

TABLET FOUR

Gilgamesh and Eber enter the Laboratory by torchlight. [During the conversation with Eber, Gilgamesh unrolls a series of the charts, thereby covering the tapestry affixed by the Rector in Tablet Three. Some of the charts he merely glances at; others he studies with varying degrees of attention: a site plan of the city, drawings of the ziggurat (tower), a flow-chart of the construction project, and projective geometrical drawings of the IRTH.]

- Gilgamesh:** All works take longer than they should. So my motto is: predict too soon, and finish soon enough. Production is at last improving. The building trades have learned to heed my specifications. Work-orders regulate their habits.
- Eber:** It's an army under lash. You might as easily push them into war as force their arts and crafts.
- Gilgamesh:** You must admit bitumen was a good idea. Not for a moment has fuel been lacking. Watertight pitch makes hellish heat—as well as perpetual torches to light more work at night! In the flames aloft, when there's no moon, the new tiles gleam like sapphire, lapis lazuli, and rubied copper. By that heap of beacons I dare the thunderbolts to find me after dark!
- Eber:** You think their gods will be dazzled by ersatz stones in girlish colors? Leaving only Engidu for you to fight? Shall I tie one hand behind your back?
- Gilgamesh:** Without sarcasm now, tell me what you think: does he abhor my works? Or will they fill him with delight? I wonder if he's really ugly.
- Eber:** These beauty-lovers want him in your place regardless. A man who lies with beasts should be stoned outside the gates, instead of welcomed like a bridegroom! But the women have gone out to greet him with garlands already! Are you going to let a stupid game of force bring all your works to desolation?
- Gilgamesh:** No man exists with greater strength than mine.
- Eber:** But an animal may be faster and more cunning. —Still, all things are reported to me, and I'll ferret out his weakness. It's possible that by some device we can survive him.
- Gilgamesh:** Not by trickery!
- Eber:** The trick is to forestall the Rector's tricks. No longer can my vigilance alone keep the chain-mail of his conspiracy unmeshed. Yet you send Norkid on a hospitality expedition!

- Gilgamesh:** Your wariness has not been wasted. Had not your One True God set his face against my enemies, no doubt I'd long since have fallen to poison or my own unreckoning. But I don't want to keep the Rod and Ring on Shaddai's sufferance!
- Eber:** You abuse His gift of will by thwarting His favor with stiffnecked caprice. But it's not as prophet that I protest your negligence. By your command I'm responsible for the body politic. Furthermore, daughters of Erech now bear my children's seed. Therefore allow me to ward off my own destruction by urging you against your pride. A great spirit gets time to grow still greater if it's less magnanimous about the way to stay alive in single combat.
- Gilgamesh:** There'd be no greatness of any kind in consenting to a secret handicap. If I deserve my power and my life, I must contest the categories of life and power. It's the law of nature that spirit be sustained by gross faculties of body.
- Norkid enters,** travel-worn and weary. —Is Engidu intact? What about the priest-woman? Did you have to push her? How long did it take? How did she—
- Norkid:** [Smiling wryly.] Good my lord, I'm not strolling back from an idle bout of chess. Give me leave to catch my breath—and savor your joy at seeing me again. I'm happy to find that you too are still alive.
- Gilgamesh:** [Grinning, reaches Norkid a mug.] Hello, old dogface! —Your beer's been waiting. —I hear you've landed the prince of the peaceable kingdom. —What have we here? A puny bow!
- Norkid:** [Hands Gilgamesh the bow of a fire-drill.] His present to you. The scepter he rules by. For making fires when you're all alone. Her Highness had given him your Isorectotetrahedron.
- Gilgamesh:** That was the lure that did it?
- Norkid:** I couldn't say what did it.
- Gilgamesh:** [Examining the bow.] I'll tighten the string and play it pizzicato while I wait for New Year's Day; or pass the time like a bard, thrumming deeds I've never done.
- Norkid:** [Drinking deep.] She called it her one private jewel. But she also gave him another, as we would have said back home. The goddess favors Engidu, and everyone knows it. You can smell incense in the street.
- Eber:** That gorilla will have the mob on his side before the feast even begins. You should have kept him out of sight.

Norkid: Of course I brought him in as a hooded prisoner after dark; but how do you disguise such a specimen? A swarm of honeybees was waiting at the gate! When this pretender's all adorned with gold and purple, and led before the people with their queen, it will take thunder and lightning to reduce him to a scapegoat!

[Gilgamesh lays down the drill and takes up his axe, which has been remounted with its double head.]

Eber: The Rector's busy transmogrifying bees to hornets.

Norkid: In his mind it's all over but the acclamation. He began to taste the restoration as soon as he saw his royal sister about to be disburdened of her natural imperfection by a holy savage already incised with the barb of religion—congenital proof of Ishtar's choice! At two hundred yards Engidu's notch was as prominent as the Rector's miter. Maybe he was born ithyphallic too, because until he was relieved of his superabundance, it looked as if he was goose-stepping on the run!

[Gilgamesh hurls his axe into the floor, where it remains sticking.]

[Pause.]

Being the clairvoyant hound of Gilgamesh, I bristled with presentiment—the sparrow's horror at a sudden shadow on the sun. You should have seen the ferocity of him before she sheared his mane and dressed his loins! Without the lady's help, I'd rather have tried to lasso a crazed elephant!

Gilgamesh: If you'd killed him I would have pardoned you.

Norkid: So lightly you now disclaim the threat that frightened me the most! Still, I tried to disobey my orders. Nearly in a palsy, I fitted a silver-tipped arrow to my bow. It's not easy to aim at the son of a goddess when your nerves are shaking like a cornered rabbit's. He hadn't seen us, but he heard the shaft, caught it in his hand, and flung it back at me like a javelin, but twice as fast. Thank god it must have been deflected by the volley I'd ordered in my panic. Twice, with our Rector's shrieks splitting the silence of high noon, we skirred a band of sky. But Engidu stepped among the arrows as if they were children streaming out to play. It was eerie: no shadow, no echo, no engagement! —The guides broke cover and ran. One of them he got on the back of the head with his bannerstone, thrown by the handle. The other two he overtook in easy bounds, and spilled their brains by banging the two skulls together.

[Dances, or slightly mimes, dry and sporadic illustrations of his story.]

Gilgamesh: I'm glad you missed. Your blind devotion would have disgraced me.

Norkid: Or cost you my worthless life. What saved me and mine was his awe of the lady. It made him see that he was naked. He retired to the hills, escorted by the animals that had been at the water hole. Next day, nevertheless, he returned in the same condition—still shy. But not as timid as the hares and gazelles and foxes and wolves and lions. Like us, they hung back to watch the unveiling from a distance.

[Gilgamesh retrieves his axe and hones it with a whetstone.]
[Norkid sits down to drink pensively.]

Gilgamesh: What unveiling?

Eber: Unveiling of a whore! How much distance?

- Norkid:** We couldn't see much from our side of the grove, and His Grace nearly had a conniption when she refused to take him along as master of ceremonies. But I reckon there's not much doubt about the consummation. Three days later she led Engidu out through the trees clothed like you and wearing the Isorectotetrahedron. The animals had fled, and he was no more innocent than she who was laughing at his familiarities.
- Gilgamesh:** What familiarities?
- Norkid:** That's all there is to tell. After that wedding he was brought here for all the feastings of a potentate. The rest is detail.
- Gilgamesh:** Detail is what you're paid for, captain! Details are all I want. A general needs no report on net results. Did she dance?
[Flaring up.]
- Norkid:** The Rector seemed to visualize what we couldn't see of her courtship. He was skirling on that weird pipe of his—a thin monotony; it stood my hair on end, and would have swayed a cobra on its haunches: the only sound for twenty miles. Then his music stopped—an officious cue for her Cry of the Maidenhead. It finally came, like a fainting afterthought.
- Gilgamesh:** What courage, to have danced in her very terror!
- Norkid:** That's your imagination of a Gilgamissy girl! Engidu has no horns and he isn't ugly.
[Gilgamesh fiddles with the bow,
- Gilgamesh:** You mistook her poise. I think she stood with frozen veins, dreading to be seized. Those shudders are invisible.
using one of Norkid's arrows as a fire-drill.]
- Norkid:** All right. I'm no psychologist. But she opened up her robe.
- Gilgamesh:** As she'd been instructed. But she didn't make advances.
- Norkid:** I didn't say he was backward. Knee to knee, he didn't need a schoolmarm's prompting.
- Gilgamesh:** Norkid, were they like dogs, blinded by instinct?
[Raising his voice.]
- Norkid:** Dogs don't make love when they couple. Or talk. He had speech to learn. She taught him how to use his tongue.
- Gilgamesh:** It's natural he'd love her. But the converse doesn't hold. She has no use for a troglodyte.
- Norkid:** I'm not a spy—my job was to bring the victim back alive—but I could see she wasn't too proud to let her eyes be opened. It was no surprise that an imaginative spinster, roused by priestcraft, should fall for an adoring gallant who wishes to deliver her from a fate worse than death.

- Gilgamesh:** But then he grabbed her brutally. It was too rough and quick. He was incorrigible and rude, probably quite smelly.
- Norkid:** You seem to think that woman's as fastidious as a white raven. Haven't you noticed the way she walks? For her the unwashed ruffian was a princely changeling. On the way home he was in her tent at every bivouac, and in the morning she was always starry-eyed. You could almost hear the purring. As we traveled she would smile and close her eyes, rehearsing all the stitches she had taken.
- Gilgamesh:** Why didn't you just rope the fellow and carry him here trussed upsidedown on a pole—without all those hornpipe solemnities?
[Angrily.]
- Norkid:** Sooner than be tied he would've gnawed off all four paws. Possibly you'll kill him yet, but I wish I'd done it before she brought him sorrow. In putting on the new man he gave up the old. He lost a dozen tongues by licking hers. Old littermates no longer listen to his calls.
- Eber:** A fool's exchange. He's no smart trader. If his lust can't be slaked in one white sepulcher, there's still a whole catacomb of hot sarcophagi stewing for his marrow. Before an ordeal, whoring cannot help him. A savage isn't bred for urban stamina.
- Norkid:** False hope, my friend. Even when he beclouded with beer the grief of being shunned by his animals, the honeymoon did not bereave him of strength or speed. Dissipation is his tonic, and funeral his resurrection. One sundown we camped on the edge of the steppes near some village that was terrorized by a rogue lion he had tamed. The shepherds came to ask his help. So by my leave he set out to tell the beast about mankind's sheep-laws. But dragging off another ewe between its teeth, it ignored his warning. In an amazed fury he threw off his clothes, grabbed the lion, and in half a minute tore the life out of it with his bare hands. When the frenzy left him, and he saw that he had killed, he carried the carcass to Lil-Amin, twice his own weight, asking her what to make of murder. As tender education of Engidu's ferocity, all night long they waked the poor lion. But in the morning, as usual, nothing drunk or done by himself or the woman had softened him up.
- Gilgamesh:** Did you say he sometimes sleeps?
- Norkid:** As much as a cat—as much or as little. Sleeps and leaps indifferently. By the pain of guilt he earned the praise that men reserve for a mighty hunter. He began to play the lion's part as our provider. Like a big carnivorous cat he found he also relished other blood. The blood of prey that used to flock to him for safety.
- Gilgamesh:** So he's aching for the thrill of more momentous sacrifice!
- Norkid:** The priest harped on that theme in his religious instruction: expiation of his kills by killing for the gods, to save their people, and win the Rod and Ring from the raging mountain bull who oppresses the numberless women of Ishtar's city and all her livestock. Meanwhile of course to me the Rector affects to be duping a victim too ignorant to suspect that the famous skill of Gilgamesh will be backed by the sacred force of custom. Of course I never left them alone together. You should make that a rule as long as you live.

Gilgamesh: Let the schemer proselytize. What difference does it make? Conspiracy's too linguistic for an aboriginal ear.

Eber: But that harlot's in the plot. How does she ply the golem's remorse?

Norkid: Their pillow-talk was not for ears of mine. All I know is that he battens on tales of Gilgamesh. He who never saw a wall now envisions himself commanding a tower. He who never saw a rite now imagines splendid liturgies in Gilgamesh's raiment. He who never heard of gods now calls himself the champion of Inanna.

Gilgamesh: Yet from inborn slavery to her the poor fish doesn't know his lack of air!

Norkid: But fighting man-to-man that fish won't feel out of water. Don't count on having time to size him up. He won't wait for you to start it.

Gilgamesh: If the first move gives an edge, why then he and I will strike at the same time. But he will feed the immortal maggots. I'll play the dirge while women mourn his mortal parts.
Plucking on the fire-bow, **Gilgamesh** picks up his axe and **goes off**.

Norkid: By bruising his widow's spikenard Engidu has merely unlocked her perfume for our royal anchorite. She's not one to lose her fragrance at the center like a wornout cake of soap. It seems Gilgamesh is about to learn that such virtue renews itself in the giving.

Eber: The three of us could be dead already! I'll watch the ayatollah. You watch the ape.

Eber and Norkid walk off together.