

TABLET EIGHT

[Uruk. Early nighttime in forum, by torchlight, just inside a city gate.]

Berosus sits off to one side with pestle-cymbal or darabukka drum.

Enter former Widow 2, holding a baby to whom she is happily crooning.

Widow 2: Sweet baby mine—coo, coo, coo! Just between us, prettier than the new queen and not a day older, nor younger either.
Trooper 2 enters.

Trooper 2: Well, the watch is set at last. What's for supper? —Me too, tiny damsel! I want some of that teat. —So are you available for fun tonight, my dearly beloved little callipyginous wife?
[Kisses her and tickles baby.]

Widow 2: Cally *what?*

Trooper 2: Beauty-ass! That's what Norkid used to call you when you were serving in the temple.

Widow 2: How could he know?

Trooper 2: He wears glasses and he has a good head for figures.

Widow 2: Then maybe he's a pretty nice boss after all—even though he usually keeps you out all night. Shall I ask him to put in a word for you with Gilgamesh, who always seems too preoccupied to notice what a good man you are?

Trooper 2: Don't let me catch you talking to the Captain about *anything*, that old goat! Gilgamesh has been fair enough with all of us. I pray to Mazda he makes it back here soon. When Engidu's with him he's twice too confident. Meanwhile let's you and me pluck a young mother's rosebuds while things are still quiet around here.

Widow 2: The way you're plucking me, our quarters will soon be too small for a soldier's happy home.

Trooper 2: There's no place like wherever your rose bed is.

Widow 2: Maybe before the Rector's old glebe is all parceled out to civilians Gilgamesh will give us a little house for my bed. With a garden and two palm trees to shade another baby-boo or two. I'll rig up a hammock for you to renew your virility in—if I can ever soften you up long enough for me to get some housework done!

Trooper 2: Gilgamesh will take care of us. God knows he's generous enough with our
 [Low drumbeat.] enemies, just to keep the peace. —Shit piss and corruption, another foolish night-
All actors enter alert! —Sorry, baby, got to go! We have the devil of a time recognizing shadows
 severally, from various before moonrise. It's prob'ly a lion, or just some stray camel.
 directions, at first in
 unhurried
 curiosity, then with increasing excitement.

Norkid: There are at least two out there! Sound quarters!
 [From above.]

Widow 2: Oh no! I'm still afraid you'll leave me!

Trooper 2: For god's sake sweetheart, I'm too busy to leave you! I've got to go to the gate!
 [Hastily, as she grasps his tunic.]

Widow 2: I mean it! If it isn't Gilgamesh now, he may never return! The Rector will get
 back his power and all you Kassites will go back to your women in the mountains!
 The kings of Ur Lagash Nippur Eridu Umma and Kish are just waiting to rape and
 rob us, not to mention Susa and the Hyksos raiders!

Trooper 2: None of us will ever leave Norkid, and Norkid won't leave Uruk while Lil-Amin is
 queen, or her daughter. And Eber's boys are multiplying faster than your people
 do. That's how they count their riches, to the city's advantage. So Eber will stay
 when the queen asks him to, and manage everything just as he did for Gilgamesh.

Widow 2: But if our adventurous king *is* coming back he must have insulted the gods again.
 Uruk can't resist the will of heaven when its citizens are armed only with pickaxe,
 hod, and basket instead of bow, spear, and shield! You mercenaries alone can't
 man a tower and seven walls until your sons grow up, whether Gilgamesh is here
 or not!

Trooper 2: Your people will learn how to fight, and Eber's too, not just our men, if anyone
 [Drumbeat louder and threatens the prosperity they gripe about that Gilgamesh has brought them! —Now
 faster. Trumpet signal.] let me go, or Norkid will put me in the guard house!

Norkid: Open the gate! It's Gilgamesh and Engidu!

Enter Gilgamesh and Engidu, ragged and dusty, one with
 a doublebitted axe, the other his bannerstone in hand, both
 with bows slung across their backs.

Gilgamesh: So it seems you've kept the city safe! How's my little daughter—and her mother?
 [To Norkid, embracing him.]

Berosus:
[As Norkid replies inaudibly. Mingled clamors of welcome and gestures of ambivalence. All except Berosus assemble hierarchically in the forum.]

This foreign ruler of Uruk, or Erech (as the Eberews called it), might have been Sumer's Alexander two millennia before the Greeks were ever heard of if he'd cared for power more than fame, or territory more than engineering, or religion more than his own freewill. He'd rather measure the world than win it. Though this event is long after Ea sent Oannes to instruct mankind how to serve the gods it is many centuries before the Akkadians overran the lower valley of the two rivers.

Gilgamesh, said to be two-thirds god but one-third mortal man, tyrannical deliverer of the city, has won the loyalty of Engidu, the dark superman sent by the petitioned gods to overmatch him. With the twinned prowess of their friendship he means to double his feats. Now he and Engidu, looking ever more alike, have returned from an expedition intended to disabuse the blackhaired people of their conviction that fiery Kumbaba, hideous guardian of the sacred Cedar Forest at the top of the world (where nascent Tigris and Euphrates are opposite trickles from the Lake of the Gods), can forever deny their brickbuilt city the timber to make it greater.

[Eber hands Gilgamesh the Rod (staff) and Ring (crown) of kingship.]

You see the pair joyfully surrounded by Norkid and his Kassites troopers. The Eberews and most of the natives are surprised to see the foolhardy adventurers still alive. Gilgamesh is greeted equivocally by the Rector and Optimates, but cordially by Eber his vizier who seats them both, and calls for cups of beer. You notice Gilgamesh from time to time peering in vain for Lil-Amin the Queen, who remains unseen.

Gilgamesh:
[Addressing the Rector and Optimates.]

You said it could not be done. [*Brief chuckle:*] Prediction is fiction! A fig for your solemn prophecies! Some of you dared to murmur that I was an arrogant foreigner restless in folly, and that Uruk has no further need of lumber for its gates, rafters, furniture, and seaworthy boats. You've balked at every change in trade or speech until it's made you richer. "Enough already" even Eber sometimes said!

Eber:

It's pride that I resist, not innovation. For did not Elohim say "Let not him that girds on his armor boast himself as he that puts it off." But now I'm glad to see your armor's off.

Gilgamesh:

The Rector wailed that I'd bring down upon Inanna's own city the wrath of every other god because I've allowed the words of secular life as much privilege as the language of women. And I know that brave Norkid thought I was too insatiable for fame to imagine my own defeat in any matter. He believed that shape-changing Kumbaba, unceasingly alert with flaming jaws and petrifying stare, could detect the breath of a mile-off butterfly. Kumbaba's roar was said to be like the sudden thunder of floodwaters striking terror in a canyon.

Your champion, my beloved Engidu, who had lived on the steppes and come close to the mountain of the gods, confirmed these urban fears. But he was willing to share my fate. He overcame his dread and became my guide. He kept watch when I was troubled by my own childish nightmares. The time came when we had to overcome each other's fears. Yet mortal panic would have been justified. For any living creature—animal or man—the most distant view of that mountain touches an instinct of terror. Long before we mounted to its forest Kumbaba's aura froze our blood.

Berosus: Before they left the city Gilgamesh and Engidu had asked Lil-Amin for sympathetic advice. But according to rumor she'd only offered intimate dismay and a vivid premonition of double grief. Gilgamesh reciprocated the love in her words but ignored their wisdom. In anger at his conceited folly she withheld her blessing and refused them even an ordinary votive sacrifice, turning her back on their leavetaking.

Gilgamesh: For the city's sake, not for mine, not for Engidu's, your admirable queen execrated me with scorn for the vanity of a fastuously temerarious glory-seeking self-appointed shepherd of her people! She cursed my career of fatal sacrilege. She blamed me for corrupting Engidu—even as she tried to corrupt his loyalty to me. Neither of us laughed at the oracle. We did not deny our fear or the power of the gods. But in the end we were still refused her coldest farewell—we the sires of her daughter!

Rector: Blasphemy! All Uruk knows that my sister the lady-priest of Inanna did not deceive the heavenly father of our baby princess with either one of them!
Storms off, thumping his crook, followed hesitantly by **Widow 1 and Optimate1.**

Gilgamesh: That woman-mongering master of ceremonies hates all reason in the name of worship. Behind my back he spits and says my feet are clay. He has no humor for the loss of his power.

Berosus: In those days, you see, high priests still professed their lord god Enlil to be the father in a sacred marriage. This Rector hated Gilgamesh for confiscating the temple's glebe.

Norkid: He's more unreasonable since he sacrificed his orchids.

Gilgamesh: Is Lil-Amin well? Has she been informed that her wisdom has proved too feminine?
 [To Eber.]

Eber: The queen is aware of your return. She declines to hear your story.

- Gilgamesh:** Before morning she'll hear it from me. You may assure her that by slighting prudence I did not belittle her warnings, or yours—or yours—or yours—or all the people's. Kumbaba certainly did terrify our entrance to the sunless Cedar Forest, and did indeed guard the Tree of the Gods. We were wearied by weeks of pathfinding, of fending for ourselves on the steppes and highlands, ever half starved or parched, always awakened from brief sleep by dreams of horror, though each of us in turn guarded by his wakeful double.
- Optimate 2:** Tell us how you found the way, alive for months in the bush, beyond the territorial endurance of our greatest hunters.
- Gilgamesh:** I am no storyteller, sir! I have no time to cry or crow. Perhaps you'll find Engidu more accommodating. He's learned to speak quite well.
- Optimate 2:** As you wish. We respect the Rod and Ring of Uruk, despite taxes and conscription.
- Eber:** Well you might, under an administration of justice and construction that keeps you rich.
- Engidu:** When I ran with the lions I learned their fear of mountains. At first I led the way I knew, untrodden by men, between the rivers, where gazelles find water holes. Gilgamesh trusted me for forage. We ran seven times seven leagues a day, with no rest to ponder fear. But at the dark of the moon we came to drier land I did not know. I was afraid. He took the lead. The moon came round again and made shadows with his light. Then we walked—seventy times seven leagues, more days than I could count. Gilgamesh gave me heart, found food and water when I lost hope. At night I dreamed endless fears. Finally from rising foothills we saw the cloud-gathering peak of the seven mountains still far before us at the top of the world, origin of waters. Dooming thunder shook the massif as we climbed. We dodged chains of lightning bolts from the sky at our backs. One night on an eagle's ledge we huddled wet and cold, taking counsel. All day in hail and snow we groped for the final pass. Again we took a clinging rest to study the face of rock. At moonset, undercovered by the screech of icy wind, we pulled ourselves up to the rim of Kumbaba's domain.
- Berosus:** Thus the moon has twice made its rounds before they try their strength in that forbidden crater of the gods. Gilgamesh and Engidu each lead other in fear and feat.
- Norkid:** You can bend his bow that none of us can string. Now can he run as fast as you?

[In what follows Gilgamesh and Engidu step down at appropriate moments to act out the account in dance or mime, accompanied by the percussions of Berosus.]

Engidu:
[Suddenly exuberant.]

We have a tale that will raise the hair inside your head, if I tell it right. Before his first sight of Kumbaba, in truth, the huge heart of Gilgamesh was daunted by nothing real. As we crawled up the mountainside like tandem ants on a naked slab, with no horizon to mark a level, his longbow saved us from guardian eagles only. But when into mist we climbed the crevasse that drains the valley of the gods, blind and cautious, now and then we stopped to hold our breath and listen for Kumbaba overhead, our eyes alert for the glowing nostrils and flaming mouth that had kept intact the dismal forest of the gods since earth began by blasting intruders to dust with rays of magic, or by sweeping them deathward like dry twigs by loosing torrents from the sacred lake.

Gilgamesh:

I thought it would be the fight of my life, the test and fame of mortal over fate immortal.

Engidu:

I said: “You will not die alone. Forever we are brothers. With you together I will lose the breath of human speech and my love of life; even in this newest terror, far from all things sensible, I will fight at your side as one redoubled.” But at the sound of this thought my heart came nearly to a stop, as if a god was passing. It drained the swelling of my chest, numbed my legs and arms to the ends of toes and fingers. “Yet, Gilgamesh,” I cried, “there is no help in me at all! Let us turn back before the whole world is overtaken by your doom!”

Gilgamesh:

But I replied: “Do not imagine weakness when our strength is multiplied by each other. You have learned the devices of man and I the skill of a lion. Do not look back at the scaled abyss; do not look up at horror.” So his pounding heart grew stout again; his quaking limbs were steeled.

Engidu:

We had taken turns climbing ahead of each other, the only way to measure our ascent into the black cloud that nullified every sense of direction.

Gilgamesh:

[To the others.]

Yes, yes, my friend, but cut it short.

I won't succumb to the luxury of my bed until we've mustered a crew tonight and headed it for the headwaters of Euphrates. The season will soon be too dry to fetch even secular logs afloat.

—So much for your “pillar of heaven”! Look, aren't the same old stars are still up there?

—The tree will be found at the foot of the mountain where it landed, scraped almost naked of limbs I hadn't lopped off with my axe before we tipped the trunk top-first over the lip. It was still more than twice as tall as the radius of its forest.

—Please recruit some good men before Engidu and I fall sleep on our feet.

—You must make ditch-diggers and hod-carriers into lumberjacks. Give each a double-bitted axe, tempered as I've taught you. Next year they'll find easier access to the smaller timber and start some regular felling. Here's the map I made. Later I'll tell you the details.

[To Eber]

[To Norkid. Hands over a small tablet. He continues to scan the assembly while only impatiently joining Engidu to dance his part in the story.]

Berosus:

[Soft beat.]

This is not our death-day, Gilgamesh whispers to Engidu, as they come to the top of the Achaemenian Rocks, dreading that Kumbaba should hear them too soon. Engidu prays that their lives will be spared.

[Flute.]

[Berosus himself dons
and doffs a series of
Kumbaba masks.]

Suddenly the silence of blackness is shattered by a shriek. The hideous face of Kumbaba emerges above them from a white fog at the very crown of the world. Even in clearing light Kumbaba's teeth gleam ghastly yellow in a red and purple gorge spitting fury.

Suddenly a fragrant canopy of green cedars is revealed above that face beneath a pure blue sky. Gilgamesh and Engidu no longer pause. Backwards step by step, holding in the breath of death, no longer panting to keep from burning up, that wiley porter of the gods feigns lessening size and rage to trap the sacrilegious invaders on the bronzed alpine floor of slippery age-old needles in the deeper forest; for Gilgamesh's purpose is already known in the lamasery of invisible dieties. But as he advances, no longer daunted by reverberating screeches, he incidentally blazes the finest tree trunks for future harvest, heedless of Engidu's warning that Kumbaba laughs in mockery while leading him into impotence where retreat will be too late and any repentance will be ignored even by those in heaven who respect his fame.

Now they find themselves at the pivot of the earth where its turning shrinks to stillness. Under the noble Cedar that lords itself above all others, pointing to the pole star of the universe, they can hear their own hearts beating in the eerie silence. At poise to strike with blazing fangs, the tensed hamadryad tortures that lull with howls and hisses, swelling to fullness with gnashes of tooth and claw, shielded by leathery wings, coiling and uncoiling in sanctioned rage around the huge cedar's base like slithering roots of chthonic muscle. But the taunted champions do not hesitate in caution. Engidu suppresses fear with reckless excitement at the apparition of Gilgamesh transfigured by his renowned battle-warp, nearly as wonderful to see as the dragon's. In a unison of the mortal powers raised by action this reckless pair attacks the preternatural defender heaven.

Gilgamesh:

[To Engidu.]

Never mind the drama of it! It's not local mummery that will spread our fame beyond these walls. You can sing the feat to scribes tomorrow. Enough for now to mark the year that people from Uruk begin transhumance with an alp. Other kings and Eber's God may batten on praise for being themselves, but I want to be

[To the others.]

known for my improvement of the gods' designs. From me you have a wheel to turn your pots; bitumen that you called river dung lights the night and caulks your Sea-Land fishing boats; you trade naphtha for lapis lazuli from Kush and the people's salt from Dilmun; wood is added to the arts of stone, clay, copper, and bronze—and ciphers to your reckoning. I serve gods my own way, not by bowing down in esoteric rote. Enlil is surely not displeased that I have made seven-gated Uruk, eternal city of his daughter Inanna, proof against flood and siege. It would be too much for a soul to bear if the gods always failed to understand that canals, walls, towers, and writing too, are to their credit as creators of the people who made them—that they themselves will be magnified by the harvesting of timber for peaceful sheepfolds and temple roofs. Why should they resent my motive? Are they too orthodox to recognize my liturgies as manly worship? Anyway, I had no choice but to kill their incorrigible reptile.

Engidu:

Gilgamesh spreads her jaws apart with the haft of his axe. I crack her skull with my bannerstone and hold her tail until he drags fifty feet of guts out by the tongue to put a stop to her unearthly death-wail!

- Optimate 1:** *Her!* You still haven't learned the pronouns!
- Gilgamesh:** We saw her female parts. The spawn of Tiamat. Let poets memorize what they please. Engidu is too innocent to lie for the sake of a story.
- Eber:** [Excited.] The city is now returned to your hands. After the sabbath I will at last shake the dust of Chaldea from my feet. Too long with high office and rich reward you have dissuaded me. My calling is from Elohim, the One God your impiety cannot challenge. Let your servant's right hand wither if he forgets your righteousness in public justice—but excuse him now from listening to your creed!
- Gilgamesh:** I meant no disrespect to your nomad god, though more demanding of me than the others. Tomorrow we will reason together. You are to remain Uruk's chancellor till the moment of your caravan's departure, laden with the city's gifts.
—Dismiss this murmuring assembly. Uruk will never be a republic.
- Eber goes out,**
motioning for dispersal.
- Optimate 2:** [Walking off, to Optimate 1.] "Justice", forsooth! Not for Inanna's people—only for his mercenaries! I was hoping we'd seen the last of this tyrant, but now he'll be harder on us than ever. But I am surprised that lust didn't bring him and his monkey home to the queen much sooner.
- Optimate 1:** [Replying aside, as all except the following speakers go off.] Can't you guess why? All alone together like incestuous twins? "Guarding" each other, they call it!
- Berosus:** Thus also did the Greeks misunderstand the poem when it came down to them.
- Gilgamesh:** [To Engidu, as they leave together.] Before you take your bath go tell Lil-Amin that I'll clean up and come to bed as soon as I can. First there are other things to see to.
- Engidu:** Maybe she will still be too angry.
- Gilgamesh:** No doubt she's at her loom.