcher, Gilgamesh paused to look around the stadium and spotted a familiar figure. There just behind the Lamassu dugout stood the spectral form of Gilgamesh's old companion, Enkidu. Enkidu smiled at his life-long friend, but Gilgamesh dissolved, once more, into a puddle of remorse, and lay curled up and sobbing uncontrollably on the ground.

"Damn!" Hawk swore. "I never did get around to talking to him about that." He ran to the incapacitated hero's side as Nergal struck out. Nin-ti and the rest of the coaches arrived moments later. Together they all tried to shake Gilgamesh out of his fit both verbally and physically, but he shook them all off.

"Wilton," the umpire said at last, "you need a batter out here."

"Hold yer horses," Ratatosk told the man in blue. "This is extenuatin' circumstances."

"Just a minute please," Hawk added hastily, "while I help my player here. The umpire nodded. "Gil," Hawk told the ancient slayer of dragons sternly, "that's just about enough. Now get up!"

Gilgamesh stopped sobbing and uncurled enough to give Hawk a look of dawning rage. "Can't you at least respect my grief?" he grated out.

"After four thousand years?" Hawk countered. "Gil, it's time to let it go and get a life instead. Look at him. Look!" He pointed emphatically and Gilgamesh's eye reluctantly obeyed. "That's your brother."

"He's dead," Gilgamesh said flatly.

"His spirit is still alive and wants to be with you. Damn it, man! Can't you see how you're hurting him? All he wants is to be reunited with you and cheer you on as you play the game. You, on the other hand, want to roll on the ground and throw tantrums. Now, get up and be a man!" Enkidu nodded his agreement and for the first time in four millennia, Gilgamesh smiled at the site of his blood companion. He stood up and

Enkidu pointed at homeplate. Hawk added, "Now go out there and win the game."

"Right, skipper," Gilgamesh replied determinedly, and strode purposefully away.

"That was a fast turn-around, wasn't it?" Hawk asked Nin-ti.

"Gods can be like that, dear," she replied and returned to her post.

Hawk didn't have long to wait for results. Gilgamesh swung on Eros' first pitch and with a thunderous crack of bat-against-ball won the game and the season with a grand-slam homerun.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The Worlds Series

Hawk's eye opened when the first rays of light burst through his bedroom window. Nin-ti was still fast asleep as he quietly dressed and left their home to stroll through the garden paths of Dilmun.

After a few minutes he realized that he was not wandering at will but was being subtly summoned. It was not unlike the summons he had received from Enki much earlier in the season, but he was definitely not headed for the water god's Abzu temple-home. Instead he entered a somewhat more modest area. A relatively small ziggurat, a mere fifty feet tall, stood surrounded by four distinctly different gardens. The path Hawk followed wound through each of them in turn.

The first garden had been planted exclusively with evergreen trees and shrubs. The second was filled with daffodils, tulips, lilacs and other spring flowers. As he passed through the summer and autumn gardens, Hawk realized that he must be headed toward Ninhursag's Dilmun home. He was proven correct a few minutes later when she met him at the top step of her temple.

"Good morning, Hawk," she greeted him warmly. "Coffee?"

"You have coffee?" Hawk asked, surprised. Coffee was one of the modern foods that had to be imported for his use. To his knowledge none of the ancient gods had been aware of the beverage before he had arrived.

"I grow my own," she replied. "Oh, not here, not in Dilmun, but unlike most of the team I've kept up with and am still worshiped by some in the modern world. Even my garden here is very much modernized."

"It is?" he asked, following her inside the small house on top.

"Oh yes. I've used many modern breeds and hybrids and the seasons are as viewed in Western culture. The seasons in Mesopotamia are different and so are the plants. You might notice that this is the only garden without palms in it."

"You've been busy this summer," Hawk noted.

"A god doesn't need to sleep and one can only play baseball for so long before one needs a break," she acknowledged with a shrug. They sat across a table from each other and she poured coffee. "Cream? Sugar?"

"No thanks." He took a sip. "Very good. Now what was so important you had to summon me here?"

"I just wanted to talk," she replied.

"You went to a lot of trouble just to have me over to chat. Especially since we get together most evenings after the games anyway."

"This is not about baseball," she informed him seriously, "and I wanted to talk to you alone. Now when have I had a chance to do that lately?"

"Anytime over the last seven or eight months."

"Not alone. You haven't been alone for more than a few minutes at a time since you accepted Enlil's offer."

"So I was with Nin-ti most of the time," Hawk shrugged. "There was something you didn't want her to hear?" Then his eyes widened as Mother Nature's intention became obvious. "What's wrong with Nin-ti?" he asked concernedly.

"Nothing is wrong with her," Ninhursag told him quickly, "not yet anyway."

"Then what..."

"HawkWilton," she asked with deadly seriousness, "what are your intentions with my daughter?"

Hawk paused, stunned by the question. Then he did something even Mother Nature didn't expect. He laughed.

"What's so amusing, Mr. Wilton?" she asked as the temperature in the room dropped ten degrees instantly.

Hawk struggled to get control of himself before replying, "I'd would have more expected that question from her father."

"She doesn't have a father," Ninhursag informed him, warming up just a bit. "Well, maybe a father in spirit, but, no, I really can't count the fox."

"Her father was a fox?"

"Only in that it was by his intercession that Nin-ti and her sisters came into being."

Hawk grinned. "I always thought she was a fox. Never knew it was literally true, though." He stopped suddenly when he realized that Ninhursag still wasn't smiling.

"You haven't answered my question," she reminded him sternly.

"My intentions?"

"Yes. She is not a fringe benefit of the job, Hawk. She stays with you because she loves you and has ever since she first saw you." Hawk tried to say something, but nothing came out and Ninhursag continued. "Love at first sight is common among the gods, Hawk. One look at you and she knew you were destined to be together."

"But for how long?" Hawk countered. "I'm an old man."

"You're effectively forty years younger than you were last winter," she countered, "I'd say you'll live at least that much longer."

"You mean this won't wear off?"

"Of course it will wear off. Slowly over the next forty years, unless you eat and drink of the food and water of life again," she added. "You have the option of living forever. Now do you love my daughter?"

"Of course I do," Hawk. "Why else would I still be living with her?"

"I know the nature of men better than that, Hawk," she told him pointedly.

"Then consider the nature of this man."

She did. Hawk squirmed as he felt her probe his soul in some mysterious and magical way. After a few minutes she spoke again. "I have my answer. Thank you, Hawk, and take care of her. You're going to be together for a very long time."

"Forty years at least," Hawk returned with a smile.

Ninhursag chuckled. "Much longer than that."

"How much longer?"

"You should figure that out for yourself, but if you don't I'll let you know in a millennium or two."

"Right," Hawk drawled, unaware of just how literally the nature goddess spoke. He took a sip of his coffee and the matter slipped completely out of his mind as did the entire conversation once he left Mother Nature's lair. Ninhursag did not believe he was quite ready for the entirety of his situation. Immortality is something a person must grow into.

EnderbyPark had an entirely different look from the vantage point of the dugout. From the grandstand, Hawk had seen it as just another oversized ballpark of the Celestial League, but once he was at the field level he saw it as the ultimate expression of baseball. Tiamat Field, Olympic Stadium, and all the rest

represented the minors, but here, Hawk realized, he had returned at last to the big leagues.

Then he looked across the diamond to see the team from Hell taking batting practice and felt his tongue grow thick. Out of twenty games this past season, they had only defeated the Hall of Flames five times.

"Hall of Flames!" a high-pitched voice squeaked behind him. "They deserve to lose for picking a name like that. Last year they were just the Demons. Why they changed it is way beyond me."

"Thanks, Ratty," Hawk replied.

"For what?"

"For shaking me out of a funk. I was really starting to get worried about those guys. That is a silly team name they have, isn't it?"

"I've heard worse," Ratatosk disagreed. Hawk nodded silently. By now he knew that the squirrel often said such things automatically rather than from any felt belief.

"I'll bet you have. So, what's the report?"

"Report?" the squirrel countered.

"I seem to remember hiring a scout for my team, or was that some other furry critter with aspirations to journalism?"

Ratatosk glared at Hawk a moment, then shrugged. "You're getting pretty good at that, you know."

"I've had all season to practice," Hawk replied dryly. "Now tell me about the Flames."

Ratatosk started to say something, then changed his mind. "Too easy," he muttered. "Alright, it's like this. They're coming into the series strong. They've got a .750 record for the season and have only lost five games this past month. Just be thankful we were in the weaker division. Three teams in the Western Division have better records than we do."

"They've also been playing longer than we have," Hawk pointed out.

"Only the Flames and the Angels. This was the first season for the Vikings. Y'know, Odin may be a stubborn old fool at times, but he wised up fast enough. That manager he hired after the first month of play really brought that team of his team together."

"They had a lot of potential," Hawk admitted, "but so did we and next season we'll do even better. So what are the Flames' weaknesses at the moment?"

"None that I can see. They've had no injuries in over a month and seem to be as fresh as they were opening day."

"I'm happy for them," Hawk retorted flatly.

"We, on the other paw, are really tired. Our pitchers have been working every third day at the outside and even gods have their limits."

"The rest of the team seems as gung ho as ever," Hawk returned.

"Yes, but even they are starting to get tired. There's an end to the season in sight and they're looking forward to more than one day off at a time."

"They're also looking forward to the league championship. We'll hold out another few games. Who knows, maybe we can sweep the series."

"Don't put any money on it," Ratatosk told him.

"We'll take the first two games," Hawk told him confidently.

"With Enki and Enlidu pitching? Maybe. But who's going to back up Izzy and Ninshubur? Neither of them will last an entire game."

"I'll use Nin-ti as a closer and Enkimdu as a reliever if I need to."

"We'll see," the squirrel said sourly. "We'll see."

Hawk's predictions proved true as the Lamassu dominated the first two games of the series, 10-3 and 3-0, but the second game ran into extra innings and he had been forced to employ Enkimdu, Nin-ti, and finally Ninshubur to back up Enlidu's performance, which brought Isimud to the mound a day earlier than his normal spot on the rotation.

Isimud pitched five perfect innings, but Dagon belted his first offering out of the park. The next three batters were each struck out in turn, but the Lamassu didn't make up the one-run deficit until the bottom of the ninth.

Inanna had singled by driving a blazing grounder out into left field and then stole second when Ninshursag fanned for strike one. Then Inanna made it to third on a sacrifice bunt. Hawk sent Martu to pinch hit for Isimud which brought up another problem.

"So who do you want to warm up?" his pitching coach asked.

"Enlidu," Hawk replied. "He won't have to pitch again for at least two days. Longer, if we can sweep the series."

"He threw his arm out yesterday," Enkimdu pointed out. "You could use Ninshubur."

"He's starting tomorrow," Hawk countered. "and he closed yesterday."

"One or two innings shouldn't tire him out too badly."

"I'll do it," Enki jumped in. "I've got three days before my next start, and I didn't pitch at all yesterday." Hawk considered it briefly and then nodded. Enki sprinted out to the bullpen while Hawk returned his attention to the field.

Ishkur was waiting with a full count while Leo Durocher and Rimmon conferred with Astoret on the mound. Hawk knew it for the stalling tactic it was, however. Archernor was warming up in Hell's bullpen. The conference dragged on and the umpire walked out to break it up. On his approach, Durocher started leaving the mound, but as soon as the umpire's back was turned he was back on the mound. On

the third time, however, the umpire caught on and stayed nearby until the Flames' manager was back in the dugout.

Astoret threw one more pitch which Ishkur tapped lightly between the right and center fielders for a single, bringing Inanna home to tie up the game. Durocher then called in Archernor who struck Nanna-Sin out with three successive pitches, bringing the inning to an end.

Both Enki and Archernor pitched flawlessly through the fifteenth inning, but in the sixteenth, Enki walked Azazel. Azazel made it to third base on a sacrifice fly by Moloch, and then stole home on a wild pitch.

There was hope among the Lamassu when the bottom of the sixteenth started out with hits by Enki and Ishkur followed by Nanna-Sin making it to base on balls. Utu, however, popped up an easy catch for Rimmon, Marduk was struck out, and Nergal flew out to deep center field to end the game with the Lamassu one run back.

Ninshubur's pitching failed to win the next game and the series was tied. Enki, however, pitched a no-hitter putting the Lamassu within one game of the league title. The next day they had off and Hawk used it to take the team back to Dilmun. There wasn't much to do around Enderby between games and he didn't want his team getting bored. They spent the afternoon in light practice and in the evening they traveled to the mortal plane to watch game five of the National League play-offs. They returned the next day to Enderby, rested and enthusiastic.

They worked through batting practice with a joy and grace that even Hawk had rarely seen on the diamond. Inside the clubhouse, Hawk kept his pre-game remarks to a minimum. "Enlidu," he instructed his pitcher, "watch Marduk's signs. He knows the Flames better than anyone. Shake off any sign and I'll want a full explanation. The rest of you, keep playing like you did in practice and we'll cap this series tonight. Watch out hitting those ground balls. I've never seen those guys error when diving for a grounder, and if you're going to hit a fly put enough power in your swing to drive the ball through them. Those winged demons are nasty! The best offense I've seen is to send a lot of loopers into shallow outfield, over the heads of the infielders, but too far in for the outfielders to catch."

"They'll figure us out soon enough," Enki noted.

"True," Hawk allowed, "but when the outfield starts playing in, we'll start hitting out. Their flyers are fast, but none of them are fast enough to catch up to a ball that's gotten behind them.

"Hmm, what else? Nothing," he added after a moment's thought. "Just go out and win, and we can all take the next few days off." He didn't mention the coming series with the Baseball Gods. It was bad strategy to think too far ahead, and they all knew what a battle they would be in store for against the undefeated Baseball Gods anyway.

The game was a nail-biter. Being an even numbered game, the Lamassu were technically the away team, although neither team was on their home field. Hawk's players scored two runs in the first inning, but allowed three of the Flames to score in the second. They pulled ahead once more in the sixth inning when Inanna blasted a three run homer that landed on a glacier several miles away.

The lead was held through the seventh inning stretch, but then the Flames tied up the game on an error by Ninhursag, who let the ball get by her and then overthrew it when she finally did pick it up.

Enlidu's arm was shot by that time and Hawk brought Isimud in as a reliever. The entire team cringed as Rimmon tapped Isimud's first pitch out of the park to put the Flames ahead 6-5, but Isimud pulled himself together and struck the next three batters out.

That brought Marduk up to lead off the ninth inning for the Lamassu. He swung hard, but the Flames' pitcher threw harder. There was a massive crack as Marduk completed the swing and part of his bat followed the ball out into shallow left field in a pair of long, lazy arcs. It should have been an easy catch but Dagon and Lilith called the ball simultaneously and collided. The ball fell harmlessly between them and the bat knocked them down again for good measure, allowing Marduk to reach second base.

Dagon and Lilith remained dazed and Durocher brought in Zebub and Nishrak to replace them. Chemos then walked Nergal and Stygian was promptly brought in from the bullpen.

Stygian, one of the Flames' best pitchers, was usually a starter, and Gilgamesh kept fouling off pitches that were just barely within the strike zone. The count was still 0-2 after ten pitches when Hawk gave his batter the bunt sign. It was a dangerous move; a foul bunt was always a strike, but he reasoned that it might be unexpected. Gilgamesh squared to bunt the next pitch and sent the ball rolling slowing down the third base line. Stygian and Rimmon dashed toward the rolling ball and Rimmon waved the pitcher back as the ball started to roll foul. However an earlier runner must have scuffed the base line just a bit for as the ball approached the line it suddenly veered away from it again and finally stopped clearly in fair territory. The bases were loaded to the delight of the crowd. This was just the sort of game they'd been waiting for all season.

With no outs, Hawk told Inanna to swing away. She did, slapping a line-drive into the right field corner. Azazel played it off the wall, but not in time to prevent two runners from coming in. With runners at the corners, Inanna decided on her own to steal second. She was picked off, but the move gave Gilgamesh the opportunity to come home as well. Ninhursag hit another home run before Isimud and Ishkur were struck out.

Ishkur then pitched only five pitches in the bottom of the ninth. The first was hit for a single by Melkarth. He threw three times before Rimmon popped out and Dagon swung into a double play on his first chance giving the game, the series, and the championship to the Lamassu.

"Hawk!" Nin-ti exclaimed, rushing into his arms, "you did it! Just as the auguries said you would!"

"We all did it," he corrected her.

"We sure did," Enki agreed, "but we couldn't have done it without you." The other approaching team members shouted similar sentiments. "I said you were the only man for the job, didn't I?"

"You did," Hawk admitted. Last March was a lifetime ago, maybe literally.

"Right!" Marduk laughed. "Now we'll go on and teach those so-called Baseball Gods a lesson!"

Oh hell, Hawk thought sourly. I'd forgotten about them.

The Gods of Baseball

Enki came up at the bottom of the ninth with two outs and swung on Paige's first pitch. There was a resounding crack as the ball met the bat. Hawk nodded grimly as the ball left the stadium. That was one of the very few homeruns hit by the Watergod all season. Too bad it was wasted for it was also the one and only hit for the Lamassu all game. Ishkur came up to the plate next and struck out to end the game with the Lamassu behind 4-1.

"That was disgusting," Ratatosk said by way of greeting as the team entered the clubhouse. "What I can't figure out is how you managed to keep them to only four runs, especially when old Wet-behind-the-ears here gave up twenty hits."

"Magnificent fielding, rodent," Utu chuckled humorlessly as he slumped past en route to the showers.

"I'll give you that," Ratatosk allowed. "Too bad none of you can hit off of Satchel Paige."

"Maybe tomorrow will be better," Hawk speculated. "Who is next on their rotation?"

"How the heck would I know," the squirrel retorted. "For all I can see they might shoot craps to see who's next. Tomorrow will be the first time they've played two days in a row. They could put up anyone from Cy Young to Nolan Ryan. They could put Ken Ryan in for that matter. They have got to have the most changeable roster of any team in history."

"Why shouldn't they?" Hawk countered. "They've every ballplayer in history to draw upon."

"Their only weakness," Marduk added as he drifted through, "is that the spirits of all those players must all want a chance to play. I'll bet the competition is fierce."

"You forget," Ratatosk corrected him, "these aren't the spirits of the actual players. We'd have a chance against them if they were. These are the individual embodiments of the spirit of Baseball itself. Of course they act like the perfect team. In a sense they're all the same entity."

"We could protest that," Hawk mused. "Require nine different entities on the field."

"No such luck! The Commissioner knows all about it, no surprise there, and ruled that so long as the players have no telepathic connections and play with the personalities of the players they depict, it's fair."

"Maybe there's a chance there. We could try to set up situations in which they would compete as much with each other as they do with us," Marduk suggested.

"If you can think of something," Hawk replied, "try it. Me, I'd like to get into the mind of their manager. He seems to be able to know what I'm going to decide as soon as I do, maybe sooner."

"He ought to," Ratatosk laughed. "He's you!"

"What?"

"Didn't you notice? Nah, your mind was probably too much on the game itself, but they have the idealization of you for their manager, at least for this series. That's probably why they gave the line-up to the umpires early on, before you did, so you wouldn't know. It's been changing from game to game just like the rest of the roster."

"But all their players have been the very best ever known to the game. I never even managed a major league game. I'm certainly not in their league."

"How do you know?" Marduk asked. "You never really had a chance to shine. You might have been the best there ever was. There are a lot of potential players and managers and relatively few positions. I imagine that a lot of fine men, and women for that matter, get lost in the system."

"More likely they're using you in order to get a handle on the way you think," Ratatosk suggested.

"That can be used both ways," Hawk replied. "We'll just see what happens tomorrow."

The next day, as the spirit of Chief Bender threw out the first ball, Hawk glanced over at the Baseball Gods' dugout and confirmed that they were still using his analog as team manager.

Cy Young was warming up and Hawk asked himself what he would do in the place of the Baseball Gods' manager. A nice conservative game, he realized, that's what I'd call for, at least for the first few innings, after a comfortable lead, however... He decided that he would also expect himself to try something unconventional as Lamassu manager, so his first instinct was to play conservatively as well, then realized that he would see through that ploy as well.

"This is more difficult than it seems," he muttered out loud.

"It's baseball." Ratatosk agreed.

"What'd you say?"

"I said, 'It's baseball.' Seemed like an appropriate comment considering I didn't have any idea what you were talking about." Hawk quickly explained his reasoning. "You're crazy," the squirrel replied at last, "or you will be if you keep that up. Go by your first or, at most, second thought. After that you'll just get caught in the trap of trying to out-think yourself."

"Who would you use for the starting line-up then?"

Ratatosk considered that. "Well, you've been leading off with Ishkur all season, but his average has been slipping the past few weeks. I'd put Martu to start in left field, then Dumuzi in center. You haven't used him nearly enough this season. Then I'd put Marduk, Nergal, Gilgamesh, Inanna, and Ninhursag in their usual positions. Isimud is pitching, tell him to go heavy on those knuckleballs of his, and round off the line-up with Nanna-Sin in right field."

"Really? He's been doing really well as the second batter up."

"Yeah, but you started him this season at the bottom of the order, and he worked well there too. A lot more RBIs, he hits well with men in scoring position. Do it any way you like; you're the boss. You asked me how I would start the game so I told you. Don't blame me if you don't like it."

"It's not a bad line-up," Hawk conceded. "Okay. I'll use it." And he walked away leaving a stunned squirrel in his wake.

Ishkur was not happy about being removed from his starting position. The ancient storm god showed every sign of living up to his reputation, but Hawk stood his ground and Ishkur eventually calmed down. The Mesopotamian gods had actually been very well behaved since May or so when Hawk learned not to let them push him around. There had been the occasional tantrum, thrown by Inanna more often than not, although Gilgamesh had an ego as large as his temper was short, but once they started winning games, Hawk's lectures about teamwork started sinking in. Temperamentally the gods were not unlike the mortal ballplayers Hawk was used to dealing with. Some were mature, businesslike individuals and others were children who had never grown up. Hawk had never learned just what Enlil had told Inanna that pre-season day, months earlier, but whatever it was stuck in her mind and she was never able to stand up to Hawk for more than a few seconds, although she continued to hold her own against the other members of the team.

Ishkur was still sulking in the dugout as the top of the first inning progressed. "Stop that!" Hawk snapped at him, "or I won't put you in later."

"I'm going to play today?" Ishkur asked hopefully.

"Of course you're going to play. What did you think? That I had cut you from the squad?"

"Well, I, uh, haven't been hitting too well lately, and this could be our last game until next season..." he trailed off.

"Everyone's playing today," Hawk grunted and then turned his attention back to the game.

Isimud allowed two hits in the top of the inning, but a well-turned double play got him out of trouble.

Martu grounded out in the bottom of the inning, but Young walked Dumuzi. Marduk was up next and, after loading up the count, knocked a high fly out to the right fielder's glove. Nergal drove Dumuzi in on a two-bag blast before Gilgamesh struck out to end the inning.

The Baseball gods tied the game up in the second inning with a single homerun by the Bambino. The tie didn't last long however as the Lamassu, through a combination of hits and stolen bases, scored four times. Hawk felt good about that, since it was his aggressive coaching that prodded his players to take the chances that paid off that inning.

But his counterpart on the other team saw through Hawk's defensive strategy and the game came up tied by the end of the fourth inning.

The top of the fifth inning was an unmitigated disaster. After Babe Ruth and Mel Ott made it to base on singles, Ted Williams hit an easy pop-up to left field with two outs. However the sun, low on the Antarctic horizon got in Martu's eyes, blinding him, and he dropped the ball. Recovering it, more by luck than anything else, he hurled the ball, not where he should have, to Inanna, but to Nergal at first base. Nergal had to reach far to his left and, in his stretch, took his foot off the bag to stop the ball from getting past him. However, it wasn't quite in his glove and it bounced out and rolled halfway to homeplate. Ruth had already made it home and Ott was rounding third. Williams was over halfway to second before Nergal scooped up the ball at last. The only play was to second, but Nergal too, over-threw the ball and it went high over Ninhursag's head and into shallow left field. Inanna sprinted out, nearly colliding with Gilgamesh as Williams was rounding third, and picked up the ball and fired it in toward Marduk at

homeplate, but she was nearly on the foul line before recovering the ball and her straight throw hit Williams in the back of his right leg, giving him the run automatically.

Isimud gave up one more hit before Hawk brought Ninshubur in to relieve him. Joe Jackson struck out to end the inning. Hawk was feeling hopeless, but when Cy Young walked Ninshubur with two outs in the bottom of the fifth followed by a rare homerun shot by Ninshubur, his hopes started to rise again.

Both pitchers pitched perfectly in the sixth inning, but Young allowed Inanna, Ninshubur, and Ninshubur to score in the seventh before he was relieved by Dizzy Dean. The Lamassu were now ahead again 10-8, but with two more innings to go, the Baseball Gods still had plenty of time to score.

Hawk kept Ninshubur in for the eighth inning although he was already showing signs of fatigue. However, after initially walking Ruth, he was saved by good fielding and the next three batters all grounded out.

Nergal singled, but Gilgamesh hit into a double play in the bottom of the eighth. However, Inanna hit for a double and Ninshubur, who was batting 1.000 that game, was intentionally walked. Then Hawk put Ishkur in to pinch-hit for Ninshubur. Ishkur's single drove Inanna in for an insurance run, but Ninurta, pinch-hitting for Nanna-Sin, grounded out to end the inning.

Then Hawk used Nin-ti as his closer. She started off well by striking Wagner out. Joe DiMaggio lined out straight into Nergal's glove, but then after giving up hits to Heilmann & Foxx, she walked Ruth to bring Joe Jackson to the plate with the bases loaded.

Swallowing hard, she composed herself and threw one pitch to Jackson. He hit a hard grounder to shortstop. Inanna caught it perfectly on the bounce and tossed it lightly to Ninshubur to end the game with the Lamassu ahead 11-8.

TWENTY-NINE

Tie Breaker

The stadium was still filled with enthusiastic gods as the Lamassu returned to their dugout. There had never been any doubt that the Dilmun team held the hearts of the other gods. The "Gods of Baseball" were seen as young upstarts and the elder deities felt they needed a hard-learned lesson.

The cheers grew slightly louder as Hawk and Nin-ti neared their dugout and Hawk paused to tip his hat to the crowd and then gesture toward Nin-ti who did likewise. The crowd went wild.

"Great game, Hawk!" Ratatosk enthused as they entered the clubhouse.

"It had its ugly moments," he replied.

"Maybe, but we won. That's the first time anyone's ever beaten the Baseball Gods, Hawk. Do you have any idea of what you've done, man?"

"I didn't do it," Hawk told his scout modestly, "The team did."

"Under your management, dear," Nin-ti added. "You must excuse me," she continued, as she rubbed her pitching arm, "I don't have Enki's stamina and you may need me tomorrow." She quickly left, leaving Hawk and Ratatosk.

"Don't discount what you've done, Hawk. I think Enlil's prophecy was correct. You're this team's best hope. You brought us to the league championship and tomorrow..." Ratatosk let the sentence hang. Hawk didn't reply, but he knew that not even Enlil could have predicted the Gods of Baseball.

Hawk arrived in the clubhouse early the next morning and sat down at his desk to work on the starting line-up. Two hours later he had gone over most of the possibilities and decided to use the same starters as the day before. The choice of pitcher kept him going right up until game time, however. Enlil was next up on the rotation, but Enki was the best pitcher on the team, although the water god had just pitched two days before. Finally Hawk decided to start with Enlil. There was something to say about consistency.

The Baseball Gods, however, were not about to be consistent. During batting practice Hawk glanced toward their dugout to discover that his doppelganger was no longer manager. He had been replaced by Billy Martin.

Enki was about to throw for batting practice, but Hawk stopped him. "I want you fresh in case we need a long man."

"Long man?" Enki asked, confused.

"If Enlil goes sour we'll need someone to pitch several innings until we can bring out our closer. Let Izzy pitch the practice."

Enki nodded. "Then I should take a turn in the cage?" he asked.

"Wouldn't hurt," Hawk grunted. Then a thought crossed his mind and he added, "Have all the pitchers take a turn in the cage. Wouldn't want to give anything away."

"Even Nin-ti?" Nin-ti was an excellent pitcher, but had trouble hitting the ball even in practice. It was just another reason why Hawk played her so infrequently.

Hawk was about to say, "Of course," but quickly changed his mind. "No," he told the Water God. "Make a big show of not having her take practice, as if it was something the other team is not supposed to have seen."

"But if she's too tired after pitching yesterday," Enki began. "Oh. I see what you're getting at. Clever. Should have thought of that myself."

Practice was over soon enough and the team returned to the clubhouse for fresh uniforms and Hawk's final pre-game pep talk and strategy briefing. Like so many times before Hawk didn't really know what

he was going to say in advance nor did he remember many details afterward, but the speech did the job and the team was fired up and ready to win one more game. All Hawk would ever remember clearly were his last words before they left the clubhouse, "It's been one hell of a trip, hasn't it? We've dragged ourselves up from the league basement and captured the pennant. Not only that, but we've proven ourselves the equals to the incarnations of the spirit of Baseball itself." That drew enthusiastic cheers from the team. "Now let's get out there and show we're more than just equals!" The cheers became roars and the Lamassu ran out onto the diamond.

Hawk listened to the announcer call the starting line-ups and wondered just where the speakers were hidden in the stadium. It was certainly the finest public address system he had ever encountered, and the sound seemed to come from everywhere at once without so much as a trace of echo. Then he shook his head and put his attention back on the game, realizing that he hadn't really heard the other team's line-up.

His ignorance did not last long, however. After Enlil threw out the first ceremonial pitch, the Baseball Gods' version of Nolan Ryan stepped up to the rubber and began throwing to his catcher, Yogi Berra.

Ryan was throwing at the peak of his form, of course, and struck out Martu and Utu with three pitches each. His first throw to Marduk was swung on and missed, but the ancient hero watched the next one go wide and the third came in low. Then the next pitch blazed in across the far corner of the plate and was followed by an off-speed pitch that Marduk just barely caught enough of to pop-up for Yogi to catch a mere twenty feet from his position.

Enlidu pitched a perfect first inning as well. Rogers Hornsby lined out to Inanna, Honus Wagner struck out and Lou Gehrig's ground ball bounced straight into Ninhursag's glove for an easy out at first.

Ryan's pitching held firm in the second with Nergal, Gilgamesh and Inanna each going down in turn. Enlidu struck out Babe Ruth, but gave up a hit to Ted Williams. Mickey Mantle worked Enlidu for fifteen pitches before hitting into a double play.

Ninhursag hit a broken bat single to lead off the third inning and then advanced to second base on a sacrifice bunt by Enlidu. Nanna-Sin's long fly landed in the Bambino's glove, but it was deep enough to give Mother Nature the chance to take third base. Then the first injury happened.

Martu took his second at bat and after fouling off five times with a full count, hit a sixth foul straight onto his left foot. When he couldn't get back to his feet it was determined that he had broken two bones and Ishkur was brought in to replace him. Hawk felt a shiver go up his spine. Throughout the season there had been only five injuries, all quite minor, and he had expected to get through the final series similarly. Martu breaking his foot on his second at bat was definitely a bad omen.

Ishkur had only one pitch to swing on and he missed, stranding Ninhursag at third.

Enlidu started thinking for himself, however and Mike Schmidt led off the bottom of the third inning with an infield single after Enlidu shook off Marduk's first sign. More damage was done when Marduk called for a curve and Enlidu insisted on heat. Yogi Berra followed Schmidt's hit with a deep single that allowed Schmidt to get to third, barely beating out the throw. Hawk called for time and met with Enlidu and Marduk on the mound.

"Looking good," he told his pitcher.

"Runners at the corners and no outs," Enlidu muttered sourly in reply. "Oh yeah. I'm looking real good."

"You've got the form, kid," Marduk encouraged him, then added pointedly, "You just have to throw a bit more garbage. More curves, sinkers and splitters."

"Right," Hawk agreed. "Just don't get rattled. So they got a couple hits off of you. The game's still young. Even if they score we have time to make it back. Oh, and stop shaking off Marduk's signs. That's okay every once in a while, but you have to be absolutely sure of yourself."

"Right, Hawk," Enlidu sighed. After two wrong decisions, the pitcher had learned a little temporary humility.

Ryan swung on an outside sinker and clipped just enough of it to send it bouncing up the third base line. Gilgamesh charged it and fired it to Ninhursag who, in turn, touched the second base bag and relayed the ball to first for a double play. Schmidt had started for home, but decided against the attempt and ran back to third.

That brought Hornsby back to the plate for a bloop single into shallow center field, driving Schmidt in for the first run of the game. Enlidu was looking nervous, but followed Marduk's signs carefully and with a full count served up a mean curve to Wagner who lined-out directly into Inanna's glove.

Marduk evened up the score with a one-run homer and after Nergal struck out, Gilgamesh sent another ball out into the frozen landscape of Antarctica. Inanna then did her share with a deep drive to right for a double, but she was left there when both Dumuzi and Ninhursag grounded out. Emboldened by the team's hitting success, Enlidu pitched a perfect inning to leave the Lamassu ahead 2-1.

Ryan walked Enlidu, but then struck out Nanna-Sin, Ishkur and Marduk to prevent them from widening their lead. But in the bottom of the fifth, the Baseball Gods pulled ahead. Willie Mays was sent in to take Mantle's place and he swung on the first pitch for a homer that tied up the game again. Schmidt flew out to center for the first out, but Dumuzi twisted his ankle as he caught the ball. He held on to it, but Utu had to be sent in to continue the game. Then Enlidu walked both Berra and Ryan. Hornsby singled to load the bases and Wagner knocked a grand slam over the left field fence.

Hawk wasted no time and told Enki to start warming up. Jimmy Foxx pinch hit for Gehrig for another single and that sent Enlidu to the showers. When Enki came to the mound, Billy Martin sent Hank Aaron in for Babe Ruth. Aaron fouled off three balls that could easily have been homers had they gone in the right direction, but finally popped up, an easy catch for Enki. Ted Williams then went down on three straight pitches and the Lamassu finally got out of their worst inning of the game.

Nergal singled and Gilgamesh made it to base on balls. Inanna then came to the plate with uncharacteristic nervousness. She didn't feel she'd been playing at all well so far and was worried that Hawk might send Ninurta in for her. Her fears were unfounded and her deep single brought Nergal home. Hawk's hopes began to soar, but were quickly dashed when Utu struck out and Ninhursag hit into a double play.

Shoeless Joe pinch hit for Nolan Ryan. He fouled off Enki's first pitch and watched the next two go by low and outside. Marduk then called for a split-finger fastball, Enki's second-best pitch, and Jackson fanned fractions of a second too late. Encouraged by the 2-2 count, Marduk then sent Enki the sign for a curve and Jackson belted the ball for a high fly. Utu and Ishkur faded back together toward left centerfield as the ball began its long, slow curve back to earth, but Utu held up at the wall, while Ishkur attempted to jump for the ball. It was a prodigious leap, far higher than Hawk had ever seen him jump before, but the ball passed him mere inches above his glove.

Enki was rattled and walked Hornsby on four straight balls, which brought Marduk to the mound with a few words to calm his father down. "Happens to all of us," he told the water god. "It's part of the game. Just concentrate on the next batter." Enki nodded wordlessly and Marduk returned to his spot behind the plate.

Wagner's ground ball skipped lightly to Inanna at shortstop. She picked it up expertly and flipped it to Ninhursag to force Hornsby out at second, but Wagner beat out the subsequent throw to first, safe by a fielder's choice. Jimmy Foxx then came up and hit Enki's second pitch into deep right field. Wagner ran for all he was worth and was just coming up on third base as Nanna-Sin retrieved the ball and fired it toward the infield. Ninhursag cut it off in shallow right and relayed it in to Marduk at the plate. To Hawk's eyes Wagner was out by a comfortable margin, but the umpire spread his arms and shouted, "Safe!"

Hawk reacted without thought and stormed in toward the plate while the rest of the team cleared the bench. Nin-ti suddenly realized, from past experience that Hawk was about to get himself thrown out of the game and just as quickly decided that the Lamassu couldn't afford that to happen in this critical game. She rushed out after Hawk and arrived just as he was starting his tirade. The umpire was calmly waiting out the storm, occasionally noting that Wagner looked safe to him, and didn't notice Nin-ti quietly stepping behind him. Just as Hawk was about to build up to profanity, however, she caught his eye and shook her head quietly. Hawk found himself uncharacteristically at a loss for words and while he was still searching for something to say his beloved Nin-ti led him quietly off the field.

"Did you cast some sort of spell on me?" he accused her as the game started up again.

"A spell?" she replied with unfeigned innocence. "Why no. The thought never even occurred to me." She paused a moment and then added, "But if I had, you can be sure that you wouldn't have thought of it now." That seemed to close the subject.

Hank Aaron was up next, but he lined straight into Ninhursag's glove and Foxx got caught in a squeeze play between her and Inanna to end the inning. Hawk smiled tightly, comparing the play with the way they had played at the start of the season. Had they tried a squeeze play back then, Foxx would not only have made it safely to third, but probably would have been safe at home as well.

The Baseball Gods' new pitcher was Cy Young and Hawk felt a shiver oscillate up and down his spine. His fear was unfounded, however when it turned out that the Lamassu hit well off the great pitcher.

Enki lead off the Dilmun seventh inning and hit a single into right field. Nanna-Sin followed that up with a blooper into left. Ishkur bunted down the first baseline and sprinted toward the base. Foxx sprinted in to snatch up the ball and should have had an easy out, but the ball never quite got into his glove. Still he might have recovered, but he didn't discover the glove was empty until he tried to transfer the ball to his throwing hand. Ishkur made it to base safely.

Marduk struck out with the bases loaded and Nergal popped up back to the pitcher. Gilgamesh, however, was ready and swung only once for a Grand Slam.

Inanna was up next and she hit a dinger over the right field fence to tie up the game. Young then walked Utu and Ninhursag singled. Enki hit to drive Utu in, putting the Lamassu ahead 9-8. Finally Nanna-Sin struck out to end the inning. Hawk turned his attention briefly to the crowd. They had been fairly quiet for the last few innings, but they were getting loud now. This was what they had been waiting for, exciting play with their favorite team in the lead.

Enki was fired up and struck out Joe Dimaggio, pinch-hitting for Williams. Then he did the same to Mays and Schmidt for a 1-2-3 inning.

Young managed not to give up any runs in the eighth inning although the Lamassu did hit twice, but Inanna struck out to strand Ishkur, and Gilgamesh.

Then Enki's arm went sour and the Baseball Gods went to work. Berra led off with a one-run homer that tied up the game and Mel Ott got to first on a pinch hit for Cy Young. Roger Maris was sent in to hit for Hornsby and homered for another two runs.

Marduk and Hawk conferred with Enki just trying to help the pitcher pull himself back together until the umpire broke them up. It worked and he proceeded to strike Wagner and Foxx out. Hank Aaron, however slammed one more ball out of the park and Dimaggio doubled. Rather than let Mays hit, Hawk signaled for an intentional walk.

Martin pulled Schmidt back from the on-deck position and sent Roberto Clemente in his place. Clemente worked Enki slowly but surely up to a full count. Then on the third 3-2 pitch Clemente connected for a high chopper that bounced toward Inanna. The Goddess of Love and War, against all her training, reached out and grabbed the ball with her throwing hand and whipped it to the only play, first base. Nergal stretched to grab the wide throw, but managed to keep his foot against the bag.

"Out!" the Umpire called, bringing the disastrous inning to a close.

"How's Ninshubur's arm?" Hawk asked his batting coach.

"Hard to say," Enkimdu replied. "We're all tired."

"Warm him up," Hawk decided. "If we get to the bottom of the ninth we're going to need him. Ashnan," he then called his batting coach.

"Hawk?" the grain goddess responded.

"Get ready. You're batting for Enki."

"Right."

The Baseball Gods had a new pitcher and Hawk watched Sandy Kofax warming up, trying to remember if there was any weakness to exploit there. He couldn't recall.

Utu lined into left field for a single on Kofax's second pitch. Ninhursag hadn't been hitting up to her usual standards, but tripled this time up. That brought Utu home and then Ashnan entered the game and her fly ball landed deep in Mays' glove. It was out number two, but Mother Nature had time to tag up and score.

Hawk then sent Ninurta in to hit for Nanna-Sin and the God of the Stormy South Wind hit one into the rightfield corner. It was an easy triple, but the under-played god tried for an in-the-park home run. He blew right through Hawk's hold-up sign and was tagged out at the plate easily. Even Hawk couldn't protest that call. Ishkur, however, was more careful and after hitting into almost the same place held firm with a stand-up double. That brought the ever-confident Marduk to the plate, representing the go-ahead run with two men out.

Kofax pitched low and in the dirt and Berra misjudged the bounce and the ball went between his legs. As the catcher scrambled for the ball, Ishkur stole a base. Any reasonable hit would tie up the game, but somewhere in the back of Hawk's mind he could hear Ratatosk's misquote of Casey At the Bat.

"It looked extremely rocky for the Dilmun nine that day," the poem echoed between Hawk's ears. "The score stood nine to twelve with but one inning left to play." Well, he thought wryly, that's where the score stood at the start of the inning. The Lamassu had gained two more runs since then, but eleven wouldn't scan. The poem had been a favorite of his as he grew up, but while this situation wasn't perfectly parallel, the game and the entire season had come down to the performance of one key player.

Kofax threw again. The ball was well inside and Marduk had to jump back out of its way.

"Strike!" the umpire called. Marduk turned to look at the man in astonishment. Hawk started toward the plate, but Ishkur held him back. The crowd, however, was not so restrained. The boos and catcalls were thunderous and a thousand bits of jetsam were thrown out on to the field in disdain.

Marduk, however, held out a restraining hand and, in some manner, caused his voice to be heard by all, "It's only one strike, friends. I have two more."

A few minutes later the field was cleared of the trash and the game resumed. This time Kofax pitched perfectly, sending the ball just barely across the lower outside corner and caught Marduk looking.

There were more boos, but not directed at the umpire this time. Marduk smiled and stepped back into the box. That smile bothered Hawk. It was too cocky, too much like the indomitable spirit shown by Casey in the poem that was still turning over in his head.

Then Kofax threw the final pitch of the game and Marduk swung for all he was worth.

THIRTY

The Final Score

The ball came in hard and straight. No curving trajectory, no ducking nor weaving. This was a ball shot out of a cannon and it blazed toward the plate.

Marduk brought his bat around and Hawk swore he could hear it whistle as it cut through the air. Then came the sound of the ball's impact and Hawk's heart sunk. It wasn't the sound of the ball hitting a bat, but the softer thump of the ball in the Catcher's mitt. Marduk had fanned and the game and series were over.

There was applause for the Baseball Gods as they congratulated each other, but the overall mood in the stadium was disappointment.

Hawk was stunned. He just stood there watching as the stadium emptied of both fans and players. A few minutes later the groundskeepers came over and started covering up the infield. It was starting to get cold inside the huge ballpark and Hawk thought he detected snow in the air.

"Mr. Wilton?" a deep voice cut through his introspection. Hawk turned to find himself face-to-face with the king of the Dilmun pantheon.

"Enlil," he greeted his boss with a voice devoid of emotion.

"Good game," Enlil commended him. "Great season."

"We lost," Hawk pointed out, regret starting to take its effect.

"I'll tell you a secret," Enlil replied with a conspiratorial smile. The King of Dilmun looked around to be sure there was nobody nearby and said, "I never dreamed we'd do so well."

"But... your prophesy?"

"It only determined that you were our best choice of manager, Mr. Wilton. Taking the league pennant, especially from Hell was something I never dreamed would be possible this first season. Of course I didn't want to admit that before we even started. I'm sure you understand." Hawk nodded. "Well, you've earned every bonus I am capable of imagining. Hawk," Enlil continued, suddenly serious, "I will grant almost anything you ask."

Hawk considered that. Many people muse over what they might ask for if they had one wish. And as he thought, Enlil seemed to read his mind.

"No. I don't mean that as a one-time deal. Hawk, if there's ever anything I can do for you all you need to do is ask." Then he smiled and added emphatically, "Forever."

"Forever," Hawk whispered.

Enlil laughed out loud then. "If Nin-ti has her way, yes. And she usually does. Oh, I nearly forgot. You are available for the next few millennia, aren't you?"

Epilogue

In Two Box Seats Along the First Base Line

Loki and Ares were the last two spectators left in the stands. The infield tarp was down and it was starting to snow. They sat there silently for a while, finishing off their last hot dogs.

"So?" Loki asked at last. "What do you think?"

"Not bad," the War God admitted. He took one last sip of cola before adding, "It was almost as exciting

as Armageddon, but we managed to get through the season without destroying creation."

"And wasn't that refreshing for a change?" Loki smirked. They both laughed. "Oh, I hear that the Baseball Gods have decided not to join us during the regular season next year."

"Who told you that?"

"Heimdall. Seems he overheard it from the source during the seventh inning stretch. They've decided that while the Lamassu surprised them, we aren't really in their league, if you'll excuse the pun."

"The nerve of those young pups!" Ares exclaimed angrily. "My team learned a lot this year. We did all right this season, but next year I expect to go all the way. Are they still planning to play the Worlds Series?" Loki nodded. "Then the Cubs will teach them a lesson they'll never forget!"

"You'll have to get past the Vikings to do it," Loki bragged.

"We'll see, Trickster. We'll see."

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