

## TABLET ELEVEN

[Upper edge of an island's flat beach. **Urshanabi** squats looking down at **Gilgamesh**, who is prone on the beach before him, axe in hand. (He wears not much more than the small Isorectotetrahedron slung from his neck on a thong.) On the sand in a transverse row between them are seven loaves of bread. Nearby lies a gourd of water. **Berosus** as usual sits off to one side.]

[Gilgamesh raises his head to look at the loaves.]

- Urshanabi:** Can you stay awake now?
- Gilgamesh:** It was miraculous to recover breath enough for sleeping! I dreamt there were seven giant stone men above my brow to keep me from getting off the beach!
- Urshanabi:** Eat the bread. There's sweet water. I thought you were a dead man.
- Gilgamesh:** So did I.
- Urshanabi:** How did you get ashore with that axe? Even when you were sleeping I couldn't get it out of your hand. It's something that may be useful on this island.
- Gilgamesh:** I swam with one hand. That axe is all I have. No use landing without it.
- Urshanabi:** Well now the Mother of All Living has proved The Ancient of Days wrong. He said you must be some demigod, since Enlil has drowned all mankind for being too troublesome and noisy. But gods don't sleep. She baked a loaf every day you lay there to show how long you slept. She expected you to want the truth.
- Gilgamesh:** I'll never sleep when I reach the sunrise. I fell asleep while she was talking, but I thought it was in the dream. An old man and an old woman were droning over my head.
- Urshanabi:** The surf was up. They came to watch and noticed you tossed by the breaker. There's not much of a tide here, but it left you high enough to be hauled the rest of the way up the beach when they called me to help. You were very lucky to be washed through the western passage in the reef.
- Gilgamesh:** My boat had been once too often patched. In fact I didn't think it would last that long. The reeds were waterlogged and finally the pitch gave way. I was paddling with the axe head. That at least was no dream. And I don't think I've dreamt you up.
- Urshanabi:** I'm just a carpenter who's lost his tools.
- Gilgamesh:** I'd prefer to address you by name.
- Urshanabi:** Urshanabi, but Ziusudra still calls me Sailor sometimes.
- Gilgamesh:** Who is this worthy Ziusudra?

[Still dazed.]

- Urshanabi:** Was. King of Shuruppak, he claims; also originator of sacrifice and auspicy. The wisest and most virtuous of soothsayers, his wife says: therefore entitled to the honorific Atrahasis. He told me he was warned of a flood by the voice of a god But it was I and my raft that saved him and his woman. We found that our river had no mouth: we were swept out to sea before I could pick up something to steer with. What we haven't salvaged for the fire is rotted driftwood now. —Well then, who are you?
- Gilgamesh:** I hardly know. Give me time to think my way back out of dreams. But I must thank the lady for my daily bread and pay my respects to the governor. I think I remember seeing their faces.  
[Gets to his feet and stretches. Peers at the bread.]
- Urshanabi:** There's no one here to be governed but me.
- Gilgamesh:** So I surmised. —Which way is sunrise? Is the sky always so overcast?  
[Points to the sky.]
- Urshanabi:** Aside from typhoons, very seldom. I suppose it's a sign you've brought us bad luck. But I would have been glad to see any human being, though a young woman would have been more welcome.
- Gilgamesh:** I am no enemy. But where are Ziusudra and his lady now?  
[Drinks water and starts eating bread.]
- Urshanabi:** The Ancient of Days and the Mother of All Living are off in the bush for their daily attempt to breed a new race. Since your avatar they've shunned this beach as wanting in privacy. He told Ziusudra to sire four sons, each to start his own new tribe. I am to be midwife. So those two survivors have been going at it three times a day ever since the Lord God Enlil amended his curse on the teeming world. All the other gods had raised a clamor for the restoration of public services and earthy womens' favors.  
[Points landward.]
- Gilgamesh:** In his ire Enlil sometimes forgets that without human work there would be no canals to water fields of grain, and no altars for the sacrifice of flesh. There'd be no leisure in heaven. Gods would be laborers, or go naked and hungry. —What will Ziusudra do for daughters-in-law to bear fecund grandchildren?
- Urshanabi:** It is said that Inanna will produce them from this island's clay, all in good time. But the question is moot because Mother of All doesn't tell the Wise One that she's too old for babies. I suppose she likes his efforts. Meanwhile she spares him the burden of any other work if I can't do it. She is convinced that an archflamen who studies gods' messages in the night sky can't be expected to pick coconuts, gather seaweed, or go fishing.
- Gilgamesh:** The gods chose a friend of mine for death, and it didn't require a flood. What about livestock and all the other creatures living on each other to feed or clothe those who served the gods? Such a flood must also have rid the earth of snakes and cats. Ospreys and their like might survive on fish, but the other birds must have perished.
- Urshanabi:** Ziusudra made pictures of all the birds and beasts, male and female, to preserve the species. He grieves more for the animal kingdom than for his comforts and servants.

- Gilgamesh:** If I had thought life could be preserved by pictures I'd not have taken the trouble to fix words with writing. How did he save so many tablets on a raft, or even cylinder seals?
- Urshanabi:** For one who counts the stars and communicates with gods it is not difficult: he stored the pictures in his head. He's learned everything that I don't understand.
- Gilgamesh:** You can see in the stars what takes your fancy. I have seen a raging bull.
- Urshanabi:** It's not his wisdom that makes me glad to serve him. Nor the riches that will be my reward if his expectations come to pass.
- Gilgamesh:** I'll ask his advice, and yours. But if this ocean is an ephemeral inundation, when will it subside?  
[Finishes eating bread.]
- Urshanabi:** He watches the irregular reach of waves on the sand for hours at a time, and chases the retreating surf to reclaim the margin of its undertow. And as the tide ebbs he follows it patiently with hope. When he can no longer deny its return he says it's still just practicing for the ultimate revelation of basic earth. He declares that it tastes less bitter every day, and that when it's sweet enough to drink our shoreline will begin enlargement. We shall find ourselves on a mountain peak.
- Gilgamesh:** That reasoning is not unsound. He sounds like a patient prophet.
- Urshanabi:** Here they come. Maybe he'll have the pleasure of finding out who you are! He may even answer some of your questions. —I must get ready for cooking.  
**Enter Ziusudra and Mother of All Living.**  
[Urshanabi hastily busies himself]
- Ziusudra:** Speak, apparition! You look alive at last.
- Gilgamesh:** Thanks to your kind lady and this affable sailor.
- Ziusudra:** It looked as if the flood had drowned you, but we couldn't let a survivor starve. How did you escape the common fate? I wonder if you are one of my descendants. If so, you must have heard of me: Ziusudra, sometimes Utnapishtim in legend: secretary astronomical, master of ceremonies, royal Atrahasis in any case, so entitled by the gods. Why do you disturb the proper succession of things?
- Gilgamesh:** I journey east on Utu's road. But always sunrise seems as far ahead as ever.
- Ziusudra:** The sun rises over there and beyond. From the other side of this island you can look toward the world's east edge, but it's still too far to see.  
[Points inland.]
- Berosus:** I don't know distances by sea, and I'm not a scholar of time.  
[Aside.]
- Mother of All:** No one can get there. —Even to find his father a stranded son would be suicidal to waste his salvation by ignoring the facts.  
[To her husband.]

- Gilgamesh:** Madam, your words betray some clairvoyance—but no mortal has ever wished more than I to stay alive. In youth I paid no heed to time until I found that my friend Engidu had not had his share of it. He was seized by the earth like some creature of a day. Now he's curled in that black womb, disintegrating in slime that turns to dust, uncohering from unique personality into a million common atoms less alive than the seed of fossils. Now I always face the morning sun and put the afternoon behind me, striving to see time's arrow at the bow.
- Ziusudra:** You may as well search for the winds. Time is the gods' mystery. Can you be so privileged? If not, you will go blind seeking such light. You are speaking to a seer.
- Gilgamesh:** I have no wish for second sight. The very simplest knowledge of here and now is what I want. Let come what may. Prophecy is fiction. I leave that to you. Time was before the Tablets of Fate. Even your gods themselves can't overcome what doesn't come by necessity unless it's already here.
- Ziusudra:** May I ask by what name such a polemical monotheist distinguishes himself from slender-witted madmen?
- Gilgamesh:** Call me Noman. I hope for advice that only you as a scholar of the skies can give. As long as I'm learning I'll teach in return.
- Ziusudra:** I'm intrigued by the offer if you're as clever as you sound. But Mardi is my kingdom now. This is the end of the rainbow. You must do my bidding.
- Gilgamesh:** As long as you are just. I wasn't born to be subjected.
- Ziusudra:** This is an island of no return.
- Gilgamesh:** There is nothing I wish to return to.
- Ziusudra:** Where do you come from? Who really was your father? How did you escape the flood?
- Mother of All:** No no, my dear. Let Noman tell us as he wishes, a little now, a little later. Everyone's story reveals its causes, and when pieced together anyone's story is worth waiting for. That way he'll tell us much more than what you can think of asking. You won't have to speculate so much. A friendly way is always best. Let him take his time. He's suffered much in getting here. Any tale is better than none.
- Ziusudra:** [All except Gilgamesh sit down opposite Berosus to listen.] All right. I am tired of my own news.
- Gilgamesh:** I may have strayed off course. This is same earth I've always lived on but the stars here are new, or too low to recognize. —How much do I remember? Certainly not my two fathers. I'm not even sure how many of my memories may be dreams.
- Mother of All:** Please don't worry about needless distinctions. Sometimes we too confuse one kind of memory with another, and some are false perforce. Just as you and I forget some of the truth that we used to remember.

**Gilgamesh:**  
[He accompanies much of his narrative with dance or pantomime, moving from point to point, with his axe, in illustration of his travels.]

For me there's often too much to remember. At times in stress I forgot to stay on a straight course to the sunrise by keeping the pole star on my left without crossing the ecliptic to my right. But there way no way to observe both those marks at any one point unless I stopped for a night and a day. But when I sojourned for a while, repossessed by habitual interests and pleasures, I was likely to forget the purpose that drove me.

—Yet I do remember the greatest challenge to what was still my youthfresh strength. Two lions tried to deny me water and a share of their kill at an isolated spring. They may have been former companions of Engidu who held against me his decadence and wormy death. Of necessity I killed them both, each with one blade of this axe.

—Then trekking an immense plain eastward, I was daunted by the barrier of an endless mountain range gradually rising in the east. The massif of unscalable cliffs was surmounted exactly in the center of my direction by two broad-based peaks like upright fangs of heaven guarding the nativity of time.

**Berosus:**  
[Aside.]

Thus his memory.

**Gilgamesh:**

That night two giant scorpion-men stood guard over the pass between the peak. They seemed to see both ends of time. I hailed them. They conferred together, bending across the alpine space that separated them. I held up the axe to show my only weapon, calling up to them my name and purpose. Again they whispered through the void of stars. Then they turned again and pointed down into the recess that separated them, one with his left hand and the other with his right. Accordingly I advanced and beheld that I had been deceived in perspective. The scorpions had been standing on two separate mountains overlapping like crooked teeth, split apart by a bending canyon no wider than my shoulders. For seven nights and seven days I groped and wended through that deep fissure, dark as a cave, ever fearful of wedging myself into a jointure of sheer walls as parallel as a frost-crack's, where my skeleton would stand upright till the end of the world. But at last, as I was about to succumb to thirst, I was revived by an errant ray of the risen sun briefly penetrating the twisted darkness ahead. I forced enough hope from a kindred spark of life to claw myself many hours later out upon the gentle eastern slope of that sierra, next to a purling brook, just as the day was ending

**Berosus:**  
[Aside.]

Thus his dream.

**Gilgamesh:**

When I awoke the sun was rising as far away as I'd ever seen it. But my feet were cold and a beautiful girl was rubbing them. For many days she kept my attention. I recovered my strength. She had been lonely. She had been yearning for someone worthy of her first love, and she was well prepared by imagination to make me forget for a time everything that she had no interest in. She diverted me with reciprocal usages she wished to learn. For a long time I gave myself up to the pleasures of tawny skin like the lion of a pride. I lingered in her pleasure garden with amber beer, among the peaceful people of that broad valley.

**Berosus:**  
[Aside.]

Memory of the Harappa flood plain.

**Gilgamesh:** Day and night, nothing—no one in the circle dance—was denied me. A black panther was my bodyguard, purring at the foot of my generous bed. No strife, no jealousy, among that moonlit people! I had bells for my toes and elephants to ride on—but a ring on my nose! So when I paused from idle recreations my mind began to recall old motives. They allowed me to make plans and build a city safely on the river bank, with watered fields and gated canals to carry their freight. I also taught them how to write and reckon. The ring had fallen from my nose, but still for too long I was distracted by constructive pleasures—as if I was seizing the chance to build a greater Uruk with an exotic labyrinthine tower! It took seven years and more for me to be learn that public improvements are always in progress and decay, never finished....

**Mother of All:** Sir, you lose us in your memories!

**Gilgamesh:** Anyway I noticed that I had forgotten both the bitterness of private loss and my essential quest. I had forgotten myself in the bemusements of dalliance and engineering! To my horror I woke to the understanding that I was still captive to a gratitude greater than any I had known before, and to a young woman's instinct for godlike babies, threatening to lift her skirt to the wind as my mother did.

**Ziusudra:** I can understand that.

**Gilgamesh:** But the east was still barricaded against me by a serrated range of mountains arrayed in snow-laden thickets from end to end of the horizon, their myriad peaks as entangled with each other as with the clouds that never ceased to rake the highest sky. Only by turning south could I hope to get past around them. To make a clean escape I had to steal away without warning, apology, or pity. I made the best river boat I could secretly contrive and cut myself fifty punting poles to get through the marshes and off the shallows down to the open sea, by which I reasoned the whole continental barrier might be skirted. Then I could again travel as close as possible to Utu's daily path while keeping the pole star on my left by night. With a bolt of lady's cloth I hoped a breeze would ease my way. But the small winds were against me and the big winds tore it away with my mast. —If I had another cloth I'd now know how to make it work to my advantage in any weather. Here at least I can cut a mast and spar.

**Mother of All:** I'll not weave your shroud! I've lost too many sons to trust men's confidence.

**Gilgamesh:** Half of every day afloat I faced the blinding sun to fix my course. I ate and drank undigested fish from the fluid bellies of occasional sea birds, always defending myself from curious sharks with this handy invention of mine. At intervals on every island sojourn in my eastering—deflected by wind or current but always between the Crab and the Goat—I bartered knowledge or invention for my keep, but never again, no matter how long I tarried, did I forget my purpose. I do not forget it here, but I shall leave you the better for my visit.

[Indicates his axe.]

- Ziusudra:** Now wait a minute, Mister Noman! This will be your last stop if you don't parley in good faith! You've been informed that I am wise! I will not be deceived! Double-bitted axe—tower—walls—canals—Uruk—Engidu! I am not ignorant of what the world hears! Are you a poet or an actor?
- [Suddenly rises and begins to pace about excitedly. Mother of All and Urshanabi stand up reflexively.]
- Gilgamesh:** I cannot sing. But I sometimes take action.
- Ziusudra:** You pretend to be Nimrod!
- Gilgamesh:** No, Engidu was Nimrod. I am Gilgamesh. I had hoped for the advantage of anonymity; but I have been too transparent in telling my story to a student of every science.
- Ziusudra:** Then prove that you are Gilgamesh.
- Gilgamesh:** My seal, the Isorectotetrahedron, a four-pointed jackstone.
- Ziusudra:** I have heard of that amulet! But you may have stolen it from Gilgamesh.
- Gilgamesh:** Do you know the legend that I'm two-thirds god, only one third human?
- Ziusudra:** Every human must have at least a trace of the gods that made his race.
- Gilgamesh:** My mother confessed that I was conceived under Utu's eclipse of Sine at a moment when her loves were equally divided. I had to choose between them for my god when I corrected Uruk's calendar.
- Ziusudra:** Identity is never absolute, but the scope of your replies is sufficient. We shall have plenty of time to debate the heinous errors in your infamous measurement of years.—If you are Gilgamesh you can teach me how to write and read.
- Gilgamesh:** Then Urshanabi must help me build a boat, advise me of the local currents, and chart the eastern opening of this atoll.
- Mother of All:** If Ziusudra agrees to that I'll weave your sail despite my warning. But I fear you're no less apt to kill yourself than any woman's reckless son.
- Urshanabi:** I'll show you how we fish the lagoon without an axe!
- Gilgamesh:** At half ebb tide the sand will be smooth and firm. Every day with a stick on the hard beach you will draw from your head some of the pictures you hoard. With this stylus I will write their names for you to compare before the tide returns to wash them out. All the words and pictures can then be inscribed on clay outside your head to work the thaumaturgy with at any time. Posterity will know forever the acts of resurrection by which you will have restored all living creatures to the earth.
- [To Ziusudra.]  
[Points to the Isorectotetrahedron on his neck.]
- Ziusudra:** Fame is not my motive. Is that the talisman that's said to reconcile three with four?
- [Bends to examine it.]
- Gilgamesh:** Also with the degrees of every azimuth. And with much else in reckoning. At your leisure I will decipher its many meanings.

**Ziusudra:** If you were once a king, why now such a generous tutor?

**Gilgamesh:** I have no responsibility to keep religious secrets or vows of obedience like those that burden you. I have relieved myself of works. I've renounced my interest in power. I harbor no arcane jealousy. I exercise no wish either to know myself or to empty my mind of the pragmatical world. My mania is now confined to retrogression, leaving me in all else disinterested.

**Ziusudra:** I pity your derangement. You are not the thoughtless brute of your reputation. But you cannot reach the meeting place of earth and sky the vitalizing herb I shall give you to round out our interesting covenant. You must guard it for your life from diving albatross and breaching giant squid. They can sniff it at a hundred fathoms.

**Mother of All:** Come, my dear. We must leave this brave guest for a while to gather incense for our meditation. We'll pray for him to acquire a taste for my palm wine that will at least prolong his holiday with us. —Urshanabi, let's celebrate with a new fish tonight. It goes without saying that there'll be yams, coconuts, and bananas for the other courses. Please sound the conch when everything's ready.

**Mother of All leads  
Ziusudra off stage left.**

**Urshanabi:** I must to go fishing now. But tell me about this boat you have in mind.

**Gilgamesh:** The tide looks about right: come on down and I'll draw a plan. —What's this herb the shaman has in mind for me?  
[Picks up his axe by the head, handle downward.]

**Urshanabi:** Brier roses grow all along the shore. If you mind the thorns you can chop yourself a bushel of their hips.

**Gilgamesh and  
Urshanabi go off stage  
right.**

**Berosus:** In Babylon those thorny flowers are known as dog roses. Pyramus picked them for Thisbe.  
[Aside.]