

TABLET TWELVE

Column One

[**Melchizedek**, tall, bearded, vested in white and gold, stands burning incense at a fieldstone altar outside his tent. Berosus sits with music instruments in his usual place.]

Berosus: This is Melchizedek, Amorite king of Canaan, priest of Elohim, come down from Shechem to the hills near Bethel.
Enter Gilgamesh, stage right, escorted by two of Melchizedek's armed scouts.

Melchizedek: A prisoner from the west?

Scout 1: A pirate called Noman, captured at sea off the coast of Kittim. Your ship's captain sends us to you with him.

Melchizedek: Well, another disappointment. I was hoping otherwise when I saw you coming. I'm awaiting the rich son of Shem who built this altar long ago. —You have no retainers or possessions at all?

Gilgamesh: A single free traveler, relieved of power but not a pirate.

Scout 2: He was carrying this axe.
 [Hands over Gilgamesh's axe.]

Gilgamesh: It has saved my life on land and sea, but not as a weapon.

Melchizedek: You look as if you were once strong enough not to need one. But obviously you're not the shepherd warrior I've been looking for. You may keep your ambivalent axe. Let me see that jewel on your neck.

Gilgamesh: Just a piece of baked clay of no value to anyone but me.
 [Exchanging the Isorectotetrahedron for the axe.]

Melchizedek: What image is this? No god that I have seen before. It's an ugly naked figure.
 [Examines the IRTH intently before distastefully handing it back.]

Gilgamesh: It's not to idolize but to bring to mind some thoughts.

Melchizedek: I'd like to hear those thoughts. We must converse at length before I let you go. Are you a wandering song-stitcher then, with a poor memory and no harp?

Gilgamesh: I'm sorry that I can't sing you my story. I was an autocrat, and will be again, but now I am alone. Almost twenty times with the polestar on my left I saw the sun veer to the Crab and fall back to the Goat. Then after three oceans my course narrowed through two mountains into a narrow sea of stepping-stone islands—Trinacria, where they offered to worship my amulet; Caphtor, where they copied my axe; Kittim, where I taught them to draw plans; and others in between like even the Isle of Snakes where I found cordial haven in return for my advice. After all my previous solitary struggles, these heartening sojourns led me on a sea-path to these brine-ending forest-clad hills so sweetly watered by the clearest springs I have ever tasted. I hope that I have at last put angry waves behind me. What a discovery, this whole unbeknownst anti-world! The land of the rising sun! Already, in approaching, I have marveled at the outreach of its skills; now I have been brought to face the sovereign of its wisdom and power!

Melchizedek: What might you want of my goodwill?

Gilgamesh: Perhaps when I return from the further end of this land I may be allowed to fell some of these great trees to build a dragon ship for my voyage home. Down on the beach I would gather a crew of young sailors who'd like to see the old world and bear back to you more precious tokens of its glories than a humble axe. Meanwhile in gratitude for your generosity and friendship, as well as opening my mind to your ears I will open my mouth with navigational and military intelligence about how you can plant greater colonies along your landlocked western sea. —But how much further is the *eastermost*? Will I at last face Utu rising on the other side of those majestic heights, surely the last barrier to my goal?

Melchizedek: No one knows the end of that land across the valley. I can tell you only that there is a mountain pass to the steppes before you come to an endless river. Even now I am awaiting word of a great sheikh who comes with his tribe from somewhere down its banks. If you will wait with me for his account we may amplify each other's science.

Gilgamesh: At this stage of life I cannot linger. I must first find my half-father, the progenitor of time. The horizon has disappointed me so many times over these years that I am apt to be overtaken by weakness and irresolution before I can return to regain my strength. Until then I dare not sleep again, for fear of never waking.

Melchizedek: Your half-god Utu is but the Creator's creature! Speak of your other half.

Gilgamesh: My other half is human. My other third is lunar. Sine is my moon-father. I am not a worshiper of any other.

Melchizedek: Two at least approaches unity. It will not be entirely a sin to make you my guest for a day or two and hear all I can about a fabulous old world!

[To Scout 2.]

Both Scouts enter the tent and return with bread and wine, which they place before the altar.

[Melchizedek blesses the bread and wine at the altar and brings it to a low table center stage,

at which they place two seats on either side. Gilgamesh sits facing east (stage right), opposite Melchizedek, each with a Scout nearby as servant. The axe is propped against the downstage center of the table, helve down, its head above the surface. As Gilgamesh and Melchizedek speak more confidentially the Scouts finish their own portions and discreetly bring another (unblessed) jar of wine to the table.]

Gilgamesh: A most welcome meal. Never have I tasted with such gusto!

Melchizedek: But, my friend, only an eagle can fly to the sun. No longer afloat with your gear, you won't be spared the stumbling blocks of gravity. You will be footsore and slow, girded with impediments, a pack on your back. And your axe can't feed you where game is rare and swift. You will need the distal weapon of a hunter. You shall have a longbow and its quiver of arrows if you are able to use them, won from a rock-slain giant. It is of no use here because none of our archers is strong enough to draw the string. Try it!

[Scouts fetch the bow and arrows from the tent, stay just long enough to watch in awe as Gilgamesh draws and shoots in a high arc eastward.]

—Bring it out to him.

Gilgamesh: I think I still have the strength to draw anyone's bow!
Scouts disappear.

Melchizedek: For your sustenance and safety on the eastern heaths—according to the will of God, if I'm not mistaken.

- Gilgamesh:** Then I thank you and Him for a timely gift. In my youth I was a bowman. And thanks to you for sharing the lordly purple-lipped invention of this draught! It warms my heart when I need rejuvenation. Vagrancy wearies the body more than manic battle does. I age with little aches and pains I never had before, none as definite or serious as sickness or wound. I used to hold a lion in my arms as easily as a cat; now even my legs don't recover all their strength when I'm fully rested in cloudless humor, charged with proleptic zest, and rejoicing in a spirit almost as clear and buoyant as when I had my dearest friend to double every muscle! I refrained from resisting your sailors only because I was loathe to test myself. Sometimes reason seems futile.
- Melchizedek:** Every mortal ages.
- Gilgamesh:** But I've survived the sea-world's fury only to face what I fear will be yet another continent of hazards! Is the orient endless? The sun is always rising or setting, constantly inviting, forever inaccessible! I feel no closer to the morning of the world than I did long ago in Dilmun. Has time no youth?
- Melchizedek:** Even youth grows old.
- Gilgamesh:** Even on a course against the sun's? Why shouldn't I be gaining time? Instead, fevers of thirst and starvation have left me weaker, though I stopped at every landing to recuperate and gather hips of roses. It's a sapping of lungs and sinew too subtle to notice in a month or year, enfeebling the very memory of full strength and wit—even of love and hope itself. Yet these swallows of your vine-juice call up pristine the idea of my end in view!
- Melchizedek:** Which I now perceive.
- Gilgamesh:** No, no, you mistake me! I have no wish for everlasting life. Better even to die without fame than live forever ruled by fate! It's more interesting before infirmity of mind to learn the mystery of time! The very thought of that success invigorates me! Too often now I sleep when I used to need no rest. —Ah that recalls the last dream I can remember: I spent many weeks on an island with the astrologer Ziusudra who had notions of the future. I had long since left him when he appeared at sea, standing in the stern to wake me from a sitting sleep within that dream. He warned me that even a god can die if he attacks another god (not to mention a demigod's mortality). He said: "Utu and Sine will eat up each other's light, one after the other. One must not watch his fathers fight!" Still dreaming, I was about to ask his meaning when suddenly with a downward surge both gunwales were seized by four raptorial limbs of a single loathsome intelligence I felt rising from beneath me as its other lurid arms groped like snakes for my basket of dogrose fruit. With my axe, left and right, I tried to free myself of the horror, terrified by underwater thrashing and bloody foam, but the boat of reeds was swamped, its length severed by my own blows. I saw Ziusudra's head calmly sinking as he continued to advise me. "Look, here comes a white whale to feed on the monster, and a dolphin to save you. Take your axe, but don't lose your life diving for the emptied basket." I awoke on a shore I'd never seen before. Are you an interpreter of illusions? What did the old sage mean? What did the dream mean within which he meant it?

[Long silence as
Melchizedek ponders.
He suddenly rises in
alarm.]

Melchizedek: —Noman, tell me your real name!

Gilgamesh: —Is that important?
[Taken aback, hesitates.]

Melchizedek: If you expect my neutrality.

Gilgamesh: Well then: I'm generally called Nimrod.

Melchizedek: What made me dread to ask? A strange name I've heard before. What could have already carried it here?

Gilgamesh: Perhaps it echoes some indistinct word you've dreamt.

Melchizedek: No, there is only one cause of all things. It must have been an old warning among the words of God when I was distracted by immediate difficulties.

[Abruptly.] —Now the sun is down. I am disquieted by intimations of my indiscretion. I must leave you now—for special pray alone, higher on the hill. In the morning we may not part as friends.

[To the Scouts.] —Take your prisoner to the guest tent and see that he is provided for.
—Under my hospitality you need not fear to sleep. The bow is yours to keep. The Scouts will make you up a pack of food and water for sustenance on your way. But your quest is an impiety that I cannot countenance. A man might more easily try to watch one of God's oaks turning into the acorn that fathered it.

Melchizedek leaves.

For a moment **Gilgamesh** stands still looking after him before he is escorted off by the Scouts.

Column Two follows

Column Two

[**Gilgamesh** is prone on the ground, facing upstage center, drinking awkwardly from a river. His axe and bow are lying beside him. As he twists to cast the Isorectotetrahedron off his neck he notices that a young **Shepherd** with a crook, spear, slingshot, and short sword (slung on a baldric) is watching him from stage left; but after a brief hesitation, driven by thirst, he bends again to drink with one arm behind him groping for the handle of his axe. **Berosus** is in his usual place with music instruments.]

Berosus: Gilgamesh is desperately drinking from a river. The bank is steep. He must take off the Isorectotetrahedron lest he lose it in the water.

Shepherd 1: Here, use this. If you drink too much all at once you'll get sick. Don't worry about the river running dry. You were lucky to get here before our flock muddied it all up. I won't let them come this far. Go ahead and take your fill.
[Takes a cup from his belt, which Gilgamesh turns to accept. The Shepherd then gestures to someone behind him.]

—That's far enough. Water them down there by that double palm tree. Then we can pitch the tents up here. Send Peleg to tell the master.

[To Gilgamesh again.]

—I've been watching you come down from the desert. It looked as if you wouldn't make it this far. You must be a stranger to these parts. So are we, but we know enough to stay near the river, even when it turns north. Take your time. There are a thousand sheep, three hundred goats, a hundred asses, and all kinds of cattle to slow the camels down. They're still two or three miles behind. With all our men, women, children, and chattels, sometimes that takes a whole day. Thank God we don't keep swine!

[Gilgamesh finishes drinking with a sigh and hands back the cup.]

—Whatever possessed you to cross the desert? I suppose a desert's as deserted in the mountains as on the flats, and maybe harder going. I hope the Amorites aren't after you.

Gilgamesh: Thank you, my friend. I feel much better now. No one's chasing me. I've been heading east from the west the straightest way I can find. Down here it's hard to believe how cold I've been up among those rocks. I'm a stranger.

Shepherd 1: That's obvious. We're both strangers here.

Gilgamesh: Where are your people going with all those flocks and herds?

- Shepherd 1:** Going west from east, in a roundabout way. We must follow the fodder. The chief says we're going to settle in greener pastures somewhere over there. Did you see a land of milk and honey?
- Gilgamesh:** It's indeed a land of plenty.
- Shepherd 1:** More to the point: we lost a ewe, two lambs, and a kid last night. Did you see any wolves or lions on your way here?
- Gilgamesh:** Sorry, I haven't been looking for them these days—just hoppers or hoofers that I can eat. I haven't had a shot at one of those for the last five days. Nor even private property.
- Shepherd 1:** Oh I'm not accusing you! Here, have some figs. Not too many all at once!
[Gives figs. Gilgamesh eats voraciously as Shepherd watches him closely.]
- Gilgamesh:** Where are you people from? Did you live by yourselves with all that livestock at the end of the earth?
- Shepherd 1:** With more people than you can imagine! At least from what I've heard. I don't know much about it. I was born on the trek. My mother was one of the chief's favorites. All I know is that we usually give cities a wide berth, and even when we don't I have to stay outside with the sheep. I wouldn't know how to deal with a mess of people penned like cattle, even if they sacrificed to our God. I suppose they swarm and bleat like hind-legged goats and sheep! Not only the noise: I imagine cities stink to high heaven! But the chief and his wives don't seem to mind. He's just spent almost a month feasting and trading inside the biggest one yet. It's a relief to get moving again.
- Gilgamesh:** Cities! When I came over the ridge today I saw something that looked like a city in the haze down there, but I thought it was a mirage. I've been having so many dreams and delusions that I was surprised to find there really was water quickening under the greenery I saw! —What's this river called?
[Bowed in thought.]
- Shepherd 1:** The River. What else? The desert is the desert. The river is the river. I think cities have names, because there are more than one. But that's no concern of mine.
- Gilgamesh:** Where does the river go? Where's its mouth?
- Shepherd 1:** Mouth! Where's its nose? Where's its toes? You *are* an odd one, the way you talk! Maybe the sun's too hot for you here. You must be some kind of a poet. What do you mean by "mouth"?
[Laughing again.]
- Gilgamesh:** Where does it flow to? Where does the water go?

- Shepherd 1:** How should I know? Where does the land go? Where does the sun rise? You do ask strange questions!
- Gilgamesh:** Do you know of another river?
- Shepherd 1:** Another river! There you go again! I hope you don't read from the stars like some daft minstrel singing to sunstruck camel-drivers about another world in the north or suchlike fantasies of the fireside!
- Gilgamesh:** You did say there are several cities. So they must have names to tell them apart. What's that one called?
- Shepherd 1:** I never heard the name. Fishes don't have names. I don't know why cities need names. You can never be at more than one at a time. A city's just a big village, isn't it? All I've heard is that the king of this one is sometimes a woman.
- Gilgamesh:** Have you ever come across any holes of black water?
- Shepherd 1:** Oh, here and there. Even sheep are smart enough not to drink it. Where it's as thick as honey I've heard there are gentiles who even burn it! I once saw a gazelle get stuck in the devilish stuff. It took an hour to disappear. I wouldn't touch those stinking pits with a ten-foot pole, but last year I watched a city man smearing some of it on his boat with a stick. Maybe he was a wizard. Believe me, I didn't stick around to find out!
- Gilgamesh:** Well all people are not alike, since some live in cities. What are your folks called, or the people you work for?
- Shepherd 1:** They just call us Eber's tribe. I think he was my chief's great-great-great-grandfather somewhere down to the east or south of here. If I knew where that was I'd have answered your question about where the river goes to!
- Gilgamesh:** [Aside.] What has disconnected the pieces of my mind? This bewilderment of old age frightens me! It's as if this boy is at the wrong end of things. Was my dear Eber a ghostly namesake five generations removed, across three oceans and a sea? But if New World names and migrations may repeat themselves by chance, is there another Lil-Amin to be found—or Engidu?
- Shepherd 1:** You might ask the chief all your questions. He'll feed anyone who comes with knowledge of the west.
- Gilgamesh:** I thought I knew the world! What am I about to learn? —Some day, when I return to power, you will be rewarded. You may be opening my eyes to a wonder I cannot yet grasp.

- Shepherd 1:** There are lots of things no one ever understands. Why does water move? They tell me what difference does it make, say your prayers, that's all you have to know. But of course I can see that you're no ordinary old fellow. My chief understands everything. He may give you a good dinner just to hear your story. I'll have Peleg take you to him when he's settled in his tent. I appreciate your gratitude but I don't count on your goodwill to better my lot. As for the refreshment, it's only the common courtesy we're all taught. You must have already learned a lot from me by the process of elimination. For all I know, you may be a spy.
- [Gilgamesh betrays increasing agitation.]
- Gilgamesh:** I begin to think I'm a spy from the world of dreams! But you and your help are real enough!
- [Laughs, but no longer addressing the Shepherd, he throws himself again prone upon the river bank to see his reflection in the water, talking to himself. The Shepherd cocks his ear to listen.]
- Does the world repeat itself? Or is it merely accidental that the easternmost looks like the westernmost, their rivers and landscapes so much alike? The end of the journey remains to prove that east is west and west is east!
- Yet I don't look any younger. The dog-rose saved my life at sea but does not erase the additions of time. It's not mere emaciation that unstrings my legs and shrinks my shoulders. It isn't the river's ripples that lays lines upon my face. Will I still be welcomed anywhere for the strengths of my prime? I've never relied on brawn as much as brain, but will that soon fail me too?
- [To Shepherd.]
- It's impossible to get to the west by going to the east. Does the sun reverse and the pole star shift, and the zodiac too, to make me travel in a circle when I go straight toward a rim of the world that I can never reach? Do Utu and Sine deceive my senses in order to nullify this pursuit of reason? Or do I misinterpret my eyes with rash imagination?
- Maybe this terrestrial expanse and its weird transhumance goes on forever, dismissing the question of sunrise anywhere. Has mankind always been deceived by reasoned facts?
- Does your leader retain a sagacious master of paradox? You think I'm old and crazy, but this is the first time in my life that I've been bereft of commonsense.
- Shepherd 1:** He is himself our savant. God speaks only to him. It's a poet you should ask for!
- [Laughs.]
- Gilgamesh:** But if time's an arrow in the air, could one find himself about to be where he began—yet older? You who know the sky at dawn so well, what keeps the sunrise out of reach?
- Shepherd 1:** It's just too far away. Like the stars, which I've given up trying to count. Girls are more interesting.
- Gilgamesh:** Nevertheless I wish I could take you with me.
- Shepherd 1:** I'm willing. You've got me curious about why and what the river flows to. Ask the chief. But what could you trade him for me?
- [Laughing.]

Gilgamesh:
The younger **Shepherd 2**, less well armed but carrying a flute, **enters** from stage left.

Shepherd 1:
[Laughing again.]

Knowledge of the Old World. He'd find it useful.

He'd listen to the proposition if not forbidden by Elohim the One. He doesn't seem to value my services very highly.

—Peleg, stand on that rock and watch for you know what. I'm taking this gentleman to the chief. If you see anything, skirl on your pipe right loud. No need for you to fight a lion! If I don't come back to save your life, sooner or later somebody else will be sent to relieve your anxiety!

Peleg leaves stage right.

—Did you have horses in the old world? I don't much like herding camels and dromedaries. They're haughty and mean. But I'm sure I would be too if I had them for my masters! Asses can be difficult but at least you can feel sorry for them. I should think horses would be the best for an army.

Gilgamesh:
[Aside.]

Norkid could make this clever fellow his understudy! He's a bold cadet and probably brave to boot. If my dreamy way back to Uruk is not the path of a mirage he'll be a good messenger and companion—if I can teach him a spy's discretion.

[To Shepherd.]

—You are confident enough. If we ever stop long enough I'll teach you how to make a bow from the finest wood and bone. You'll soon be strong enough to bend it. With string at ear, it will hum like a purring paramour!

Shepherd 1:
[He tries unsuccessfully to draw Gilgamesh's bow, first with one hand and then with the other.]

And I'm now old enough to have one! I can already imagine...all kinds of love! ...If you show me how to handle bow and axe, on both sides of my nose, I'll teach you the javelin and sling, sinister or dexter!

Gilgamesh:
[Points to his pendant.]

I have no time left for superfluous skills, but you have enough for them all. If you're as bright as you sound, and not too impatient, you'll do best for yourself by mastering this stylus to scratch the words of patrons and carry them to distant places for honorable reward. You will have no competition.

Shepherd 1:

I've always had a secret yen for magic! So on second thought, if you really hope to be my new master without promising so much as my keep, we should stay out of the old sheik's way. We'll avoid the hospitality of his righteous feast-bowl by skirting the camp and coming back to the river further downstream, out of sight behind his back. I begin to doubt that he'd willingly give me up for the bemusing stories of a scarcely clothed vagabond! We must show ourselves only in territory he's left forever. Then I can do your bidding without hindrance. I'm tired of sheep; they're all the same. I'd like to learn new work and see strange gods. But I won't mind if friendly girls are all alike!

Gilgamesh:
[Aside, musing.]

I have weathered enough in plains as well as mountains. Let's hope you too will learn to cherish city walls for the advantages of civil enclosure! Every fleece in one fold—princess, priestess, and milkmaid!

—According to one of my dreams I am about to transplant a green twig to an orchard in the past. I seem to have lost the idea of what I thought I sought—something that's made by all the changes of sky and earth and living creatures. Or was it what buoys all hope and doing? Am I losing more than I thought to gain? Is it living or unliving to trace an arrow against its motion?

- Shepherd 1:** Never mind my motives. —Hey, what wants to be filled when it’s empty and wants to be emptied when it’s full?
- Gilgamesh:** Your belly.
- Shepherd 1:** I was thinking of girls, but that’s a good guess! You *are* worthy to be my master—even without wages or found. But on to our first bivouac! What shall I call you?
- Gilgamesh:** Noman is good enough for the present. What’s your name?
- Shepherd 1:** Ha! For the present I will answer to “Dumuzi”. I’m an ambitious shepherd-boy risking longevity for adventure. What kind of dislodged beggar are you, whom I desert my tribe to serve? A fugitive for murder?
- Gilgamesh:** I’m a Sicani who has killed many men who were trying to kill me, and was made captain of fighting ships for the king of Caphtor, an island that rules half a middle sea. By war and bride-raids I won him fabled wealth, of which I was allowed a share. But I do not murder, and never before have I been a suppliant. I lost all my men and treasure, some to Phoenicians, some to the deep. This bow is the only gift I was able to save from my last whirlwind at sea. The Canaanites on shore drove me into the desert because they regard all seamen as Caphtors and all Caphtors as pirates.
- Shepherd 1:** I know what islands are, in the river; but what exactly is a sea?
- Gilgamesh:** The sea is an eternally restless flood of irritable bitter water, green or gray or blue, that only fish can drink. It invests all continents and enlarges every breach with many-fingered hands. It heaves to the breath of Father Sine like an immense desert perpetually in motion. Though you sail for many moons in chaotic winds and currents you may never see a place. Except for Sine and Utu the gods themselves avoid it.
- Shepherd 1:** I’m skeptical of whatever you may tell me, but, as you seem to think necessary, I’ll accept your stories and definitions for the convenience in understanding each other. You’ve let slip that you know mountains; and you seem familiar with riverland: between us, I think you’re a Kassite straggler trying to get back home through enemy lines much deeper than you’d expected!
- Gilgamesh:** What do you know about Kassites?
- Shepherd 1:** Kassites are gentile freebooters who live by cruel rapine—fierce and cruel barbarians who toss babies on their swords and put villages to the torch. They are enemies of God! Nimrod was their khan.
- Gilgamesh:** Is that the lore of your tribe?

- Shepherd 1:** That's what everybody says. I've always wondered how people hate what they don't learn for themselves. My mother told me the secret that her father was a Kassite prisoner. The people around here share most of that opinion, and they don't spare suspicious strangers by merely driving them into the desert. They'd assume you were a Kassite even if you weren't. We must disguise ourselves.
- Gilgamesh:** Maybe the reason you don't think like a shepherd is that you're half sheik by blood.
- Shepherd 1:** But only one of many!
- Gilgamesh:** When we repossess my walls and tower I'll give you a job to your liking. Maybe my daughter's equerry. Meanwhile I intend to keep your attention with assignments and thoughts interesting enough to occupy whatever attention can be spared from your hereditary lust, which nevertheless I'll aid and abet with nostalgia.
- Shepherd 1:** With all respect, to test that promise as we search for a safe spot to pitch our imaginary tent, I'll thank you for a fuller version of your outlandish story.
- Gilgamesh:** Then go keep your word to poor Peleg, and pack your kit. I'm sure you can find for us some useful artifacts too common in your camp to be missed, while I try to start a hare or something bigger. When we rejoin, and get a night of rest, I'll tell you how to teach yourself the ways of a city by going into the bazaars with your eyes and ears open until you find out who's wise among the foolish, and whom you can trust to answer a foreign trader's harmless questions. Then you can test yourself as a mummer. After a few days of taking in the local customs you'll know your way to the palace and where to hang around until you get access to the inside market.
- Shepherd 1:** Market for what, our camel-load of golden fleeces?
- Gilgamesh:** You are no longer a shepherd or wool merchant: you are apprentice to a Phoenician arms trader who wishes to sell one of the best battle-bows ever wrought by famous Caphtor craftsmen of well laminated wood and ivory, too stiff for ordinary men-at-arms to flex but destined for lords of the sea. It's worth an argosy, you may say in truth, and fit for some strong king who in his own chariot would lead the conquest of these riverine plains. Someone at the court will invite a display and demonstration of our uniquely precious treasure. Whatever the price they bargain for, it will buy a boat and all necessities for our escape down Euphrates—if that happens to be the gentile name of yonder river—to find what is where down there! Until you have elicited a royal summons this treasure will be the tool to provide us with flesh from field or stream.
- [Aside.]
Gilgamesh and Shepherd 1 leave, stage left.
 —He's no Engidu, but in this dream he stabs my heart like memories of young Lil-Amin! This clever Dumuzi serves well as an only son.

Column Three follows

Column Three

[Young princess **Enheduanna** sitting in her simple reception chamber. Elderly **Widow 1**, heavily veiled, and a couple of palace **guards** attend. **Berosus** stage right as usual.]

Berosus: This is Babylon when it was newly civilized, many centuries before I was born and educated there. It has not yet occurred to Sargon that he could overcome the southern cities on the river that were vaguely acknowledged to be the sources of all culture.

Shepherd 1 enters, carrying a rolled carpet on his shoulder, followed by **Gilgamesh**.]

Enheduanna: You are sure that no one knows what you have inside that carpet? It must be a surprise for my father when he returns from driving off the Elamites. I hope it will be on his birthday! I'm always looking for such exotic presents as he'd never win in ordinary battle or get as tribute. On pain of death, it's a secret to be kept from his court and all the local merchants until after he's surprised by it—and before he can surprise *me* as usual with something in gold or lapis lazuli.
[Shepherd 1 unrolls the carpet on the floor and reveals the bow, which is then handled as implied by the dialogue.]
[She indicates Shepherd 1.]

—The king loves me all too well, but he knows I find grown-up men too coarse and hairy. He's never thought of bringing me a beautiful young slave like this one!

Shepherd 1: I'm a student, Madam, not a slave!

Enheduanna: You're not any older than I am! I'm glad you're free. Your legs look sturdy and hairless.
—Anyway, the surprise is as important as the bow itself. In a high king's life any novelty is rare, especially from a sheltered daughter! It has to be something I can meanwhile hide even from nosy chambermaids. Of course I trust my life and reputation with these three dears, but if your slimly curved machine is as manly as you claim, and I give you what you've asked for it, how can I be sure you'll refrain from boasting about my patronage until it's in my father's hands and you're a thousand miles away? Everyone knows that the Elamites and Kassites have spies out there in the plaza, and they'd love to spoil my fun!

Gilgamesh: No one could see that he carried anything but a carpet. You can trust me as a cautious trader who has every reason to earn your continued protection, and to be at your future service from near or far. It is everywhere known that even rumor can't outdistance the effects of your displeasure.

- Enheduanna:** Woe betide any betrayal of my condescension! If word gets out too soon I'll have every person now in this room garroted and thrown to the river sharks without a scruple of injustice. I mean it too! I have more power than any of my brothers because I'm the favorite, and my father loves to see me exert his authority. When I'm just a little older I shall be the chief priestess of Inanna and Sine for his empire. He promised me!
—So you are the master of this lovely boy? Where do you hail from? You're better looking than other men your age.
- Gilgamesh:** I am Noman of Caphtor in the Middle Sea where this bow was made for me from the finest materials in the king's arsenal. I had saved his country from famine with shiploads of Sicani grain. No other bow can shoot so far, if one's strong enough to draw the string.
- Enheduanna:** My father is the strongest man in the world!
- Gilgamesh:** Then he will value it for more than the surprise.
- Enheduanna:** Try it, soldier.
[She gets up from her chair to handle the bow with feckless childlessness. Then the soldiers try without success to draw it. Gilgamesh finally shows them how easily he can do it.]
—You too.
—How can an old merchant be nearly as strong as my father!
- Gilgamesh:** It's not strength but understanding. I have lived with this bow so long that I can feel its breathing. I know how to make it joyful.
- Enheduanna:** Do you think I could make it laugh? I am a poet. With the words of my mouth I can make men laugh or cry.
- Gilgamesh:** Accept this royal weapon and on my return I shall bring you as a gift my tablet of runes with all the kennings that can be knotted among themselves a thousand ways to bring on smiles or tears, as you may choose to use them.
- Enheduanna:** What, do you trade in poetry too? Will your tablet tell me the story of Nimrod? I get nothing here but scraps or rumors about legends of what elders may have said when someone was too young to understand the words. The Eberews wouldn't tell me anything because of our religion! —Do bards in the west sing of Nimrod?
[Laughs and claps.]
- Gilgamesh:** In Canaan I think I heard that name used for a dragon to terrify children with.
- Enheduanna:** Well I know he was a cruel tyrant! He betrayed his city to the Elamites and killed his own brother.

- Widow 1:** ...his own brother. No! Giszax loved him!... Elamites again!
 [Wailing.] Call Norkid!... Father's soaking blood... cry my Kassite babies also dead!...
 Lil-Amin hates Gilgamesh gone from bed..... Enkidu lies in mother earth.....
 Mother Lil-Amin carries Semiramis to die a mother..... All mothers gone but
 one who flirts to be one No, no, no—not yet!..... My eyes still hurt, hurt,
 hurt....
- Enheduanna:** Quiet, you crazy old fool! You tell me nothing! Such tantalizing gibberish,
 always the same! That's all I ever get out of her when she hears Nimrod
 mentioned—crooning repetitious unpoetic syllables! I hate her! Every now and
 then she falls into that agony of trance and torments me with her meaningless
 staccato screeches!
- Widow 1:** ...screeches.
- Gilgamesh:** But every lamentation has its causes!
- Enheduanna:** So of course I do love this half-crazed woman, alone of all those who wait on me
 in their own interest. They say she had served my grandmother, whose child she
 brought to the king my father. That child—whom she adored more than gods, to
 whom she devoted every breath her life—grew up to be my father's queen, young
 enough to be his daughter, and even in her youth ruled Babylon as his regent
 during endless foreign wars. Her I killed, my mother, by getting born too late.
 This shattered ancient, unable to tell her woe and no more useful to me than a
 mute as far as my mother is concerned, still loves me as much as she loved
 her—but sometimes when angry she makes me feel the guilt. Noman of the world,
 am I a murderer? Should I cast off my mother's savior and accord myself some
 peace of mind? Or should I keep her here in hope that someday her memory of the
 years before my birth will return? She must have been far braver and more loyal
 than I can even try to be. I cringe at the thought of looking at her bloody eye-
 sockets.
- Widow 1:** ...bloody eye-sockets.
- Enheduanna:** Her memory is gone forever. —But why am I telling all this to a wandering
 merchant?... —Oh I know why! As a learned adventurer you can help me with
 the poem I mean to write about my mysterious origins. I'll reward you with jewels
 of your choice, or even private hugs and kisses, old as you are! —Now that would
 really give the palace something astonishing for their gossip!
- [Bursting into a peal of
 laughter.]
- Widow 1:** ...their gossip.

Gilgamesh: Forgive me, but I can accept none of the gauds or kisses deserved by youth. You cannot give me time. I have heard enough to understand your wishes for intelligence of the past. For that purpose, and for mine, there's no need for me to linger here. If you provide us with a safe-conduct to your father's frontiers I will search the stuff of legend in every place along my way. Please let us take our leave without delay. If all goes well I'll stop here when I retrace my journey. Or at least Dumuzi here will carry you the story for your poem. Meanwhile you must study the art.

Enheduanna: I'll make beautiful verses of what you find! Someday you'll hear how clever I am. My brothers don't even understand the stars, but I know how to interpret dreams! I can almost figure out the little marks that stand for acts and things on seals in my mother's jewel box. My father will depend on me for reading all kinds of signs! He wants me to learn for him, so I can keep accounts and make a lot of tablets to perpetuate his glory. What could be more interesting to future priests than stories? So find out for me all you can about that terrible Nimrod who hated the gods and made slaves of his own people. —If only women could be as free as men! I'd ride my barge all the way down the river to see for myself if there really is a tower almost touching heaven! But I can become famous right here by entertaining travelers who are not prevented from seeing elephants and giraffes, or mountains and sea-monsters, or shining walls!

Widow 1: ...shining walls.

Enheduanna: But this boy is not dismissed quite yet. —I notice you did not try the bow, Dumuzi. Maybe you and I could do the trick together, before I let you go and keep the secret of my purchase—or tell the tale and make yourself the enemy of all my vengeful suitors. I'm still almost a virgin, but I know how to overcome your trembling in my presence. Such a body is nothing for a princess to disdain. You may learn something especially delightful and still get back to Noman before the gates close. —But you are free to spurn the simple curiosity of an imperial princess. I am not vindictive.

Widow 1: ...not vindictive.

Enheduanna: —In any case, Noman, here's payment for the bow, and something more in anticipation. In this city even my private affairs can't be kept secret for more than one turn of the sky. You have time to buy a boat, but you must cast off before dawn if you wish to stay afloat alive. Sometime soon this innocent messenger will take you safe-conduct tokens that can get a boat off and past the reach of jealous assassins.

—Well, do you choose to stay with me a while, my fresh darling?

Widow 1: ...fresh darling.

Preceded by the guards, Enheduanna takes up the bow and **leaves, tenderly guiding Widow 1** but glancing back over her shoulder at **Shepherd 1**, who hesitates, looking back and forth, before **following her out**.

Gilgamesh:
Gilgamesh circles the
stage in agitation before
he **leaves**.

Does the tongue of that old woman foretell? Or does it let loose fantastic nightmares of the past? Do I seek past or future? In the name of Utu, in the name of Sine: who is, who was, or who will be that New World Nimrod? —Time's deception deepens. How can I know which way the arrow flies?