

TABLET ONE

[Between dawn and sunrise. The square in front of Gilgamesh's headquarters.]

Enter Widows,
sauntering.

- Widow 1:** A Widow praying to get pregnant! Don't you realize what it means to get expelled? Where's your self-respect when you've lost the emoluments and perquisites of College? You'll be out of the cold into the frozen. I tell you this dearth of work is just a time of passing troubles!
- Widow 2:** Passing troubles! What's passing are the ways handed down from heaven by the Lord God Enlil! I've heard the next thing Giszax wants to change is time itself!
- Widow 1:** How could he change the seasons of women? We shall outlive him. It's the worst of times for us to act capricious!
- Widow 2:** My vocation isn't strong enough to endure depression. What's the joy in an easy life if there aren't as many worshippers as couches? Don't preach to me about my career! The trouble is I like too much what we all profess. I can't be content with mere gestures of what we're here for! Under Giszax's yoke the clients of Inanna are as wilted as our sun-stroked bulls and rams. Bonded marriage is better than watered-down religious life—if I can land some crippled smith or leach who won't be drafted, or a boy with the enthusiasm not yet sweated out of him by godless labor! I'll earn my wrinkles spinning flax for an only child and at least half a man.
- Widow 1:** A helot's life is hell. You'll make a sorry housewife. Domestic wool is frayed before it's woven. And you're mistaken if you think Inanna will bless desertion. But say you do squeeze out one live baby: you can't expect a sister or a brother for her— when all the life around grows barren from our conquering savior's love of sacrilege!
- Widow 2:** While you sit by and watch Lil-Amin weave herself a dole of bitterest humiliation. I'm tired of weeping for our own queen confined to tapestries— while a self-appointed shah usurps the prerogatives of gods! For seven years her moons have come and gone—and still she's our priest in name alone. Giszax might as well have walled her up with bricks!
- Widow 1:** But the Rector's spindle isn't yet unwound! Soon he'll seize back the Rod and Ring. In fact, I just heard—
- Widow 2:** I wouldn't mind the family way at all. I'd like to get to really know a man—maybe even one of Giszax's palefaced falangists . . .
- Widow 1:** But listen to this—
- Widow 2:** You always listen to those hoaxes on ourselves. What kind of oracle can be brought to pass by gossip? You should have given up hope when Giszax took the warhead off his axe and proclaimed himself our peacemaker. It appears that peace consists of a law and order that tampers with the language, doctors our numbers, and desecrates our calendar. Better be at war than have our unison deranged. No sacrifice by the Rector will ever again raise my hope against a willful king who's made him fix our planting by the sun. Giszax's hideous obsessions darken the streets and regiment the waters.

Enter troopers,
unobserved, listening to
the widows.

- Widow 1:** Inanna will send us a champion! I'm telling you—
- Widow 2:** Oh please excuse me! I thought you were going to say the goddess herself, on second thought, would strike him dead! —Oh, oh! Don't look up. The Kassites are spying again!
- Trooper 1:** Our forbidden fruit off guard!
- Trooper 2:** If it ain't the bachelor girls bewailing their famine! Such sad song was never heard.
- Trooper 1:** Hello, miladies! Are your coffers empty?
- Widow 1:** Did I hear hyenas yapping?
- Widow 2:** It's only the melting snowmen. From time to time they make attempts at speech.
- Trooper 2:** They forget we saved their honor from the Elamites. Chivalry is but a trifle in this depraved witchburg!
- Trooper 1:** We could cheer you up, bellibones!
- Widow 1:** No matter how long they study Uruk, these hillbillies will never be anything but unconscionable barbarians.
- Trooper 1:** Un-con-shun-a-bul? Sounds like illegal woman-talk.
- Trooper 2:** Or one of the Captain's words. We must be as uncouth as they say we are.
- Widow 1:** I could excuse simple ignorance, but not willful stupidity. They can't tell cashmere from earthenware. Ridiculous Chanticleers, to strut the ramparts crowing all their smut!
- Widow 2:** They do seem hardly chaste. But maybe where they come from—
- Widow 1:** Uncircumcised boars, bragging about their stinkhorns! But from what I hear on the outside, when it comes to business, these flagging dildoes only peck and bolt.
- Trooper 1:** You must have a sweet-tooth somewhere, little jailbait!
- Widow 1:** I don't dote on fungus, and I've never had a yen for albino-livered chalk-skinned turnkeys.
- Trooper 1:** It's not by choice we're on penal duty. And you're wrong if you guess I'm white all over. Want to see, Miss Bigot?
- Widow 1:** I know all about these parade-ground sharks: they're shrimps in battle. Superannuated striplings! They come and go with the stamina of rotten bananas. Doughboys reared on halfbaked underleavened bread. It's a poor brave that proves his manhood by the scalps he's left alive. The kind that shoots on sight but leaves his victim tossing!
- Widow 2:** Perhaps they need a governess. My grandmother said that pioneers who only plow never learn to sow and reap.
- Trooper 2:** I'd be happy to have the harvest of your tutoring.
- Widow 2:** It's only right that what is torn should not be left unmended.
- Trooper 1:** If Gilgamesh would let me, I'd show you how bowmen till shrewish whores sodden with their cultivation!

- Widow 1:** The bombastic hounds of Giszax are yapping on the leash! Let's go, before the feathered shuttlecocks work themselves into a lather and dribble out their curdless scum.
- Enter Norkid.**
- Trooper 1:** There's always some battledore to sour a man's pearls.
- Trooper 2:** You there, don't scowl! Ishtar bids you love her gifts.
- Widow 2:** I never said I hated them.
- Widow 1:** The bluster of slavedrivers doesn't faze me—but Our Lady preserve us from lewd insolence!
- Widows leave.**
- Trooper 2:** I like the way she walks. A man should be allowed to measure his place with a woman he can get to know. Kids and all.
- Norkid:** At it again, yardbirds? You can't win a war of words with female churchwardens. The ways of our fathers are forever accursed to Messpot mothers.—*Fall IN!*
- Troopers:** *Let them sing about their law,
But clip the doxies' tooth and claw.
Stitch their backbone to the mat
And make them purr like a pussycat!*
- [Forming up in front of Norkid after a little shuffle.]
- Norkid:** You cherry-pickers have nothing to gripe about. In my day a dogface would give all his pay for your fatigue duty, cracking the crotch of maidens.—*At-ten-TION!* —You royal guards have nothing to do at night but pluck the rosebuds—while your king takes the watch alone. Gilgamesh stays awake and you get all the sleep!
- Trooper 2:** Poor Gilgamesh. He stays awake to think, and never takes the spoils. His nostrils flare no longer.
- Trooper 1:** I didn't enlist to police a gang of bricklayers. An engineering king has turned me into a clerk-of-the-works!
- Norkid:** I'll clerk your works! —*Dress it up now!* —There was a time when you were glad enough for all that tender meat. It made up for lack of plunder. But now you're billeted like gentry, you bitch all day because you're not allowed the common mess. —*A-bout-FACE!*
- Trooper 1:** The common mess is too rich for its brokendown hod-carriers, while all the military gets is uncooked veal—if the Rector doesn't consecrate it first!
- Norkid:** You used to say variety's the spice of life.
- [Continuing the drill with various commands.]
- Trooper 1:** Fucking little variety in a bushel of green apples! At least on payday I ought to get a bite that's ripe.
- Trooper 2:** On these rations a man gets old with nothing but firstborn kids he can't even claim are his. I'd give a year's crop of pullets for one off-limits hen.
- Trooper 1:** First they squeal, then they bleat. Long black eyelashes full of reproach because we didn't deliver the great swoon they've whispered about since their teats began to swell.
- Norkid:** *Company HALT!* —Graduation's just commencement.

- Trooper 2:** Not for us. We get the girls, but we're not allowed to fraternize with women! We're always starting over. We get the sting so some farmhand can collect the honey!
- Norkid:** Even on archers in this vale of tears some rain must fall. —*Half-left-FACE!* —You could try a hunger strike.
- Trooper 1:** A lion in the cage can't turn up his nose at the daily feed of jackal-food.
- Trooper 2:** Who can resist the flowers of spring? It's the foretaste that keeps you ravenous.
- Norkid:** Even to me, aged and infirm, it's superhuman, how Gilgamesh fights shy of the world's most undeflowered queen—absolutely at his mercy!
[Marching them back and forth.]
- Trooper 1:** Now there's a lure to cheerful death! Long legs and inborn talent! How can he keep his distance from the parthenon? I sometimes wonder if he's lost his orchids.
- Norkid:** Why a king might want to keep his cast is beyond the understanding of cacoethical billygoats.
- Trooper 1:** There he goes again! But I guess I can guess what it means.
- Trooper 2:** If Lil-Amin is not his caste, who for god's sake is?
- Norkid:** *Pre-sent ARMS!*
- Trooper 1:** Long arms or short arms?
- Norkid:** Any more of your lip and I'll present my hammy fist to you! —*Pa-rade REST!* Your style was sharper when ass was scarce.
- Troopers:** *While we work this female city
We'll never know a woman's pity.
So we take the duty with the burden
And settle for the schoolgirl guerdon.*
[Shuffling their feet.]
- Norkid:** Things began to get out of kilter when Gilgamesh unstepped his iron eagle with its twin thin lips. Without that axe, before long we'll be fighting with our backs to the winding stairs. —You need more work on form. That's what counts in getting up your speed. To put down a mob, six seconds a shot is much too slow. They must be more quickly reminded of our feathered wood.
[Motioning them through the routine of target practice.]
- Trooper 1:** Inside walls, strings don't make good music! You should be leading us in the sword dance.
- Norkid:** Swords won't terrify the middle of a crowd. You can talk back after you've learnt how to shoot around corners: meanwhile you've got to stretch your range. Step back another yard.
- Trooper 1:** My funnybone's already bumping the wall!
- Norkid:** I'll put in for your decoration: Knight of the Humerus.
- Trooper 1:** Don't make me laugh.
- Norkid:** Tonight you can cry in your beer. Right now, show me your feathers in the bullseye. You're not past pluperfect yet.

- Troopers:** *Draw that arrow,
Nock the string.
Loose your shaft
And make it sing!
One, two, three, four—
Back tomorrow to drill some more!*
- Norkid:** Let's go, let's GO! You're slower than the pole star.
- Trooper 2:** We were young when we followed Gilgamesh down from the north on some vague summons of the night wind to raise a siege of strangers. No one can say the gods didn't warn us. Our shields were too full of holes to float; he led us across the Tigris on wineskins. At first this whole irrigation district welcomed us like a pantheon of liberators. I thought we'd take home their gold, and odalisks to boot!
- Trooper 1:** Instead we smother to death in garrison while he spends his time inventing calendars and designing public works. Anyway, what's the tower for? An island for the second coming of their Flood? To watch their enemies from afar? Or to see more stars? Well we can make them tote and stack the bricks, but they won't man it on their own. They think mortals are forbidden to see more than a mile at a time!
- Enter Gilgamesh,** unobserved, with headless axe-handle in one hand.
- Trooper 2:** Gilgamesh can see near and far without a stepladder. I don't see why he should build a tower for gods that hate him.
- Trooper 1:** If only he'd keep his mind on the military problem!
- Norkid:** My military problem is to keep his stormtroopers from going soft, so that by time he's ready to remount his double-bite you'll still be able to hit a temple door. If you're not up to the mark in a little sport like this, you can't expect to save your pampered skins wee-wee-wee all the way home. So there you have your answer: The tower's a refuge for aging archers against a host of pitchforks!
- Troopers:** *Why did our proud demented king
Accept from them their Rod and Ring?
Why pile a mountain on the plain
To raise on high Lord Enlil's fane?*
- Norkid:** Let's secure this pisspoor muster. Don't let me keep you from your bossing. Go call the roll of masons! Take up up your lash! The sooner you top that topless tower off, the better we can hope to return to our life of honorable violence. —*Fall* OUT! On the double now! Don't keep the labor battalion standing around.
- Trooper 1:** Hurry up, he says! Hurry up and wait!
- Trooper 2:** Hurry up the heavy looking-on! Wait for the pace-setter!
- [Troopers unhurriedly prepare to leave.]
- Gilgamesh:** Well, well: my elite guard all alert and fresh in the morning dew! A moonstruck nightwalker can surprise them even after sunrise!
- [Menacing them mockingly with his axe-handle.]
- Troopers:** *A pace or two, and turn.
Up the stairs and down.
We fiddle on our bows
To pacify this town!*
- Troopers go out hastily,** dancing like sentries.

- Norkid:** Police duty makes simple soldiers ironical. But you already knew that. Your wide ear takes in from most to least.
- Gilgamesh:** Your Kassites have wide mouths.
- Norkid:** I confess they're not cut out for marshalling civilians harmlessly. I'm a little stir-crazy myself. It's been seven years since we've seen a real rock or a mountain. The Sea-Land marshes get a little boring.
- Gilgamesh:** Be of good cheer: you'll soon have foreign intelligence to amuse you. Eber's spit-and-images are sailing in from the desert with salt and other cargo.
- Norkid:** Begging your pardon: Hip, hip, hurray for all the excitement.
- Gilgamesh:** I'd have thought you'd get excited about the failure of your guard to spot their dust before I happened to.
- Norkid:** You know I don't have enough men for idle masthead watch.
- Gilgamesh:** Then be glad of these Eberew reinforcements.
- Nordid:** We don't need a cavalry of merchants. But I hope the peaceloving straightlaced Bactrian-drivers can defend themselves at least.

Enter Eber.

- Gilgamesh:** They wear shortswords under their veils. —Here's Eber now. If it weren't for this colleague, dear Norkid, where would all my engineering be? He's factored all the timber and stone, and rafted the lintels down river on their own joists!
- Nordid:** It was your suggestion, sir.
- Gilgamesh:** Now he's imported our most obscure necessity. Who else would have known that salt could cure sweatiness in men and skinniness in cattle? I had thought we could dispense with trade, once we'd stocked some soapstone and cedar!
- Eber:** As your humble servants my sons were everywhere received like magi. Your seal made them wizards of finance. From sea to sea, the name of Gilgamesh opened the door of every countinghouse and caravansary.
- Gilgamesh:** My vizier of budgets and accounts is a catholic statesman.
- Eber:** As your minister I've refrained from censure of the customs here. Have I not dealt justly with all the people?
- Gilgamesh:** Yes, yes, I always praise your jurisprudence too.
- Eber:** It used to be that no one ever tried to revive a poor man when he died, because the life he lost wasn't worth retaining. Now he's hired at twice his worth, gets his bread at cost, and pays no taxes. And, for fallow years to come, have I not filled the granaries by collecting from the rich—while by my hand fixed weights and measures have brought confidence to business? Further, sir, no man has found waste or ostentation in my disbursements from your treasury.
- Norkid:** One complaint I've never heard is that the king entertains too lavishly, or that his comptroller pays any bill too soon.

- Eber:** Yet even now, as we unload freight for the commonwealth, the marketplace grows silent with suspicion. Ever since you tied back the Rector's hand in favor of my office, and took his tithes for the state, poison has been percolating. In the warmest of hearts there's a cold spot for Eber and his tribe. My job is less than thankless.
- Gilgamesh:** You've told me that virtue is its own reward. . . . But call an assembly! I'll proclaim my gratitude for the way you've civilized my laws. The announcement of my project to raise Euphrates to the level of the Tigris, and give the farmers navigation by canal, will be a good occasion to tell all Erech that it's from you I learned to plan!
- Eber:** Please! My gracious leader—if he values my remaining service, or my life—will spare me public honors. Especially while informing the people of hydraulic engineering still in store for them.
- Norkid:** He's all too right, sir! Don't ignite the sullen sedition in this hagridden warren of male women and female men.
- Gilgamesh:** But even the stubble shows how good their harvests are! The grain hung heavy as peas. We've given them bread as well as walls. And when I've shown them how to feed the world, the arts will celebrate my name!
- Eber:** Not if you don't anticipate the treachery of their slithering pope. He decries burgeoning yields as portents of famine, waterways as highroads for the enemy, and architecture as an insult to religion! He has the city festering with venom.
- Norkid:** Any spurious flare of grievance and the simmer comes to boil!
- Eber:** Against a spider's web, halfway measures always fail. If you don't root out that dancing-master's cult, they'll lay waste all your works the day you die—which may come sooner than necessary. Put down that bawd! Disband the College! Stamp out their rites! Pronounce an edict *now*!
- Gilgamesh:** Am I a petty edic-tator? Let him be. This is not an ill-bred people. Let's open their eyes, not tear them out. It's not wisdom to call for force against the peace they make for love.
- Eber:** Love! There's no love here for me and mine. The day will come when my posterity can't be saved by the memory of your power. Better that I shake this clay from my feet right now.
- Gilgamesh:** I hold you to your word! Stay you must, a while. Without you here as my diplomatic secretary-bird, Norkid and I would have been vipped to death before our second year! I've not asked you to put fealty to me above your fear of the whirlwind God—any more than I've expected the Rector to forswear his Ishtar, or the Kassites not to pluck the dates they're offered. Remember your own words:
El-Shaddai sometimes uses even Gentile means. His promise of green pastures for your seed will be kept through me because it is my promise to you to seek and grant them. Well you know also that I'd bless your sons if my offences against heaven weren't so likely to bring them curses down instead. —Meanwhile, let the city's godown reward its faithful purveyors for something more than risk at profit. Take for your own account any seven camel-loads—except lumber, stone, or arms. —Now then, bring the new copper to my furnace. Pay the Kassites with gold: it may bolster their confidence in my sagacity. —In order to avoid needless irritation, your sons will pitch their tents outside the gate.
- Norkid:** Sir! You're tempting providence! What's to stop them from decamping?

- Gilgamesh:** Have no fear. Eber will remain inside with us. From him springs all their motive, while in them lies all his hope. We have mutual hostages to our alliance. It takes all three of us friends to build up this city.
- Gilgamesh goes out.**
- Eber:** For whatever time Adonai wills that we remain in league, may we shorten the arm's length that's been between us in our past already. In the stables you will find as token of my accumulated gratitude a string of war-horses, procured by my travelers for your brave phalanx that until now has had to keep the peace on foot alone.
- Norkid:** On fame alone, more like. You know I have no property to offer as my thanks—beyond a certain reputation for stout alliance. Your boys can tell us if foreigners have gotten wind of the fact that we grow fewer with age, or that in my retirement from action I've become a professor of military science—specializing in parades!
- Eber:** With chariots you can dominate the streets.
- Norkid:** Come to the hall tonight. I invite all your men and mine. Beer and mutton—feasting to the limit Gilgamesh allows. I'm afraid there'll be no dancing girls.
- Eber:** We shall discuss harnesses, and various routes to the land of milk and honey.

Eber and Norkid go out together, laughing softly.