

TABLET TEN

[The queen's reception chamber. Two formal chairs side by side upstage somewhat right of center. One is occupied by **Lil-Amin**, motionless and apparently listless in mourning; the other is empty. **Norkid** stands or paces upstage like a self-effacing bodyguard. **Gilgamesh**, unkempt, his back turned to the chairs, as if in an inner room downstage left, is working awkwardly on an inchoate stone statue, little more shapely than a stele, of about his own height mounted on a sculptor's swivelled stand. A few apparently cuneiform characters are lightly visible on its base. Engidu's bannerstone serves clumsily as both mallet and chisel. His own double-bitted axe lies nearby. **Berosus** sits as narrator and musician in his usual place on the right side.]

[Without interrupting his work Gilgamesh beckons to Norkid, who advances stiffly toward him.]

- Gilgamesh:** Has Eber at last left me?
- Norkid:** With his people and his chattels.
- Gilgamesh:** I thought he might postpone his departure until the obsequies were over. More than ever I need him now. That is to say the city does.
- Norkid:** Yes sir.
- Gilgamesh:** You saw him off?
- Norkid:** He was my friend.
- Gilgamesh:** He at least didn't die.
- Norkid:** We are vulnerable without those Traders and their caravans.
- Gilgamesh:** But especially without his management. Had he no compunction about leaving us at exactly our weakest moment? Even gravediggers are distraught by women keening with lacerated lips and clawing at their own eyes to enlarge the flow of tears. I wish I were able to console myself by howling with them. Did Eber express no regret at giving up his power here?
- Norkid:** He'll remember that loss when he's at last shaken all our dust from his feet and his fear abates.
- Gilgamesh:** It's absurd to fear another earthquake here, any more than he might have feared one before now. All along he's needlessly feared the wrath of his God for serving me. Is there something new in his usual displeasure with my lack of policy? There has been no ominous death in his family. Perhaps I've stayed too long in seclusion. Did he leave any explanation or apology?

Norkid: He only kept repeating “Pride goes before a fall, and a haughty spirit before destruction.” Referring to what he calls your murder of Engidu.
 [Gilgamesh stops work without looking at Norkid.]

Rector enters ceremoniously carrying an abstract iconic figure representing the god Enlil, which he places in the seat of the empty chair. He is **accompanied by Optimates and Widows**.
 Norkid turns back to stand behind Lil-Amin. Flute music by Berosus.]

Gilgamesh: Is this new ceremony of yours meant to remind me that Engidu once sat there? Or is it an attempt to usurp the kingship by reclaiming the rod and ring for yourself? [Looks over his shoulder; slowly drops his tools and moves to center stage. He speaks wearily.]
 If you weren't the queen's brother you would have been removed even from your present office for clandestine resistance to my assumption of sovereignty. As magus and pontifex maximus you must stop meddling in affairs of state. Don't dare take advantage of my mourning.

Rector: You have killed Engidu, sent by the gods to relieve us of your tyranny! The Lord God Enlil is our only king.
 [Boldly.]

Gilgamesh: I saved your city from the Elamites, built its walls above the highest floods, and bonded it to gods with an imperishable tower as a ladder down from heaven. I have made Uruk preeminent in prosperity and power under a rule of reason and justice. Yet you continue to instigate the seething disparagement of me as a godless rebel against heaven, a savage northman civilized only by the people he subjugates. I am weary of engineering the excellence of a city that denies me credit. With Engidu's death I have outlived the satisfaction of public works and the pleasure of invention. I am ready to renounce the hope of constructive adventures. But who will make a better shepherd for this people? I vow that you will not succeed me!

Rector: And now you have prevented Engidu from doing so. Whoever is chosen by the queen must be a king that banishes strangers with foreign words and what they mean; one who will not destroy our scorn rites. I speak for the temple, I speak for the people, I speak for the queen herself!

Lil-Amin: I speak for myself, brother.
 [Apathetically.]
 She and Norkid remain impassive as
Rector, Optimates, and Widows walk off ceremoniously.

Gilgamesh: Norkid, for whom do you speak?

Norkid: I am loyal to the queen.

Gilgamesh: And no longer to me?

Norkid: The death of Engidu absolves me, except as she may direct me.

Gilgamesh: You really believe I killed him?

Norkid: You caused him to die in the prime of innocent strength. Even as your old dog I howl with the people at such unnatural death.

Gilgamesh: Wisest of soldiers, old Kassite friend, how can you be so blind? Are you so affected by their religion?

Norkid: Too much invention is intolerable to anybody's gods. Your kingship was too defiant.

Gilgamesh: *Was!* Do you and the Council consider me deposed? With the troopers in my pay? [Ironic tone.] No doubt incited by the effeminate priest and ratified by his puppets. It's strange that no one has dared a word of mutiny until I now pry it from my oldest friend! Of course I can remain the shah if I pretend not to notice the honest tense of his speech. Or are you simply anticipating my assassination? —But if retribution comes from gods, why haven't they long since killed me?

Norkid: Perhaps they waited to strike with a blow that's harder to bear.

Gilgamesh: Then they are perceptive after all. The nothingness that follows life of course knows nothing of its loss. But for me the loss of another's uniquely beating heart, which you say I myself have caused, forever feels the extinction of a life as precious as my own. My tardy wisdom comes with grief and dirge. My lifeless works have gone for naught as far as I'm concerned. —But for the gods' sake, as well as the peoples's, it would be stupid to neglect canals and walls now that they exist. They serve both species. Teach the people you've joined to consider them monuments to Engidu, the creature sent by heaven to destroy my pride. That's all I still ask of you. —Without you and your Kassites at my side this city would still be little more than a disputed place for fording the river. Together you and I liberated from Elamite vandals the ruins these new wonders of the world are built upon. Without you, for that matter, I'd still have been wandering the world for something to do like an impoverished knight. And without you, as staunch older brother, I never would have mated with this queen and found my twin! For me the sorrow broadened by the threat of your defection would belittle the loss of all that we have constructed. You now deprive me of whatever solace I might have found in mourning. —But no more foolish speculation about eliminating me! With or without you, I remain king, much the wiser.

Norkid runs off,
doubled over, covering
his face.
[Gilgamesh removes the
idol of Enlil, setting it
behind the chairs, and
sits in its place beside
Lil-Amin.]

Lil-Amin: Have pity on that good man's unhappiness. His thoughts hurt him more than the wounds of torture. He will never betray either of us.

Gilgamesh: Does displeasure with me drown your lamentations? And is denunciation easier for you than it is for Norkid?

- Lil-Amin:** My allegiance is to Enlil and Inanna. I wish I had told you before their patience ended that I could no longer allow you in that place by me.
[Indicates the chair. He jumps up and steps aside.] I don't need anybody's chair or bed!
- Gilgamesh:** —Then it's true that even you blame Engidu's death on my impiety?
- Lil-Amin:** I shall not darken the enlightenment of your rule or defame your arts, but I was wrong to let you loosen my religion in gratitude for your liberation of this city and in bemusement with the distinction of your manhood. But you were not willing to defy the Tablets of Fate without enlisting guileless Engidu to share your guilt. As your mirror, an actor of your will, he was damned.
- Gilgamesh:** It's true that I gave not much thought to his soul. But—
- Lil-Amin:** Nor to anyone else's!
- Gilgamesh:** I spared you implication in most of my transgressions.
- Lil-Amin:** Because to you the royal priestess of Inanna was but a captive yoni, otherwise distinguished as nothing more than a weaver of indoor pictures. I was for sporadic recreation from your daily operation of a public labor machine, or for carrying whoever's child might win the game!
[Suddenly animated.]
- Gilgamesh:** The art of weaving is higher than any of mine. And in your absurd indictment you don't mention love that our recreation has always been in a bed of love.
- Lil-Amin:** I've learned from you a manly silence. At first I thought of you as the mildest of kings, gentlest to women, boyishly besotted by the lure of glory. Now I'm not content with occasional addresses of the consort thigh and solemn advice on how to manage the state in its absence. I can't believe I ever thought of love! For a woman of my kind it brings the unhappiness that exceeds all others. The people deserve a competent queen—to honor their cult and conduct herself as a regal mother. My daughter needs the love that surpasses the love of unhappiness. —Yet maybe she will inherit and esteem much of what I did love you for.
- Berosus:** My history reports that the princess later did so, married elsewhere to imperial power, a harder woman than her mother.
[Aside.]
- Gilgamesh:** I hardly recognize you as the person I have loved. Is it motherhood that's made you inimical to me? Or was your soul cured by the shaman's behest to "know yourself"—pernicious counsel to anatomize your heart and cloud your reason. Don't you even remember your past feelings? Do you really deny our matchless affinity?
[Returns to his work downstage.]
- Lil-Amin:** Yes, matchless by any two others but not a match for us! I repudiate my illusion without forgetting it. You are replaced by my proper responsibilities.

Gilgamesh: Engidu was witness to my loyalty when I spurned your goddess. She promised me chariots of gold and lapis lazuli, and gave assurance that my goats would multiply in triplicate! I might have thought that in your heart you would recognize my fidelity to love and value in refusing the carnal Muse herself.

Lil-Amin: I am the servant of Inanna, not her rival.

Gilgamesh: Yet your disaffection is colder than I thought possible for the chief priestess of her temple. No wonder your people and my own soldiers have joined your brother and his puppets in execrating my alliance with Engidu.

Lil-Amin: Not the alliance but your fatal abuse of it! You still fail to understand the city's solidarity of hope—and how you doomed it.

Gilgamesh: Yes, I fail to understand why I'm blamed for the first death I've ever felt—I who part even with you, and dismiss a whole life's famous accomplishments, to contemplate Engidu's extinction! I for whom he was loving and beloved brother! I whose life was many a time hazarded with his and thereby doubled! Am I so untutored in sympathy that I cannot understand the public's mourning for a champion hardly to be distinguished from myself at our usual distance from the common eye? I did not seek to learn compassion by the pain of a loss wholly beyond the imagination of keening women.
—What can causes matter after death?

Lil-Amin: You are cruel to include me in the public. Or Captain Norkid, without whose excellence you'd still be a vagrant privateer.

Gilgamesh: Never mind *Norkid* and me! You're the one who cannot understand the many-knotted bond of service and command. Speak only of Engidu and me.
—I do not think of you in any class of beings, but you have joined the commons in holding me at fault for the first despair in my life. Until the final adventure with my peer, most of my thoughts were hopeful and active, never disappointed. I was as innocent of compassion as a lion. My foresight was for worthy public things, my heart a bobbing cork of innovation, unanchored to the bottom of life. Then came Engidu to complement the private unity I thought I had with you. With him I could undertake benign expeditions and glorious feats too difficult for a single champion. But the extinction of culminating hopes has awakened my heart to the vanity of those I'd realized. I'm a plummeted bust of stone staring groundward from the floor of the sea, with no more ambition than this lifeless matter, which I can hardly see in a sea of tears when I look at what I'm doing!

[Indicates the stele.]

Lil-Amin: It would be a truer image of Engidu if you let me make it of clay on my potter's wheel. Fired it in your kiln, it would endure as long as stone.
[Softly.]

- Gilgamesh:** No clay, never never clay! I saw his eyes fade to clay. He no longer heard my voice. His face was white, his lips were pale, his chest was hard. I thought we'd always be together, but I saw him petrify in revulsion from life's oven. Yet not too cold to incubate the worms that before my very eyes began to crawl from his ear, then from his nose and mouth! If mad I am, that's the horror that drove me mad. So I limn his effigy now in colorless rock, the precious last piece of Elamite stone stockpiled for my towering vainglory. Worms cannot live in faces made of granite.
- Lil-Amin:** There would have been no worms if you hadn't kept his body from the tomb so long. Ungodly mourning has disturbed the people more than godless deeds of the past. It was madness to prolong your weird dirge—without considering public, priest, or queen—in your transport of newfound pity for a living creature because he might have been yourself! As always, too enraptured with your own excesses to heed any nation's law or custom!
- Gilgamesh:** How can the lady soul-doctor open her mouth with such infuriating exaggerations? I won't listen to such asinine clairvoyance about me!
[Loosing his anger.]
—Only fire could have killed those loathsome maggots! But Norkid threatened tripartisan sedition if I tried to cremate Engidu's corruption! Even the best-educated Kassite really believes that sacred fire must not be polluted by a dead body! I have no covenant with gods but in affiliation I do address the all-burning sun. Utu does not scruple to burn parched fields and their vermin! But your people abetted Norkid's opposition by clamoring for the wormy ditch. Even before Engidu was dead the Optimates ordered his grave, and citizens were sent out to glean bricks and shards, as if to hide a midden!
- Lil-Amin:** The tomb was properly ready long before you let go of the corpse. I promised that the chamber would not be closed until you laid your imperishable effigy by the body's side, but for fear of plague the sepulture's sealing can be postponed no longer.
- Gilgamesh:** I'll soon be finished! Neither worms nor fire will disintegrate this apparition of the mighty hunter they call Nimrod, Gilgamesh's only partner.
[Turns back to his work with renewed energy.]
- Lil-Amin:** The commonwealth cannot continue to indulge your nobly morbid lamentations, which I think express more than anguish for your best friend.
- Gilgamesh:** Now don't tell me to know myself! May Utu curse all feminine divinations!
- Lil-Amin:** In any case there's no more time for pity. We well know that misery comes at last to the healthiest of men. Deer and lions weep; wild asses too; priests, widows, farmers, and servants weep. Our river weeps, the other river echoes. It is said that "Every man must give up the days that are lent him, and take up his dwelling elsewhere." Engidu's house is large enough to add Semiramis and me: but stuff it with what you wish!

Gilgamesh: I curse your superstitious custom! Engidu's pyre would have been atop my tower, filling the night sky with solar glory. That beacon would have been remembered unto the last generation by all the wild creatures of the steppes and by the gods who love high sacrifice but do not notice the puny mounds that keep mankind's memory alive between dust storms. But at least this stone, half formed by an insane artificer, will never die!

Lil-Amin: Since you can't infuse the breath of life.

Gilgamesh: When I was young, thinking forward and outward only, seldom lingering in reflective meditation, naturally the death of self, or of my mother, did on occasion cross my mind; but it would instantly dissipate into the stream of my appetites and plans—even as I saw more of violent death than most men did, and certainly reckoned on it for many who opposed me. I'd been told, and never thought of questioning, that I was two-thirds god. So I was never curious about how it feels to die.

—I suppose you believe that even in my present hopelessness I'm still too armored with congenital hope to contemplate an end to the one who hopes—that I have too long claimed the fame of defying necessity. In part you are right. But the shock of Engidu's death and an unfamiliar numinous fear has awakened me from the sleep of reason. Never more shall I ignore the mystery I share with every animal and human. Yet not for me is soul without a living body!
—All my designing here is done. You must finish what's begun.

Lil-Amin: Gods themselves weep for the death of mortals who serve them, some of whom are children of their own. But you think it's the fear of death I see in you, when I know your thinking has a nobler cast.

Gilgamesh: How can I trace the path of time?
Dropping his tools,
**Gilgamesh lifts the heavy statue to his shoulder,
takes up his axe, and carries them off stage,**
accompanied by Berosus's darabukka drum.

Lil-Amin: Here, take Engidu's own axe for the grave!
Picks up Engidu's bannerstone. Calls after Gilgamesh. Then stops to pray before **following him off.**
Lady Inanna, spare the people. The fault is mine alone for weakening to the sacrilege of an overlord. And keep safe my daughter, your father's child, to live out her destiny in a city that honors the laws handed down from heaven.