

TABLET THREE

[Gilgamesh's laboratory arranged for a meeting. The charts are rolled up.]

Enter Gilgamesh,
wearing the IRTH, and

Eber.

Gilgamesh: I've proved it! Condensed or rarified, pitch will solve my problem! The bottomless bitumen that blights our swamps will bind the bricks and waterproof the walls. We'll scoop the mastic from those black puddles! We'll dip out naphtha to feed the steady flames we need for furnaces!
[Excited.]

Eber: You mean the tar pits? Black puddles! Bottomless pits of abomination! Stinking sludge of desolation! Burning mud is Satan's art.
[Dismayed.]

Gilgamesh: Bane perhaps, but not black magic. No god would leave a miracle to me. It's by a neglected law of nature that I'll superheat my kilns!
[Laughing.]

Eber: It would be the last straw of grievances—to pollute these heathens with the nightsoil of hell!

Gilgamesh: Their tune will change, when they understand. It took a whole tree of cedar logs, with my lungs for bellows, to transmute this pointed bit of clay. But with pitch on fire day and night, we'll petrify all the bricks we can mold, without even waiting for them to dry! Isn't it you who's always warning me that God's weather will wear away the works of sun-dried earth? But walls all sheathed with glittering man-made stone won't stand to perish like our flesh; nor be worn to dust by wind, or reduced to mud by rain. If we can coin immortal tiles, the future's labor will be lightened.
[Indicating the IRTH.]

Eber: These laborers don't look beyond their week.

Gilgamesh: They shall sleep while fire makes my stone. Let them have the day in bed you say they need every week. Take credit for that indulgence. You'll reconcile them yet.

Eber: Reconcile us all to Hell! Already these sullen worms can see nothing but sarcastic pride in your monument to their gods. If furthermore you make them traffic with devils' dung and Satan's piss, you'll turn them into a colony of frantic vipers. Forever worse by far, you'll bring down the curse of Adonai on all of us! Against him an enameled tower endures no longer than a harlot's image pressed in sand. Can glossy facades repel a plague of locusts? Can the caulking of cracks keep out a rain of blood?

Gilgamesh: You wanderers carry your tabernacles with you. You'll never understand the love of a fixed hearth that governs these people. Their gods call for cities.

Eber: But abhor invention. You can't rub their noses in the jakes of Hell—unless you act with power and extirpate the idols that give them the courage to defy you! You've so tolerated their cult that the Rector preaches in public already! King, act on principle!

Gilgamesh: I'll not be the scourge of your god any more than theirs. To you truth is so clear that it oversimplifies the web. Justice isn't economic only. You should dispense all kinds of charity. Next month the equinox will fix our common feast of feasts—the first New Year of the second polestar: the covenant that Erech will become a city of one speech, one clock, one calendar—but of all the arts. In the end my public works will earn the public's praises.

Eber: The end will be too soon if you refuse to pay attention. The public will celebrate your New Year with a vengeance. Some hokum's afoot in the temple already. Crush it in the egg!

Enter Rector and Optimates, escorted by Norkid.

Gilgamesh: Ah, my privy council!

Rector: The summons from Your Lugalissimus anticipated my petition for an audience.
[Bowling.]

Gilgamesh: You know perfectly well that nobody needs a petition to see me—let alone my people's chaplain. Day and night these four doors invite unguarded. I may be stingy with holidays, but I'm generous of ear. Is your heart cowed by some anxiety?

[The Rector hands Gilgamesh a cloth.

Rector: The queen's compliments with this gift woven by her hand. A prayer rug, she declares, to bend your knee upon.
All laugh or smile at his words. Gilgamesh unrolls an ensign bearing a red and blue triskelion. With Norkid's help, he fastens it to the wall under the rolls of charts.]

Gilgamesh: A riddle in tapestry! She knows my taste in two dimensions. I marvel at her triangular lines, woven with the perpendicular stitches of a loom! I hope her droll purpose lightened the work. —Here, take her as potlatch this trenchant adamantine jewel, for lack of human sculpture, to pique her interest in the third coordinate. Tell her it's a stylus for her signature in clay.
[He takes off the IRTH necklace and hands it to the Rector.]

Eber: You're putting in his hands your tool for writing!
[Gesture of protest.]

Gilgamesh: Don't worry: I know how to make its mate. —There was a time when I got many presents from a grateful city.
[Eber gives up with a shrug.]

Rector: In a pinch of emergency the wise Optimates of Uruk elected to hand you the Rod and Ring. We remain indebted, even though we are obliged to oppose your innovations.
[Motioning toward the Optimates.]

Gilgamesh: Yes, you are not enthusiastic. Your religion is too old.

Rector: It has not run its course. But I am no enemy of yours, as I'm told you are advised. Have I not contracted the labor for piling up our tower?

Norkid: *Our* tower! Since when, this politic change of heart?
[To Eber.] —Why does he so suddenly clothe necessity with virtue?

Eber: He's beginning to pretend. That means they've been busier than I thought!

Gilgamesh: The right hand of peace, city fathers, grand masters of the guilds. I'd like to have your counsel in all the trades. Now that our architecture's high enough to catch the eye, it needs the skills of potters. Can you mix those colors into clay?
[Shakes hands with each of the Optimates. Points to the Triskelion. They look at each other.]

Eber: He hopes to win over posterity with gaudy images?
[Aside.]

Rector: The Optimates and I agree that all the crafts will heed your call. Furthermore, in accordance with our decision to cooperate in high ambition for the city of Inanna, we shall adjust our almanac to your equinox, keeping what we can of ancient measures handed down from heaven. It is devoutly to be hoped that my sacerdotal compromises will be forgiven—so long as we preserve the forms most dear to our people.
[Makes a gesture of reverence at mention of the goddess.]

Gilgamesh: I think you're driving at something I won't like. Let it be no tawdry sham!

Optimate 1: Sir, we plead only for the way to harmonize all rites, and—

Rector: These gentlemen mean to say—

Gilgamesh: Let them speak.

Optimate 2: —resolve all discord by a show of sacrificial contest.

Rector: As mathematician I have come to see the reason in your duodecimal scheme. By calculation I still could fix the dates for planting. But when it dawns on people that after this New Year you'll be abolishing the month of Epact, which Enlil gave them with their city when time began, sooner or later—
[Hastily, shushing up the Optimates by gesture.]

Norkid: I'm sure you'll see that it's sooner.

Rector: —there'll be riot, and the end to all my management. Unless you act right now.

Gilgamesh: Every year they'll have a five-day feast. More frequent revelry. No long wait for reelections! Every blessed year your calendar will be true to Sun. It's *he* that makes Euphrates rise. You should pray accordingly.

Rector: None old enough to swing a scythe will forget the thirteenth moon given Inanna by Father Enlil. The people are maddened enough by a bachelor for king. But strife and tumult won't serve the gods. The temple thrives on peace—and the temple is the state.

Gilgamesh: What act are you implanting in my stateless will?

Rector: First, withhold your intercalary decree until this New Year has begun. It's time enough when the people have tired of their pleasures—after you have pleased them most by winning the Rod and Ring from their champion. Your power to alter the city's tradition will be recognized and cheered if he has been worthy of the queen before you strike him down.

Gilgamesh: I told you that I want no puppet putting me to the test. I won't abuse your law with play-acting. Otherwise, I agree in advance to any suitor you put forward.

[Eber and Norkid
express consternation.]

Rector: Of course I speak of nothing more than the king's reinauguration. It's the rite of Epat that rids us of our sins.
[To Eber.]
[To Gilgamesh.] —During the feast you will lie hidden in undiminished royalty, like a god withdrawn, while the Lord of Misrule struts and boasts. Finally, when the braggart's purple is stained with dissipation, you'll recapitulate your fame by cutting short the mockery.

Gilgamesh: Fatuity I suppose will awaken my bloodlust to simply kill the pretender who's trying to kill me first. But I warn you that I'll not accept for sake of protocol some innocent fool deceived by adulation. I won't murder a puppy.

Norkid: Gilgamesh, don't tempt fate! Better make-believe than real surprise: treachery in the trappings of their ceremony!

Rector: A decent stranger, so elated by a few days of royal emoluments and perquisites that he'll fight to keep them.

Eber: Make him tell you who's his pick already!

Rector: My Temple hunters, tracking lions up into Aram on the rivers, venturing beyond the sight of smoke from hearth or altar, have happened upon the wild man known to legend as Enkidu.

Norkid: Engidu! By mere chance, eh? Just stumbled on him! It must have been a right cool search, beating all the bushes of Akkady. By accident you enlist the abominable windman—who abhors the faintest whiff of featherless bipeds!

- Eber:** This explains the gossip that's been showing up in my reports! That horned and hairy monster lives with the beasts, speaks their lore, and judges all their cases.
- Gilgamesh:** I've heard tales of Engidu, but never to believe. He instructs lions, outruns the cheetah, and protects the oryx.
- Rector:** Full of the hot red life that gods and mortals love to smell. Blood-power well to be expended. No danger to you of course in a duel of human skill. But to capture him will take more force than the Temple has.
- Gilgamesh:** I myself will fetch him!
- Rector & Optimates:** Absolutely forbidden! —Not the king! —Against all religion! —It would defeat the purpose! [etc.]
- Norkid:** Without you on hand we couldn't keep the people at work for even three days!
[Aside to Gilgamesh.]
- Eber:** It's conspiracy, playing upon your lesser pride!
[Aside to Gilgamesh.]
- Gilgamesh:** I forgot. —You go, Norkid. —And reverend sir, you must go with him, as spokesman for the law. I promise that Eber will not usurp your crosier. —The name of Engidu is something to bite on. Fast as a javelin and hard as an axe. Is it true that he can uproot an oak in anger? —With the Rector out of town, I can spare a few of your men. Pick volunteers who aren't half-cocked string-happy heroes. Take the battle-net. Bring in Engidu fresh and unscathed.
[Grinning at the Rector, who hesitates and then bows with icy formality.]
- Norkid:** I'm the very understudy of Gilgamesh himself, but how in the name of Mazda am I expected to snare alive some troglodytic aborigine of superhuman senses living at the end of a rainbow in league with all the fauna? I'll have to crease him with an arrow first.
- Rector:** The victim must not be either pained or drugged!
- Gilgamesh:** Then use the surest lure. Take the woman with you.
- All:** —Who? —What woman? —What do you mean? [etc.]
- Gilgamesh:** Lil-Amin.
- Optimates:** The queen! She can't leave the Temple. —An insult to Inanna! —She won't go outside the walls!
[Their dismay is first shared by the Rector, who soon bethinks himself however, making the effort to conceal his unexpected satisfaction.]

- Gilgamesh:** But I so decree. No further discussion. Engidu may hate mankind, but she'll have an opposite affect. Have her open up her robe. Let the dog sniff. Soon enough he'll have to share the scent with gods and packs of saints—after he fells old Gilgamesh! You may catch them in the net together.
- Eber:** With open eyes you walk right into the trap of this hoodwinking whoremonger!
- Rector:** It's not I that offered the queen. My hands are clean. They toil for love.
[Blandly spreading his palms.]
- Gilgamesh:** Eber, my old friend, there are times when one quick stroke should cut the knot. With both of them absent from their altar, there'll be no one here to stampede the herd before I can top off the present work. —You see, I'm sufficiently suspicious. —Norkid, don't let the Rector outnumber you with his glebe-men: no more than two or three as guides. Any trouble, I trust you to keep it diplomatic. . . .
- Optimate 1:** Let Your Grace put a stop to this sacrilege! You hardly lift your hand!
- Optimate 2:** Call out the mob tonight! We'll die before we let her go!
- Rector:** No, there's no summons to waste your death. The catastrophe is his. Suddenly an old oracle is about to be understood.
[Soothing them.]
- Optimate 2:** The gods will turn on us in unison if Lil-Amin is allowed to be dragged into the wilderness and ravaged by a bestial foundling!
- Optimate 1:** Who will ever stop the whims of this sleepless mountain bull—if our pontiff gives him leave to paw the dust?
- Rector:** Fools! It's not for laymen to interpret prodigies, or to judge the evil destined for a good to follow. Your piety dwells too much on custom. The fall of Gilgamesh will be accomplished if we endure the last vicissitude of his regime. I tell you the Tablets of Fate are about to be fulfilled. Find no fault with my tolerance of this expedition. It's I, Our Lady's dancer, who has suffered most; and it's I, the lawkeeper, who will bring down the law upon this tyrant. And when the glebe's restored, we shall possess his miscalculated monument as the city's bond to heaven! It is the will of the gods that for us Gilgamesh should raise this ladder up to heaven! . . . On a nuptial dais in the firmament, my sister's frankincense and myrrh will smell all the sweeter to Our Lord.
[Turning on them impatiently.]
[Strides back and forth, here and there breaking into dance.]
- Optimate 1:** We defer to you in matters of divinity even when no precedent is found. But will Engidu reduce our taxes?
- Optimate 2:** In any case, how can we be sure he'll win the Rod and Ring? People whisper that Gilgamesh is two-thirds god.

Rector: Two thirds can't save the mortal part! Engidu is sent to us by Inanna. When he's seen there'll be no doubt of the issue. We can rest assured he's quicker and stronger by half than the stories claim. Gilgamesh won't get the chance to dance.

Optimate 2: Then we should prime the people to welcome their redeemer. Old women will grow young with expectation!

Rector: No! Rejoicing must be contained in the mummery. Let the jubilation seem sarcastic. [Dancing by way of illustration.] "The King of Beasts" they may acclaim him, decked in purple, riding backwards on his ass. —That interloping vizier never ceases to probe the pus of hatred swelling in my liver. His spies and provocateurs are still to be feared. If he incites the northmen to forestall us, you'll die with feathers sticking out of your lungs. But may Tigris join Euphrates if I don't scatter his bones—and stamp out all his children like isolated ants! [Leaving off his dance.]

Optimates: —Exalted shall be the sacred fool who laughs when we mock him :: that he may leap [Chanting in antiphony, perhaps with dance.] for the hand at our throat!
—Happy shall be the King of the Epact :: to sow his seed like stars of the sky!
—Blessed shall be the lion of the steppes :: for he lays low the raging mountain bull!
Optimates go out.

Rector: Now I must convince the virgin queen that Enlil's law is broad enough to sanction such reversal. Gilgamesh shall never have her! Engidu is no lover for her heart: let him open the unstitched seam that's forbidden to her brother and confessor. When she's our mistress at last, she'll learn the worth of her one true minister. [Inspecting Gilgamesh's laboratory, idly pulling down various rollers, but pausing at the three-dimensional diagram of the IRTH, which he still holds in his hand. At the end he suddenly unrolls and hangs up a banner displaying the blue five-point star.]
—Meanwhile let her scorn this gage. What an absurd talisman: Iso-Recto-Tetra-Hedron! —The fourth facet wouldn't be so bad if it weren't the shape that makes a star of Eber. Yet soon we'll be bowing again to the lovely star of Inanna! —Salt, indeed! By the good Lord, I'll salt his tears!

The Rector leaves, following Optimates.