

WHEN THE GODS FELL SILENT

By
Mark Arnold

The King, a towering seven-foot figure of sinew and muscle, stood tall. His obsidian beard adorned with vibrant ribbons swayed with each anxious step in the throne room. Blood seeped unnoticed from his clenched fists as he fixed his gaze upon the lavish throne, a frigid chill coursing through him.

"Great god Anu, hearken unto me, master of the firmament and the celestial realm, it is I, Gilgamesh, thy steadfast and humble servant, who beseeches thee in this dire hour! Address my entreaties, O wise one!"

The silence stretched on, and with each passing moment, Gilgamesh's desperation grew. 'Have I fallen from thy favor?' the question echoed in the vast emptiness of the throne room. 'Why do thee remain silent when I need thee the most?'

A gentle zephyr stirred the fragrant tendrils of incense smoke, weaving silver threads into a dance around the imposing figure who knelt before the abandoned throne, but no answer came. The silence that followed was deafening. Gilgamesh was accustomed to the booming voice of Anu, resonating as if the god stood beside him, just beyond his right ear. This voice had always felt external, a separate entity commanding him. Now, in its absence, the only sound was the faint echo of his own inner voice, uncertain and unfamiliar. Gilgamesh felt a cold dread creep into his heart.

What if the gods chose not to answer? Why had Anu's voice, once a constant guide, fallen silent? 'Once, the great voice of Anu would thunder in my ear, clear as the river's current, leaving no room for hesitation. Now, in this silence, doubt is my only companion. How can I lead without the voice that once shaped my every choice?'

The grand throne room exuded majesty and reverence. Mighty cedar pillars gleaming in the torchlight supported a ceiling etched with depictions of divine entities and mythical beings. The throne, carved from a colossal heavenly stone, commanded attention with its regal magnificence. Dark wood and golden embellishments adorned it, elevated upon a dais for a commanding view.

"I stand alone, my heart heavy with fear for my people and my kingdom. Enemies besiege me from all corners and thy divine guidance is absent." The King's words faded, his gaze turning heavenward to the nightly sky.

Answer there came none.

Gilgamesh sighed deeply; his regal stature momentarily stripped of its power. In the past, he would have heard Anu's reassuring voice, a divine presence guiding him through every decision. Now, he was left alone with his thoughts, questioning whether these silent musings were enough to lead his people.

"I miss the resonant voice that once soothed my anxieties and assured my path," he thought, remembering the god's voice speaking from just beyond his sight, as though he hovered behind his right ear. When the god made himself manifest in Gilgamesh's body, the power engulfed and overwhelmed him with visions of eternity spinning like the stars in the sky. Now, in the god's absence, he was left to navigate the world alone, lost in a silence that amplified his doubts and fears. Gilgamesh anxiously began to rely more on his council and his own, hesitant judgment.

In response to the god's silence and the threat of attack, the King initiated monumental undertakings to fortify the city. He oversaw the expansion, raising the ramparts and building a mighty citadel, a testament to the enduring spirit of Uruk. With each brick laid and each stone set, Gilgamesh's resolve remained unshaken. In the face of silence from the gods, he strove to protect his city, a beacon of civilization in a world fraught with uncertainties. His tireless efforts bespoke a ruler's commitment to safeguarding his people, for in the face of divine silence, mortal determination would be their safeguard. The successful outcome of his decision to fortify the city walls without waiting for divine guidance filled Gilgamesh with a newfound pride he had never felt before.

The people bore the weight of his stern rule, unaware that it was all in service of their well-being and the legacy of their descendants. Murmurs of discontent and fear began to rise among the people. 'Has the king lost the favor of the gods?' they whispered. 'What will become of us without their guidance?'

Gilgamesh's mind wandered to the days when the gods' voices guided every action. Now, in their silence, he had to find his own strength. Murmurs of discontent and fear began to rise among the people. Gilgamesh, attuned to the voices of his subjects, had listened to their pleas echoing into the heavens, beseeching the gods to liberate them from his uncompromising vigilance. "Tyrant," they labeled him, their cries carrying the weight of their misunderstanding.

They did not know of the lurking perils that lay concealed, poised to ensnare and engulf the men and women of the resplendent Uruk. So long as the populace held fast to the belief that their King, the Council, the revered Priests, and Priestesses kept a divine connection, they clung to a sense of security. What if they were to uncover the truth that he, their King, could no longer hear...?

"I sense your anguish, Great King," said a familiar voice, soft and reassuring from behind his left shoulder. Gilgamesh turned, his gaze falling upon the esteemed Priestess of Ninsun, a tiny matronly figure radiating timeless beauty and grace.

"Ammat," spoke Gilgamesh gently, employing the Old Tongue's term of reverence for 'Mother.' This profound title symbolized his deep respect for the mortal woman who had borne him as a vessel for the goddess. While Ninsun held the true motherly bond, no one, not even the goddess herself, had ever showered him with such unwavering love and devotion.

As she gently rested her hand upon his sinewy forearm, he felt the familiar warmth of her touch, yet also the divine energy that coursed through her. Ammat and Ninsun, though sharing the same body, this duality had always been a source of both comfort and confusion for him.

"Mighty Ruler, thy countenance is marked by furrows, and thine eyes bear the weight of sorrow. What troubles thee, my Lord?" Her voice, though soft, carried the resonance of Ninsun's divine authority intertwined with Ammat's mortal empathy.

Gilgamesh hesitated, recognizing the subtle shift in her demeanor. It was Ninsun who spoke now, the divine mother from the heavens, asserting her presence. He had grown adept at recognizing these shifts, knowing that when Ninsun spoke, it was not just his mortal mother but the goddess herself who guided him.

"It has been a great span of time since the gods' voices graced my ears directly. I hear only thy wise and divine voice when thou are present in thy physical form. The others remain silent."

"And Anu? Has he fallen silent too?" The question, posed with a mix of divine curiosity and mortal concern, reflected the dual consciousness within her.

"It has been two long years since his golden voice last enveloped me, leaving me alone, Ammat."

Ammat's countenance shifted subtly, and Gilgamesh recognized the tender, maternal concern of his mortal mother. "My son, you are never alone," she said, her voice tinged with the unconditional love of Ammat. Yet, there was a slight pause, and he knew that Ninsun was also present, her wisdom blending with Ammat's empathy.

Gilgamesh knelt, feeling the weight of both his mortal and divine heritage pressing upon him. "Ninsun, Great Mother, I beseech a boon." Wise-eyed Ninsun embraced him. "Rise, King of Uruk, and embrace thy mothers." Gilgamesh stood, enfolding his mothers in a tender embrace, feeling the confluence of mortal warmth and divine energy.

The goddess extended her hands, gently resting them on his powerful shoulders. "My son has evolved into a remarkable and noble ruler, destined to be etched in the annals of time while the rest of us fade into obscurity, reduced to mere dust. I have foreseen it. Thee harbor a profound love for your people, akin to a caring father. But like children, they may not always grasp the wisdom and affection of their paternal guide." Her arms descended to her sides as she met her son's gaze. "What is the favor thou seek?"

"I yearn to fathom the sin I have committed and the path of atonement, dear mother," implored Great Gilgamesh. Ninsun the Compassionate shook her head regretfully. "Alas! I remain ignorant of the answer. If I knew, I would impart it unto thee. Yet I believe the quandary does not reside within the celestial realms but rather within the depths of thy own being, Man of Earth."

As Gilgamesh raised his hands in supplication, he felt a surge of emotion. The interplay of Ammat and Ninsun within his mother had always been a source of strength, guiding him through the complexities of his dual heritage. This moment, however, highlighted the profound isolation he felt in the absence of divine voices, leaving him to navigate his path with the wisdom imparted by both his mortal and divine mothers.

Despite the silence of the gods, Gilgamesh continued to believe in their external existence and divine intervention for he met and spoke to their mortal guise every hour of every day. All judgments now felt like a gamble, each move filled with uncertainty that he masked with a façade of confidence. The people saw a resolute king, but inside, he was a man wrestling with shadows. The voices that once commanded him, though now absent, were always perceived as coming from outside, from the heavens or the divine realms, never from within his own mind.

This unwavering belief shaped his actions and his understanding of his place in the world, making the absence of these voices all the more disorienting and profound.

"I am but a vessel for the gods, insignificant in the grand scheme. If it is not to be me, then let Anu work through another. Even if it must be that dog Nargul! Do not impose punishment upon my people for my transgressions."

A distortion rippled across the goddess's face. "It is not your place to question the eternal and boundless Anu, my son," Ammat gently chided. "No matter your towering stature among mortals, you remain a mere speck in the eye of a god."

"I beg your forgiveness for my rashness, beneficent Ammat. My concern for my people overwhelms me," Gilgamesh replied, his tone more subdued.

Ammat drew nearer, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "Indeed, be cautious, valiant Gilgamesh. Guard this most perilous secret well. Let none discover that the gods' voices elude you. In a realm where every king has adversaries, your enemies would seize upon this weakness to depose you and end your royal line."

"Yes, I share your concern," Gilgamesh conceded with a deep sigh.

Ammat's gaze shifted to the side, and a sly smile graced her features. "Which brings me to another matter that vexes my heart. You, my grown son, have reached your thirty-sixth year and as King you remain unwed and without an heir. When am I to expect grandchildren, oh solitary son of mine?"

The King had no opportunity to answer the goddess. Council members were arriving for the meeting.

* * *

In the council chamber of Uruk, the venerable assembly convened under Gilgamesh's commanding presence. Beside him stood Ninsun, the King's birthmother, a matron of wisdom and grace.

Among the council were Ishtar, embodied in the captivating priestess Lalitu; Nabu-zuqu, the weather-worn Chief Navigator bore the divine mantle of Ea, god of the seas; Ziusudra, the gifted Chief Healer, a slender woman in shirt and pantaloons who wielded the blessings granted by Gula, goddess of healing, Naram-Sin, Commanding General, young, strong, lustful for glory and carried the mantle of Ninurta, god of war, Balathu, not more than a youth, who represented Gibil, god of fire and light, and finally, Nargul, the vigilant rat-faced politician Chief of Security, and under the watchful eye of Shamash, the god of justice and the sun. There were whispers of a possible alliance between Nargul and Ishtar, clandestine plots to wrest power from the hands of Gilgamesh himself.

Naram-Sin cleared his throat and began in a low, grave voice, "Great King, I bring to your attention... a matter of increasing concern." He hesitated, glancing around the table at his fellow council members, who nodded, urging him to continue.

"It seems," Naram-Sin continued, his voice quiet but steady, "that there are troubling rumors among our people. It is said that, in recent months, some citizens claim they can no longer hear the gods."

The chamber fell into a brief but loaded silence, broken only by the faint crackling of the torches. Each council member seemed lost in thought, considering the implications of what had just been spoken. Gilgamesh kept his face impassive, forcing himself to appear as one who still heard the voices of the gods, although that silence weighed on him more heavily each day.

"It is a dangerous rumor," Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, said sharply, her eyes flashing as she leaned forward. "Such talk spreads doubt. If our people believe the gods no longer speak to us, chaos will take root."

The youngest member of the council, Balathu, spoke up, his tone cautious. "But it is not only among the common folk that we hear such rumors. There are whispers even within the temples and among those who once served as conduits of the divine."

Ishtar's jaw tightened. "If that is true, then those who spread these lies betray both the gods and our society. Any member of the government or the temple who claims to hear the gods yet does not—who pretends communion and deceives the people—should be punished with death."

A murmur rippled through the chamber. The council members shifted uneasily in their seats, uncomfortable with Ishtar's severe suggestion. Gilgamesh held up his hand, cutting off further discussion on the topic.

"We will address that matter another time," he said, his voice steady, though inside he felt the weight of Ishtar's words pressing down on him. "For now, I want to understand more about what this means for our people. How are they responding to this... perceived silence from the gods?"

Naram-Sin cleared his throat, casting a wary glance at Ishtar before speaking. "They... they have begun to adapt, Great King. In the absence of divine guidance, those who can no longer commune with the gods have turned inward. They use what knowledge they possess, what wisdom they have gained from the elders, and make decisions based on their own understanding."

Gilgamesh leaned forward; feigning curiosity mixed with the authority of one who still held the gods' favor. "And what of their actions?" he asked. "Do they falter without guidance, or do they find strength in this new path?"

Balathu exchanged a hesitant look with another council member before speaking. "More go to the oracles for guidance. The rest? They... they are making decisions without waiting for signs or omens. Some say they seem to flourish. They apply themselves to the work at hand, relying on what they know rather than waiting for divine direction."

Ishtar's eyes narrowed; her voice edged with disdain. "This independence is dangerous. Without the gods' guidance, they will drift like leaves in the wind, directionless. We cannot allow our people to stray from the path laid by the gods, even if the gods' voices are faint."

Gilgamesh held back a retort, choosing his words carefully. "Perhaps we underestimate their resilience. These people, deprived of the gods' voices, are adapting rather than falling into despair. Might it not be a testament to their strength?"

Ishtar's gaze turned icy. "Their strength lies in their obedience, Gilgamesh. Without it, there is no order—only a path to ruin."

Gilgamesh nodded slowly, maintaining his composure. "Thy concern is noted, Ishtar, as is the gravity of deception among our ranks. However, let us not hastily implement such measures." He paused, allowing his words to settle before redirecting the conversation. "There needs to be more study of this curious set of circumstances. This shall be investigated by our Priestess of Health."

Ziusudra nodded her head in acquiescence.

Gilgamesh smiled at her and turned to the rest of the Council. "For now, let us turn to other matters. What else is pending before this council?"

The room relaxed; the tension broken as the council members took note of other matters requiring the king's attention. But as the conversation continued, Gilgamesh's mind drifted back

to the weight of Ishtar's words, the threat of death for any deception. He knew the silence of the gods was no illusion, and each passing day, he felt himself edging closer to joining those who would have to find strength in the quiet unknown.

A murmur of agreement rippled through the room. Gilgamesh's heart sank as he realized the scope of the silence. This was not just a personal burden but a collective crisis. The divine silence was spreading, and with it, the uncertainty of their future.

"We dispatched men to the Eastern Cedar Forest for timber many weeks past as thou ordered, O King," Naram-Sin reported.

"Why has the timber not reached us?" Gilgamesh demanded impatiently.

"They encountered a wild man, a colossal, hairy beast with horns sprouting from his head, who forbade entry to the forest," Naram-Sin explained.

Gilgamesh pounded angrily on the great meeting table. "Send more men! The needs of our defense must be met at all costs! I shall not be deterred!"

"We have done that, Sire, and more!" explained Naram-Sin. "Archers, cavalry, chariots, mercenaries, and siege machines we have used to no avail! He is a curse sent to Earth by the gods."

"Infernal daemon or divine challenger, I shall not yield!" thundered Gilgamesh, his fury unrelenting.

"The realm of mortals, Son of the Gods, cannot subdue such a force," responded the Chief Military Strategist with solemn resolve.

"Shall I bear this burden alone, then?" lamented the King. "By the gods, so be it! I shall confront this infernal beast myself!"

Ninsun, with gentle words and kind demeanor, implored, "Oh, Wise King, withhold not thyself, for leaving thy people bereft of a ruler is too great a burden for us to bear."

Ziusudra, raising her gaze for the first time, echoed the sentiments of Soft Voiced Gula. "Indeed, Magnificent Gilgamesh, forsaking us would steer the great ship of Uruk into perilous waters, robbing us of the voice of Grand Anu in our midst."

"Thou would condemn us, my Liege," rasped Admiral Nabu-zuqu, a man of few words but indomitable spirit. Those seated around the council table turned their expectant gazes upon the ageing, one-eyed sailor. He raised his shoulders in a resigned shrug. "I have naught to add beyond what's already been spoken. Thy line, Great King, must endure for the welfare of the city and its people. I can say no more."

Doe-eyed Ishtar spoke, and a profound hush fell upon all, their reverence palpable. "Faithful Nabu-zuqu speaks with wisdom. It is fitting that our Sovereign King should bear heirs, to secure the city's legacy and safeguard our posterity."

In a sudden burst of anger, the King leapt from his seat, fists pounding the table before him. "This is not the hour for such discourse," growled Proud Gilgamesh. "It is not within thy purview to utter such things!"

With a resounding slap upon the table, Ishtar rose and raised her voice. "If we are forbidden to broach this subject, then who shall?"

"Is there something concealed from us, Magnificent King?" inquired Oily Nargul from beneath hooded eyes.

"Men have faced dire consequences for uttering lesser words, treacherous Nargul!" retorted the King, his hands tensing with a crackling force, akin to burning timber, as he clenched his fists. In a burst of rage, the great King pounded the table and with a mighty crack, the table was smashed to splinters.

Nargul quailed under the stormy gaze of Violent Gilgamesh. "My loyalty belongs to the kingdom of Uruk above all else!"

"See that it does," responded Gilgamesh already forgetting Nargul's presence. The King looked upon each council member directly in the eyes as if evaluating and at the same time challenging them. "Are there any more criticisms of my rule?" No one spoke, neither man nor god. "Good," he said, ending the meeting.

As the council members departed the chamber, their voices still echoing in the halls, Gilgamesh remained seated, deep in thought. There was yet one source he had not broached and the thought of speaking with her filled him with fear, he, two-thirds a god who should fear naught!

Gilgamesh issued commands to ready his caravan for the journey to the Eastern Cedar Forest. Under the cover of secrecy, he embarked on a solitary expedition through the labyrinthine city passages, heading towards the foothills and ancient caves beyond the city's confines.

In the marketplaces and homes of Uruk, the people performed daily rituals to honor the gods, lighting incense and offering prayers. These practices were woven into the fabric of their lives, reinforcing the belief in the gods' constant presence. Gilgamesh, their King, rode anonymously bye.

* * *

The Oracle of Ereshkigal resided in a hidden chamber deep beneath the earth, illuminated by the eerie glow of amethyst crystals. Renowned for her visions and prophecies, only a chosen few were granted an audience with her.

Upon entering the chamber of the Oracle, Gilgamesh knelt before her and presented his offerings of incense, and exquisitely crafted artifacts. A great serving dish of gold and silver, an ornately carved chair of aromatic cedar wood, bells and chimes, and a bag of shekels.

The Oracle of Ereshkigal, veiled in a shimmering obsidian robe, was known for her profound connection to the underworld goddess. Her coal-black hair concealed her face, save for her piercing indigo eyes that held the secrets of the cosmos.

The Oracle lifted her hand, gesturing to the towering King. "Speak, noble King. What ails thee?"

With respect in his voice and sincerity in his heart, he addressed the Oracle so: "Oracle of Ereshkigal, guardian of the underworld's wisdom, I come before thee with a humble heart, seeking answers to a burden that weighs heavily upon my soul. I beseech you, grant me thy audience and the grace of your insights."

"Speak!" ordered the Oracle.

"I fear I have offended great god Anu and in response he withholds his protection from fair Uruk. I am filled with doubt and anguish for my people. I implore you, reveal to me the cause of his ire and how I may make amends."

The Oracle, her azure eyes reflecting the depths of her divine connection, spoke with a voice that resonated like an echo from the underworld: "Great Gilgamesh, thou have approached with sincerity, and I shall not withhold the truth from thee. The gods indeed cast a shadow over thee because they hear the cries of thy people. They accuse thee of ruling with an iron fist, of being a stern and unyielding master who has forgotten the weight of leadership."

"Your subjects, once faithful and proud, now lament their fate and beseech the divine for relief from their burdens. The gods are angry, for they see their creation suffering under thy rule.

Take heed, O King in turmoil! Anu dispatches a champion to impart lessons of humility and moderation unto thee. In absence of combat, he shall prevail."

"Where may I encounter this champion? I shall engage him on the battlefield and emerge victorious!"

The Oracle's laughter resounded with irony. "Thee venture to confront him even now, within the Eastern Cedar Forest, by thine own volition! Do thee still doubt communion with the divine, O King of skepticism? The strength thou seeks is within thee, not above thee," the Oracle intoned

A shroud of violet mist enclosed the cavern, veiling the Oracle from sight, all the while echoing with scornful mirth.

* * *

The journey to the Eastern Cedar Forest was a formidable five-day trek from Uruk, traversing bountiful pastures nourished by the Euphrates. Gilgamesh, who had reconstructed the causeways, found contentment in his subjects' prosperity.

As the party advanced, they spied the distant fires before encountering the desolate remnants of the once-mighty garrison, abandoned by the Wildman's ruthless onslaught. Of a hundred and fifty battle-hardened warriors, barely a score endured, all bearing the marks of fierce struggle. Among them, no man remained untouched by the rigors of their defense. Huts, gear, personal possessions—all consumed by the flames of chaos. Spears, swords, and siege machinery sundered or reduced to smoldering embers. A relentless war had been waged within.

Upon entering the remnants of the encampment, they chanced upon a one-armed Sergeant, his voice strained from issuing commands to the walking wounded among the beleaguered garrison. At the sight of the King, accompanied by a distinguished officer, the Sergeant promptly stood at rigid attention. "An officer amidst the camp!" he thundered, his proclamation echoing through the world and unto the heavens above.

The motley soldiers, bearing their wounds with stoic resilience, struggled to mimic the posture of readiness, and awaited further commands.

Gilgamesh, the unconquerable, stood in astonishment as he gazed upon his battered and broken warriors. Never had his formidable army tasted the bitterness of defeat in the crucible of battle. Never had his valiant soldiers suffered such a brutal assault. "Could all of this devastation truly be the work of a single man?" he questioned, his voice tinged with disbelief.

"It is the bitter truth, O Mighty King," the Sergeant reluctantly acknowledged, his eyes downcast with shame. "But he was no ordinary man, Great Ruler! He possessed the strength of twenty, nay, forty men, with massive horns protruding from his skull like the colossal Auroch. His body was covered in coarse hair, and his claws resembled deadly blades. When he bellowed, it struck fear into the very depths of our souls, rendering our innards as weak as jelly."

"And you," spoke the King, gesturing towards the Sergeant's maimed arm swathed in soiled wrappings. "What fate has befallen you?"

"In the thicket, the wild man, fierce as a tempest, did assail us as we cleared the brush. With a blade in one hand, he severed my arm, and with the other, he grasped the severed limb. And lo, with mine own arm, he did smite me upon my brow, a blow most ignoble and severe."

The replacement soldiers marched forth to mend the fortifications, tend to the wounded, and prepare for the felling of trees. A small detachment took its place as sentinels while Gilgamesh awaited at the heart of the bustling activity. When all was made ready, the warriors withdrew into the cover of the ancient woods, leaving the King standing solitary in the open expanse of

their encampment. It was during such moments that Gilgamesh keenly felt the absence of the commanding voice of Anu, whose guidance and inspiration once filled his ears. In those solitary moments, the great King's heart harbored a profound sense of isolation. Decisions that once seemed so clear now felt like navigating through a fog.

Surprisingly swift was the response of the Wildman, as if he could scarcely contain his eagerness to confront Gilgamesh. A deafening cacophony reverberated through the forest, accompanied by a thunderous roar, as a colossal figure, resembling a man yet more beast than mortal, burst forth from the tangled undergrowth and into the clearing.

Lofty of stature, he stood, nearly a head's length beneath the mighty King. A mane of long, auburn hair, unkempt and caked with mud, intertwined with leaves and bracken, ensnared his foamy beard, which in turn melded into his tangled, hirsute chest. Bare flesh revealed itself only around his eyes and cheeks, while the rest of his form remained concealed beneath a dense covering of rust colored, wiry hair.

Gilgamesh adjusted his stance, anchoring his legs like mighty tree trunks into the earth for unwavering stability. His grip tightened upon his sword and shield, the beads of sweat forming upon his flesh a testament to his anticipation.

"What manner of creature are you?" inquired the King, his voice echoing across the clearing.

The Wildman raised his head, long curling horns thrust out from his hair, his eyes ablaze with a demonic brilliance, and let out a chilling laugh. The sound bore an eerie resemblance to the ferocity of a lion feasting upon its prey, sending a shiver coursing down Gilgamesh's spine and beyond. This was truly no man. The creature was adorned in scanty rags that concealed little of what they were meant to, but the copious hair that covered its entire body managed what clothing could not.

"In the authority of whom do you stand? Which gods guide your path?" demanded Gilgamesh, his curiosity kindled like the hunger of a famished soul.

The Wildman paused, tilting his head with an air of curiosity, as if the King's words were foreign to his thoughts. His enormous teeth bared themselves, and when he spoke it was as if the rocks gave voice, "I bow to no mortal, nor do I bend to any god beneath the sun. I am Enkidu, and you intrude upon my abode! Prepare for the embrace of death!"

Enkidu, the Wildman, charged forth, his arms swinging, and in his hands, knives gleamed as he leaped into the air, crashing against Gilgamesh's wooden shield. Both combatants tumbled to the ground, rolled, and swiftly rose to their feet, blades clashing in their hands. As they grappled, their faces drew near.

"I am Gilgamesh, the King of Uruk, and these woodlands belong to me!" growled the belligerent sovereign.

They separated and circled each other cautiously. Gilgamesh saw blood trickling from his arm and shot an angered glance at Enkidu. The Wildman also noticed the blood, chortled, and licked the blade of his knife. "First blood has been shed!" he exclaimed.

"Is this a jest to your liking?" snorted Gilgamesh.

"Only if victory is mine!" replied Enkidu and hurled a knife. It narrowly brushed the King as he swiftly dodged to the side. The blade found its mark in the countenance of a warrior who held a spear and rushed forth to aid his embattled sovereign.

Gilgamesh stood tall and shouted to his warriors, "Let no man advance! This battle is for the Wildman and I alone!" He exchanged a glance with Enkidu, who nodded in agreement with an expression of respect on his visage.

The forest reverberated with the clash of blades as Gilgamesh and Enkidu faced off, each move calculated like predators stalking their prey. The tension was electric, the air heavy with the weight of their impending duel.

Enkidu, his massive form covered in a shroud of coarse hair, moved with the grace of a wild beast. His eyes gleamed with a feral intensity as he lunged forward, his twin knives slicing through the air. Gilgamesh parried the blows with his sturdy wooden shield, the impact sending shockwaves through his arm.

With a mighty roar, Gilgamesh swung his sword, aiming for Enkidu's midsection. The Wildman leaped backward, narrowly avoiding the deadly arc of the blade. He countered with a lightning-fast kick that caught Gilgamesh off guard, sending him sprawling to the ground.

But the King of Uruk was not so easily defeated. He rolled to his feet, his muscles burning with determination. With a swift and fluid motion, he launched himself at Enkidu, his sword singing through the air.

Enkidu danced away, his movements a blur of speed and agility.

Gilgamesh's sword sang through the air in a blur of motion and sliced through a centuries old tree, felling it in a single stroke. The tree fell landing on three soldiers standing too close to the battle.

Enkidu parried Gilgamesh's strikes with his knives, sparks flying with each clash. The two combatants considered each other, their breathing heavy, their eyes locked in a deadly contest of wills.

Suddenly, Enkidu saw an opening. With a savage grin, he lunged forward, his knives aimed at Gilgamesh's heart. But the King was quicker than he appeared. With lightning reflexes, he sidestepped the attack and delivered a crushing blow to Enkidu's side.

The Wildman staggered back, blood oozing from the wound. But he refused to yield. With a primal roar, he launched himself at Gilgamesh once more, his knives a whirlwind of death.

Their battle was a symphony of steel and skill, each parry and strike a testament to their unmatched prowess. Nature itself seemed to pause, breathless, as the two titans fought with ferocious intensity.

As the minutes stretched into hours, fatigue began to take its toll on both combatants. Their movements slowed; their breath came in ragged gasps. But neither would give in. They had come too far, fought too hard, to back down now.

With one final, titanic effort, Gilgamesh delivered a crushing blow that sent Enkidu sprawling to the ground. The Wildman lay there, bloodied and broken, but his eyes still burned with fierce determination.

Gilgamesh stood victorious, his chest heaving with exertion. He had faced the ultimate challenge and emerged triumphant. But as he looked down at his fallen opponent, he could not help but feel a sense of respect and awe for the warrior he had just bested.

The forest was silent once more, as if nature itself had held its breath during this epic battle. Gilgamesh and Enkidu had assessed each other's limits and found in each other worthy adversaries. And as they stood there, battered, and bruised, they knew that their journey was far from over.

"You wage this battle skillfully, wild one," commented the King.

"In you, vainglorious ruler, resides indomitable spirit!" responded Enkidu, refusing to acknowledge defeat, and thrusting fiercely as he spoke.

Gilgamesh deftly moved and weaved in this deadly dance. Reluctance colored his every move. The Wildman, unafraid to employ cunning tactics, delivered a powerful kick between the

legs of Uruk's monarch. With a pained grunt, the King tumbled, but as he fell, an errant fist found its way into his opponent's mouth. As Gilgamesh struck the ground, Enkidu spat broken teeth into the air.

Both men rose, and Enkidu plucked a tooth from his bleeding gums. "It has been many seasons since a man has drawn my blood in combat! I am impressed, noble King!"

The King wiped sweat from his brow. "I must admit, I have never encountered someone with strength like yours," Gilgamesh acknowledged.

"Except for yourself," added Enkidu.

"That goes without saying, of course."

The hirsute man laughed and winced as he massaged a sore shoulder muscle. "Indeed! Your blows were greater than any I have encountered."

Gilgamesh nodded. "I also received a powerful blow from your hand."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Enkidu. "The blow I received from you was far mightier than any I delivered. It is astonishing that I still stand. Any other man would have perished under such incredible force! I am a marvel!"

"The true marvel," said Gilgamesh, "is that I managed to rise after experiencing the tremendous force of your punch against my crown."

Enkidu stepped back and gazed with incredulous wide-open eyes. "You dare compare your blow to mine? Even I, a creature of the wild, have heard of the Imposing Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk. They say you are half divine god."

"Indeed, two-thirds," corrected the King.

"How is that so?" challenged a confounded Enkidu.

"My divinity? A tangled thing, that. I am two-thirds a god, or so the wise ones claim. My mother, Amat, bore me, but she is not as mortal women are. She was taken by the goddess Ninsun herself at my conception—so they say, so I am told. And my father, Lugalbanda, a king of men, yet more than a man when the gods took hold of him, filling his veins with their fire. Even he... his own birth came from mortals possessed by gods. It seems the heavens always had their designs on my bloodline.

"Two parts of me are bound to the gods. Yet, still, I am of this world, with a man's blood that aches and wounds that scar. I feel the pull of death as surely as you do. The gods have marked me, but they left me tethered here, still feeling the soil beneath my feet."

He glanced at the listener, a faint, weary smile forming as if the repetition of it had ceased to carry any weight.

"Two-thirds divine, one-third bound to the earth. Divinity enough to lift me, mortality enough to keep me."

"I am sorry that I inquired," sighed Enkidu. "The question arises: How could I have endured such blows from a divine being if I am not mightiest of mortals?"

"Spare me your boasts!" retorted the King.

"Aye, you do enough boasting for us all," parried Enkidu.

Gilgamesh felt the fiery intensity in his veins begin to subside. "I would quench my thirst, wild man. Let us momentarily halt our battle and rejuvenate ourselves before resuming our duel. What say you?"

* * *

"You may be a tyrant, but you are a generous host!" announced Enkidu as he quaffed a large bowl of imported Egyptian beer and slapped Gilgamesh on the back with a hand that could have felled an ancient cave bear. They reclined under the cooling shade of a grand tent set up for their convenience. Candied fruit and other delicacies were brought before them, and they indulged their appetites for battle gives a man great hunger.

Gilgamesh, the bountiful, let out a hearty belch and wiped his lips upon his forearm. "Speak to me, Enkidu of the untamed wilderness. How have I transgressed against you?"

Enkidu emptied a bowl of ale and smacked his lips. "I came upon these sacred cedar woods many years past, after fighting in the last great war, and I laid claim to this land. I watch over the towering trees, the creatures native to this realm, and the fertile soil. Under my vigilant guardianship, this land thrives."

The thoughtful king furrowed his brow. "I bear no intention to despoil these woods. We exercise great care in selecting which trees to fell. Our desire is to ensure the longevity of this forest, its inhabitants, and the welfare of our people and livestock."

Enkidu paused in the midst of devouring a haunch of mutton, juices cascading down his beard. "Is it so?" inquired the hopeful wild man.

Gilgamesh, in his benevolence, nodded solemnly. "Indeed, I vow to safeguard these woods for all eternity."

The colossal man erupted in boisterous laughter. "Am I a fool to believe the words of Uruk's tyrant, the ruler of men? I would sooner endure the ceaseless chatter of the gods again than heed your deceitful promises."

His words left Gilgamesh momentarily speechless, his mouth agape but devoid of words. The intrigued king grasped Enkidu by the arms and drew near. "What say you? You no longer hear the voices of the gods? How can this be? What offence did you commit?"

Thirsty, Enkidu raised his empty bowl. "To answer such questions, generous ruler, I must quench my parched throat, as dry as the desert sands it is."

Generous Gilgamesh replenished his guest's bowl with beer and placed the clay jug within Enkidu's reach. "How is it that you can no longer hear the gods' voices?" he inquired.

Mighty Enkidu shrugged with indifference. "It has been so ever since I received this wound." With his free hand, he removed the horns from his head, they were attached to a metal band, revealing a rugged scar that traversed his hairy crown from front to back. "Once, I was a soldier, a warrior. An axe should have delivered my soul to the Underworld, but the god Erra did not claim me on that fateful day. Since then, I have neither seen nor heard from the gods." The wild man glanced over his shoulder and whispered to his drinking companion, "I can say without fear of retribution that I do not miss them, and I welcome the peace and quiet." He scowled and glared at the soldiers concealed within the forest's edge. "Quiet, until your men intruded upon my sanctuary of solitude!"

The King's men faded into the trees at the terrible sound of the wild man's voice.

"You have every right to voice your grievances, as I now comprehend," spoke the understanding monarch. "I bear an offer, a gesture of compensation, if you would but hear it."

Enkidu sat upright; his undivided attention fixed upon the King.

"While my men gather the timber we require, you and I shall venture to the grand city of Uruk. There, I shall present you as my esteemed guest, and we shall forge a bond of friendship, for I perceive that we share common ground."

"Oh? In what way?" inquired the hirsute man as he poured more beer into his bowl.

Now it was the turn of great Gilgamesh to draw near and lower his voice, meant only for one set of ears. "I, too, have ceased to hear the voices of the gods for some time now!"

"Is it not a wondrous thing?" Enkidu replied, leaning back.

"I do not know how to exist without the guidance of the gods," Gilgamesh admitted. "There is much in this world that eludes my understanding when I am left to my own devices."

"Undeniably," concurred the intoxicated Enkidu, his libations spilling over. "This peculiar custom requires some acclimation, as I recollect. Yet, there lies a hidden technique within."

"I would be willing to offer much to grasp such knowledge," uttered the desperate King.

"There exists a paramount directive for you to heed..."

"And what might that be?" inquired the anxious monarch.

"Engage your own faculties," advised Enkidu.

"I had aspired for a more substantial revelation," confessed the disappointed giant.

Enkidu narrowed his gaze upon the King. "Do you assume it is a simple matter? I surmise it torments your mind, disturbs your inner peace, and haunts your nocturnal repose. The apprehension of failure casts a shadow upon your desires, does it not?"

Grateful Gilgamesh nodded his mighty head in acknowledgment. "Indeed, your words ring true. I may wish to deny it, but reality cannot be denied. I discern enough to acknowledge that I must confront this crisis within my soul if my subjects are to reap the benefits."

"Your ruminations are profound and virtuous, considerate Lord."

Gilgamesh arose and declared, "Shall you become my esteemed guest within the splendid walls of Uruk?"

Enkidu rose as well, standing alongside Gilgamesh, and clasped his arm in a gesture of camaraderie. "I have long harbored a desire to witness the marvels!" he exclaimed.

And thus, it came to pass that Enkidu, the untamed dweller of the wilderness, journeyed with King Gilgamesh to the astonishing city of Uruk, a place of wonders that delighted the senses. Upon traversing the gate of Ishtar, adorned with azure enameled walls and gilded depictions of fierce lions and the captivating Ishtar herself, who subdued all with her allure.

The center square of Uruk, usually bustling with the vibrant life of the city, was now filled with an air of tension and anticipation. Torches were hastily placed around a wooden platform erected in the middle of the square. Atop the platform stood a rough-hewn altar, constructed hurriedly from stone and wood, a grim testament to the urgency of the moment. Citizens of Uruk, drawn by the unusual assembly, gathered around, their faces a mix of curiosity, fear, and reverence.

Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, stood on the platform, her presence commanding and fierce. Her eyes, like burning coals, scanned the crowd with a mixture of anger and disappointment. Before her knelt Nabu-zuqu, a senior council member, bound and trembling. His once proud demeanor had crumbled under the weight of the accusations against him. For months, Nabu-zuqu had lived in fear of this moment, knowing that his lies had spun a web too intricate to escape. His deceit had begun with the best of intentions, but the falsehoods had grown, ensnaring him in a trap of his own making.

Ishtar's voice, cold and unyielding, echoed through the square. "People of Uruk, we gather here to witness the judgment of the gods. Nabu-zuqu, thou hast been found guilty of the gravest of sins—deceiving the people by pretending to hear the voice of thy god. In these times of uncertainty, such treachery cannot be tolerated. Do thee deny these charges?"

Nabu-zuqu's voice quivered as he spoke. "Great Ishtar, I only sought to provide comfort and guidance in these dark times. I only wished to help." He coughed and blood flecked his lips. The signs of torture were visible to all who had eyes to see.

Before Ishtar could respond, Gilgamesh stepped forward, his voice strong and clear. "Ishtar, wait! Nabu-zuqu is an old friend and mentor," Gilgamesh pleaded. In his mind, he contrasted the divine commands he used to follow without question to the human compassion he felt now. Could this empathy be as divine as the voices he once heard, or was it a new strength rising within him, independent of the gods?

The crowd murmured in confusion and surprise, their eyes shifting between Gilgamesh and Ishtar. Ishtar's gaze hardened as she turned to Gilgamesh. "Even old friends and mentors are not above the laws of the gods, Gilgamesh. Nabu-zuqu's deceit cannot be excused. It has sown discord and distrust among our people."

Gilgamesh took a step closer to the platform, his voice pleading but resolute. "Ishtar, the gods have not abandoned us. We must show mercy and wisdom in our judgments." The silence that followed was deafening. "Nabu-zuqu's actions, while wrong, were driven by a desire to maintain order and hope. Punish him, yes, but do not take his life."

The tension in the square was palpable. The crowd, sensing the conflict, began to shift and stir. Whispers of anger and calls for justice grew louder. The thirst for blood was evident in their eyes, fueled by fear and uncertainty.

Ishtar raised her hand to silence the crowd. "The gods demand truth, Gilgamesh. In these times, we must uphold their honor with our integrity. Nabu-zuqu's deceit has shown us the danger of falsehoods. He must face the consequences."

The crowd's murmurs grew into shouts, their cries for justice echoing through the square. Despite the silence of the gods, Gilgamesh continued to believe in their external existence. He remembered the days when divine voices were as clear as the wind, guiding him unequivocally. Now, the silence forced him to distinguish between the echoes of past divine commands and the nascent whispers of his own thoughts, struggling to assert themselves.

Enkidu, who had been silent until now, leaned in close to Gilgamesh and said, "I like not this mob. They are under that woman's evil influence. Say the wrong word and they will kill us all and there are even too many for me to defeat."

"What would you have me do?" demanded the King.

"I would have you live and show me the sights of Grand Uruk as you have promised!" replied the Wild Man. "I think your people shall need you if this is an example of your government."

With a heavy heart, Gilgamesh stepped back, his voice subdued. "Then let it be on thy head, Ishtar. But know that this is not justice—it is something else." Gilgamesh's brow furrowed, and a muscle twitched in his jaw. He looked to his mother, Amat, who stood beside him, her face ashen as she took in the scene. She glanced from Nabu-zuqu's suffering form to Ishtar, an unspoken sorrow in her gaze. Amat turned slightly toward Gilgamesh, and in a low, almost wistful tone, she murmured, "There was a time when Lalitu's voice would have softened Ishtar's hand. I... rarely see her now. I miss her counsel."

Gilgamesh's brow furrowed deeper, surprised by her words. He whispered back, "Lalitu? I remember her warmth, her gentleness. It has been long since I've seen her spirit in these halls."

Amat's gaze grew distant, her voice soft as if speaking more to herself than to her son. "Yes. Lalitu and I... we once spoke of justice, of mercy. She held kindness like a light in her hand. But now... it is only Ishtar we see, only her gaze and her will."

Ishtar's face remained impassive as she signaled the guards. They stepped forward, lifting Nabu-zuqu to his feet and leading him to the altar at the center of the platform. The assembled citizens watched in a mix of horror and anticipation, knowing the severity of the punishment about to be enacted.

As the ritual began, Ishtar's chant filled the square, a solemn invocation to the absent gods. Nabu-zuqu's cries were drowned out by the rhythmic drumming and the murmured prayers of the priests. The air grew thick with the scent of incense and the palpable weight of divine judgment.

The guards placed Nabu-zuqu on the altar, his body tense with fear. A ceremonial dagger, gleaming ominously, was handed to Ishtar. She held it aloft, the flickering torchlight casting a sharp glint off the blade.

"Nabu-zuqu, thy deceit has led thee to this end. May thy spirit find peace in the afterlife, and may the gods be merciful in their judgment," Ishtar declared. With a swift, practiced motion, she brought the dagger down, ending Nabu-zuqu's life in a single, decisive stroke. The attendant Priestesses moved in with knives held high and dismembered the body in quick, controlled strokes of the blades.

The dripping ichor was a stark reminder of the price of dishonesty. The citizens of Uruk averted their eyes, the gravity of the moment sinking in. Ishtar's voice, now softer but no less commanding, addressed the assembly once more.

"Let this be a lesson to all who would dare deceive the gods and their people. The gods are eternal, and we shall not be denied!"

As the blood of Nabu-zuqu stained the altar, Gilgamesh felt a deep sense of loss and responsibility. The gods had not intervened, and it was clear that their silence would continue. He realized that it was now up to him to ensure justice and order in Uruk.

* * *

Enkidu underwent a transformation in the temple of Ishtar, attended by the priestesses; he was bathed, groomed, and nourished until he emerged bearing the marks of numerous ancient scars. After two weeks of such treatment, the wildness within Enkidu diminished, leaving a man attuned to civilization. Having imbibed the wisdom and passions of the priestesses of Ishtar, Enkidu joined the King within the palace.

In the resplendent city of Uruk, Gilgamesh, the mighty sovereign, led Enkidu through its labyrinthine streets. Together they partook of the city's humble offerings at the market stalls, beheld the exchange of bonded souls at the auction, and marveled at the lofty aspirations of the grand city, a testament to mankind's unyielding spirit.

Adjacent to Ishtar's abode stood a grand white marble stall housing an enormous bull, its hide pure as mountain snow. Enkidu, eyes wide with astonishment, proclaimed, "Verily, a behemoth it is!" Gilgamesh responded solemnly, "The Bull of Heaven, it is and destined for sacrifice to Ishtar during her festival."

As they stood admiring the bull, Enkidu pondered the words of Gilgamesh and then voiced his desire, "Rather would I witness the liberation of the Bull of Heaven than behold its lamentable demise."

To this, the King, wise in counsel, replied, "Aye, yet this city dwells under the aegis of Ishtar; to incense her in these times would be ill-advised. She has many followers who are slaves

to her slightest whim. Pray, my companion, provoke her not, for her wrath is as fearsome as her affection profound. It would bode ill for all."

"I shall heed your counsel, O monarch of unease," Enkidu assured, his voice steadfast.

Fortuitous was it for Gilgamesh to have secured this promise from his newfound comrade, for scarcely had the words been uttered when they found themselves hailed by the goddess Ishtar herself.

"Majestic Gilgamesh, Sovereign of Mortals, well met, Lord," she greeted, her voice resonating with the power of divinity.

In the presence of the goddess, the King and his companion ceased their stride, as she lavished upon the great bull offerings macabre, reminiscent of the most intimate parts of a young man. A chill, as cold as the abyss of night, crept through the sunny day.

"Are the winds of fortune favorable, O deity of ardor?" inquired the King, his interest in her reply but a shadow.

Ishtar, with a smile as beguiling as the crescent moon, turned her gaze upon the sovereign Gilgamesh. Her movements, like the undulating waves of the Euphrates, were laden with intention most alluring.

"Behold, O resplendent Gilgamesh, the winds of fortune have shifted favorably this day," she uttered, her words dripping with honeyed allure. "Approach, O Gilgamesh, and unite with me in sacred matrimony; bestow upon me the essence of thy being, that I may become thy consort, and thou my lord and spouse. As thee cross the threshold of our abode, scented with the noble cedar, both door and seat of power shall pay homage unto thy steps. Sovereigns, chieftains, and lords of realms afar shall prostrate themselves at thy presence; from highland and lowland, tribute they shall bear, offerings to thy majesty. Our offspring shall be the power of Uruk for eternity and our names will be remembered until the end of time! Thus, shall we unite the people of our great city, and our reach shall surpass the horizon! It is the only way to save Uruk and its citizens."

Enkidu, his countenance marked by a keen interest, turned his gaze to Gilgamesh, his anticipation evident, awaiting the response of his comrade. And verily, he was not to be disappointed.

"O divine Ishtar, graciously would I accept thy summons, were I not keenly aware of the lamentable destiny that befalls all thy paramours," Gilgamesh declared, his eyes steadfast upon the Bull of Heaven as it feasted upon the indeterminant offerings from the goddess's trove. "Which of your lovers did you ever love for ever? What shepherd of yours has pleased you for all time?"

At this, the visage of Ishtar, once radiant as the morning star, darkened like a storm-laden sky. In her fury, she spat upon the ground before the king, her words a storm unleashed. "O insolent mortal! Though thee may claim lineage divine, know that I shall see thee undone. My sire, Anu, sovereign of the celestial realm, shall cast you down for this affront!"

Yet even as her wrath unfurled like a tempest, Gilgamesh, unshaken, guided his companion away from the ire of the goddess.

As the distance between them and the enraged deity grew, the final utterance of Ishtar pierced the air, a venomous decree: "Thou and thy wild comrade shall rue this day!"

Vanishing from the sight of the wrathful Ishtar, Enkidu, with a defiance bold and unyielding, conveyed his disdain through a gesture crude and unmistakable in its meaning.

Her shrieks, a discordant symphony, resonated through the streets of Uruk, ascending to the very halls of the gods themselves.

"If you were contemplating seeking Ishtar's aid with your endeavors," Enkidu spoke, "I would most humbly suggest that you seek another source of help."

* * *

Having been away for some time, Gilgamesh had many duties to perform as King of Uruk, and while he whiled away his hours in stuffy smoke-filled rooms discussing the running of the city with tedious people, Enkidu explored the streets and backwaters of this, the greatest of the world's cities. Without his knowledge he was followed by agents of Nargul who reported his every move, every conversation with a citizen to their master who contrived to find ways to bring down the Wild Man upon the orders of a furious Ishtar.

Thus, it is told, and so it is written on the clay tablets preserved in the Temple of Uruk, that Enkidu the Wild Man, the beloved companion of Gilgamesh, came from the wilderness to the city, from the desolation of the plains to the places where the walls reach up and the towers touch the heavens. He, Enkidu, who was raw life itself, walked among the people of Uruk, and wherever his feet trod, tales of wonder and laughter soon followed.

The First Tale: The Contest of the Goddesses

In the days of a great celebration, the goddess Ishtar, bright as the moon, gathered with the wise Ninsun, queen of counsel, and Ereshkigal, who governs in the deep places of shadow. Together, they decreed that their favor and power would be tested in a contest, each setting a task to be met by the people of Uruk. And so, the city filled with the challenge, for who would not strive to prove themselves in the eyes of the goddesses?

Enkidu, newly arrived in the city and ignorant of its traditions, wandered among the people, gazing at the crowded streets, the bright cloths, and the wares stacked high upon the vendor's stalls. As the heralds cried out each goddess's challenge, Enkidu, drawn by the clamor, found himself among the gathered contestants, unaware of the games' weight.

The Task of Ishtar

The first task came from Ishtar, she of great beauty, who demanded of the people: "Let each contestant show forth the brilliance of their own beauty, for in beauty's form lies my own essence."

When Enkidu heard this, he laughed aloud, for the language of beauty was as foreign to him as the stars are to the sea. Nevertheless, the crowd urged him on, and Enkidu felt the eyes of the goddess upon him, her gaze fixed with expectancy. He looked to his side, then to his other, his wild locks swaying, and found himself a shawl, bright as the sun, embroidered with the birds of the marshlands.

"Is it not beauty you seek?" Enkidu proclaimed, his eyes glinting with the thrill of the challenge. He wrapped the shawl across his shoulders, lifting it as if it were the wings of a bird in flight. He pulled on a scarf of scarlet and covered his head with the veil of a priestess, adorned with a tinkling headpiece from the merchant's stall.

As he paraded before the crowd, a laughter arose from the people of Uruk, loud as the morning's chorus. Enkidu waved his arms and spun, his expression one of proud absurdity. From

her place, Ishtar's eyes flashed like embers, her fury stirred by the laughter. She rose and raised her hand, her voice carrying over the din.

"Is this mockery meant to amuse me, mortal?" she demanded, her gaze piercing Enkidu as he continued his strutting. The crowd shouted and laughed at such amusing entertainment.

Enkidu paused and looked up at her, unafraid, his eyes bright with mischief. "Goddess, it is you who declared beauty the test. I, a simple man of the plains, have given you the beauty of my spirit. But if it does not please, I shall retire it gladly!" The people applauded and shouted their love and admiration for both the Wild Man and their goddess.

Ishtar's rage simmered beneath her gaze but seeing that the people were enraptured by Enkidu's antics, she smiled coldly and sat again. The laughter of the crowd continued as he discarded the garments with a grand flourish, unburdened and amused by his own display.

The Task of Ninsun

Next came Ninsun, queen of wisdom, and she raised her voice with a question that hung like the first light of dawn over Uruk. "Let those who stand before me bring their minds, for wisdom alone is enduring." She called forth a riddle, speaking as a slow river across stone:

"Of what is there more at the end than at the start? Of what grows heavy yet lifts the heart? What is born anew with every breath, Yet is of life and is of death?"

The people murmured as they pondered, yet Enkidu, not burdened with the weight of thought, stepped forward boldly. His voice rang clear, unpretentious, and certain.

"It is sleep!" he announced, with a grin. "For when I lay beneath the stars, there is no burden upon my soul."

Ninsun's laughter rippled like the gentle stream. "Bold Enkidu, you see truth yet see it askance. The answer lies not in sleep, but in the journey, we make from day to night, from cradle to grave—memory! For memory grows as we do, it bears our burdens and lifts our hearts, and in its presence, life and death are bound."

The crowd murmured in wonder, but Enkidu only laughed at his own answer, his spirit unbowed. "Wise lady, memory must indeed be a burden, but the quiet sleep of stars carries no weight to me!"

Ninsun looked upon him with kindness, admiring his earnestness despite his mistaken answer. She declared him worthy nonetheless, for his simplicity had lightened the mood of all who gathered.

The Task of Ereshkigal

Last came Ereshkigal, ruler of the underworld, whose demands lay not in riddles or beauty, but in strength and endurance. "Those who seek my favor must show me that their strength is not mere muscle but power that can root itself deep within the earth," she decreed.

Enkidu, whose strength was that of the lion, stepped forward eagerly, his eyes bright as he sized up the challenge. He knelt before a tree that grew strong and deep by the temple steps and set his hands upon its trunk, fingers digging into the bark as though it were the flesh of a beast. With a cry that rang out like thunder, he pulled, and with roots snapping and soil flying, the tree lifted in his grasp.

Yet the people gasped, for the tree was sacred, and they feared Ereshkigal's wrath. Enkidu's arms, strained with might, brought the tree to the earth and laughed, but as he heard the murmurs of dismay, his smile softened. Gently, he knelt and replaced the tree, pressing soil around its roots with a tenderness that belied his strength.

In the end, the city filled with laughter, awe, and admiration, and even the goddesses, whose tempers are swift and often cold, relented, finding humor in the Wild Man's ways. Enkidu took the contest's outcome in stride, savoring the laughter that lifted in the cool morning air.

The Second Tale: The Offense to Ishtar's Image

One afternoon, as Enkidu wandered the city, he came across the great statue of Ishtar in the temple plaza, her likeness carved in stone and set high upon a plinth. He gazed up, unimpressed by the statue's fixed gaze and hard lines, for he had seen beauty in the wilderness and knew its form was nothing like stone.

"Ishtar's beauty is surely greater than this clumsy likeness," he said aloud, unaware of the nearby priests who froze at his words. "The sculptor must have had muddy eyes!"

The priests, horrified by his words, fell silent, and soon the tale reached Ishtar herself. Enraged by the insult, Ishtar appeared before Enkidu in the form of a bright star descending. She was a fearsome sight, radiant and terrible, her fury sharp as a spear.

"Mortal fool," she intoned, "who speaks of my beauty with such arrogance! Know this: thou shall make amends, or my wrath will fall upon thee and all thou cherish."

And thus, Enkidu was commanded to adorn the temple grounds with flowers and trees. Though his hands were more suited to wrestling beasts, he worked in the earth, and the plants grew wild under his touch, as if they had taken on his own spirit. The priests, at first aghast, could not help but admire the strange beauty that emerged from the chaos of Enkidu's garden.

Next, he was required to compose a hymn in Ishtar's honor. He struggled with the language, and his words came rough and stilted, rhymes twisted and forced. Yet the people, witnessing his earnest struggle, laughed with love rather than mockery, and even Ishtar, hearing his poem, found herself softened by the Wild Man's strange homage.

Enkidu's Humble Ode to Ishtar

O bright and gleaming morning star,
Who rises fierce where lions are,
Goddess of beauty, fierce and fair,
Your light flows freely through the air.

In temple halls they carve your face,
Though stone can't match your boundless grace.
For you, great lady of the skies,
Are more than clay, more than our eyes.

O mighty one, with heart so bold,
Who makes the fires blaze hot and cold,

You paint the roses in their bloom,
You light the dark and fill the gloom.

Yet still my tongue, clumsy and plain,
Finds words for you like drops of rain,
They fall and scatter, far from true,
Yet still they're all I offer you.

O Ishtar, both fierce storm and calm,
You are the healer and the balm,
Your beauty's strength, so wild and rare,
Is woven deep through earth and air.

Forgive this Wild Man's simple praise,
Unfit to match your mighty ways.
But know each word I sing is true,
From a heart that's bound in awe of you.

Ishtar, bright in every land,
With humble voice and outstretched hand,
I bow, I sing, my tribute bring,
To you, fierce goddess, star and king.

Seeing the people's adoration, Ishtar relented. She withdrew her wrath, her voice echoing with reluctant amusement. "May my name be honored in your own wild way, Enkidu, for the people's laughter has softened even the stars."

The Third Tale: The Market Challenge

In time, Enkidu's fame spread across Uruk, and his feats of strength, his wisdom in the wilderness, and his playful spirit were spoken of in every corner. There were those who marveled at him, who laughed at his wild ways and loved him for his untamed heart. But there were also those in Uruk who still felt wary of the Wild Man, who saw him as an outsider, a stranger whose place in the city had yet to be earned.

So it was that one day, amid the bustling marketplace, a local champion stepped forward, broad of shoulder and stern of gaze. His name was Buran, son of the river's mightiest fisherman, and his strength was said to be unmatched among the people of Uruk. In the crowded marketplace, Buran raised his voice to challenge Enkidu.

"Enkidu of the plains," he called, his voice ringing over the noise of traders and buyers. "The people of Uruk whisper of your strength, but words are light as feathers. I challenge you to prove yourself in three contests: strength, speed, and skill. Let all who watch be the judge of who is truly fit to stand beside our king."

Enkidu turned at the voice, his eyes narrowing with both curiosity and quiet amusement. He knew well the tone of a challenge, and he saw the proud look in Buran's eyes, a look not unlike

that of a stag sizing up his rival. Enkidu's grin spread slow and wide, for he felt the thrill of the contest stir within him, and the thrill of showing this man that strength was not only a thing of muscle but of spirit.

The people gathered around them, eager to see what feats these men might display. A ring was formed, and Buran's friends stepped forward, dragging forth stones and weights of iron, each heavier than the last. Enkidu met Buran's eyes and gave a small nod, accepting the unspoken terms.

The Test of Strength

The two men approached the stones, each lifting in turn. The crowd cheered as they heaved the weights, higher and higher, until sweat glistened on their brows and their muscles trembled with the strain. Buran, with a great cry, lifted the heaviest stone, straining but steady, and set it down with a thud that shook the ground.

Enkidu saw the anticipation in the crowd, the whispers of whether this wild man could match the city's champion. And with a look of determination, he approached the weight—the same massive stone, Buran had lifted. With a roar, he lifted it overhead, and then, seeing the crowd's eyes widen, he lifted an entire stall upon his shoulder, merchant and all. The vendor, clutching his wares in terror, dangled atop the stall as the crowd gasped in disbelief, then erupted into laughter.

Setting the stall down with care, Enkidu let out a shout of triumph that echoed through the marketplace. He looked at Buran, a playful glint in his eye, and spoke loud enough for all to hear.

"A stone is heavy, true enough, but to lift a man with his pride still intact? Now that takes strength!"

The crowd roared with laughter, and even Buran, though his pride was stung, had to acknowledge the feat.

The Test of Speed

With the first contest settled, Buran clenched his jaw and nodded to the next challenge, for he had speed unmatched by any of Uruk. The people moved to clear a path through the marketplace, a course winding between stalls, around carts, and even through the small courtyard where chickens and goats wandered freely. The signal was given, and both men sprang forward, darting into the labyrinthine paths of the market.

Buran was quick, his steps sure, and he weaved through the obstacles with the confidence of a man who knew every stone of the city. Enkidu, however, was like a creature of the wind, leaping over stalls, sliding beneath carts, and darting around startled animals with a grin of pure delight. His laughter echoed in his wake as he bounded forward, swift as the gazelle on the plains.

Behind him, Buran struggled to match Enkidu's wild agility. Twice he stumbled, once slipping on a fallen fruit and then losing ground as he nearly tripped over a squawking chicken. The crowd's laughter followed him, but Enkidu paid it no mind, lost in the joy of the race.

In a final leap, Enkidu cleared the last cart and reached the finish with a flourish, breathing deep and grinning wide as he looked to the crowd, who cheered and clapped with delight. Buran, panting and defeated, reached the end a heartbeat later, a shadow of frustration crossing his face as he saw the crowd's adoration for the Wild Man.

"Strength and speed alike are but leaves in the wind," Enkidu said to Buran, his tone both gentle and teasing. "For what is a race, if not the joy of the run itself?"

The Test of Skill

Buran's face hardened as he drew himself up for the final contest. "Skill requires more than raw strength or the reckless speed of a beast," he said, his voice steady but his pride sore. "A true warrior has aim, precision, and discipline."

The people brought forth spears for the two men, each to throw at a target set upon a distant pole. Buran took up his spear first, his face focused and his grip sure. He breathed deep, aimed with care, and threw with the force of a river's current. The spear flew true and struck the target dead center, and the crowd murmured in approval, for Buran's throw was as steady as the rising sun.

Then Enkidu took his spear, and as he hefted its weight, a thoughtful look crossed his face. He glanced at the distant target, then shifted his stance, his muscles loose, as though he were preparing for a hunt. With a swift, almost careless movement, he threw the spear—not at the target pole, but at a stone pillar far behind it.

The spear sailed through the air, a blur of bronze and wood, sliced through the center of the target, cutting Buran's spear in twain, and soaring forward struck the pillar with such force that its tip embedded deep into the stone, sending a sharp crack ringing through the square. The crowd froze in astonishment, then broke into gasps and applause as they beheld the weapon lodged in the pillar's heart.

Enkidu turned to Buran with a smile both humble and wild. "For the beasts of the plain, the hunt is not just the spear's aim, but the strike's truth," he said. "The stone lies beyond the pole, but a true throw will find it still."

Buran stared, his pride wilting beneath the crowd's adulation, and at last he bowed his head in respect. "You have bested me, Enkidu," he said, his voice heavy with acceptance. "The strength and spirit of the plains have indeed found a place in Uruk."

The crowd, jubilant, surrounded Enkidu, cheering his name. They spoke of him with admiration, not as a strange man of the wild, but as a hero whose strength and laughter had won the day. The people who had once feared him now pressed close, their hands raised in celebration, and their faces alight with joy.

From the palace balcony, Gilgamesh watched his friend's triumph, his heart swelling with pride. He saw in Enkidu not only the strength of the wilderness but the boundless spirit of a true companion, one whose loyalty was as fierce as his wild nature. Ishtar, too, looked on from her high place, her eyes dark with schemes, for she saw how the bond between Enkidu and Gilgamesh only grew stronger with each passing victory.

Thus, Enkidu became beloved in the marketplace of Uruk, his spirit as free and untamed as the winds that danced over the plains. And so, the people spoke of him with laughter and love, for he was the wild man who had come to dwell among them, and in their hearts, his name was honored.

* * *

The warm glow of the evening sun cast long shadows in Ziusudra's quarters. Shelves lined with herbs, potions, and ancient medical scrolls filled the room with a soothing, earthy aroma. Ziusudra, a small, gentle woman with wise eyes, worked diligently at her table, mixing a new remedy.

A sharp knock at the door interrupted her concentration. Ziusudra looked up, frowning slightly. "Enter," she called, her voice calm but curious.

The door swung open, and in stepped Ishtar, flanked by her loyal servant Nargul. Ishtar's presence was commanding and filled the room with an air of authority and menace. Her eyes glittered with a predatory gleam as she regarded Ziusudra.

"Good evening, Ziusudra," Ishtar said smoothly, her voice like silk. "I have come to discuss a matter of great importance."

Ziusudra straightened, her demeanor respectful but cautious. "What brings you here, Lady Ishtar?"

Ishtar moved closer, her servant lingering by the door. "Nargul and I are building a coalition, a group of influential individuals within the palace. We believe that our combined strength and wisdom can guide Uruk to greater prosperity and power."

Ziusudra's eyes narrowed slightly. "And you wish for me to join this coalition?"

Ishtar smiled, a hint of something sinister in her eyes. "Precisely. Thy skills and knowledge are unparalleled. With thy support, we could achieve much."

Ziusudra shook her head, her expression firm. "I serve the people of Uruk and the gods. My duty is to heal and to help, not to engage in power struggles or political machinations."

Ishtar's smile faded, replaced by a look of cold determination. "Thou are making a mistake, Ziusudra. Refusing our offer could have... unpleasant consequences."

Ziusudra met Ishtar's gaze steadily. "I cannot be swayed by threats or promises of power. My answer is no."

Ishtar's eyes flashed with anger, but she quickly composed herself. "Very well," she said icily. "But remember this conversation. Thou may find thyself regretting thy decision."

With a final, piercing look, Ishtar turned and swept out of the room, her servant following close behind. Ziusudra watched them go, a feeling of unease settling in her stomach.

The encounter with Ishtar left Ziusudra deeply unsettled. She returned to her work, but the memory of Ishtar's visit lingered in her mind. The room felt colder, the shadows longer. She knew she had made the right choice, but the foreboding sense of impending danger was hard to shake.

* * *

Enkidu wandered among the throng, his powerful frame and wild appearance attracting curious glances. The city, with its crowded alleys and towering edifices, was a far cry from the freedom of the wilderness he once roamed.

His steps led him to a popular tavern, its wooden sign creaking gently in the evening breeze. Laughter and music spilled out into the street, beckoning him inside. Pushing open the heavy door, Enkidu stepped into the warm, dimly lit room.

The tavern was filled with patrons—merchants, soldiers, and common folk—all enjoying the night's revelries. Enkidu made his way to an empty table near the back, his presence causing a momentary hush before the buzz of conversation resumed. He signaled to the serving girl, who quickly brought him a mug of ale.

As Enkidu drank, he caught the eye of the serving girl. She was a young woman with bright eyes and a warm smile, her movements graceful as she navigated the crowded room. Despite, or perhaps because of, the many scars that marked his face and body, she found him undeniably attractive. The scars spoke of bravery and battles fought, adding to his allure.

The serving girl, whose name was Aria, noticed Enkidu's interest and felt a flutter of excitement. She had heard tales of the wild man who had befriended the king, and now here he was, sitting in her tavern. Gathering her courage, she approached his table with a fresh bowl of ale.

"Would you like another, my lord?" Aria asked, her cheeks flushing slightly as she met Enkidu's gaze.

Enkidu smiled, the gesture softening his rugged features. "Yes, thank you. And please, call me Enkidu."

Aria returned his smile, feeling her heart skip a beat. "Very well, Enkidu. I am Aria."

They chatted for a while, Enkidu's deep voice mixing with Aria's light laughter. She found herself captivated by his stories of the wilderness, his strength and kindness evident in every word. Enkidu, in turn, enjoyed her company, appreciating her intelligence and warmth.

As they spoke, a group of men at a nearby table watched with growing resentment. Their leader, a wiry man with a cunning look in his eyes, smirked as he saw an opportunity to cause trouble.

"Look at the wild man," the wiry man sneered, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Thinks he's one of us now, does he?"

Enkidu's expression darkened, but he remained seated, his eyes never leaving Aria's. "Ignore them," he said quietly.

Aria glanced nervously at the men, but before she could respond, the wiry man and his companions stood and approached their table. "Hey, wild man! Why don't you show us some of those tricks you learned in the forest? Or are you just a savage after all?"

Enkidu's jaw tightened. "I am Enkidu, friend of Gilgamesh, King of Uruk. Leave us be."

The wiry man laughed, a harsh, grating sound. "Friend of the king, huh? Let us see how tough you really are."

Without warning, the man shoved Aria, causing her to stumble and cry out. Enkidu's eyes blazed with fury. He stood up, towering over the man. "You will not touch her."

The man smirked and swung a fist at Enkidu, but Enkidu was ready. He dodged the punch easily and retaliated with a powerful blow that sent the man sprawling.

The tavern erupted into chaos. The other men leaped at Enkidu, hoping to overwhelm him with their numbers. But Enkidu fought with the strength and ferocity of a wild beast, his powerful blows sending men crashing to the floor. The assailants had underestimated him, and they paid the price for their arrogance.

Amid the brawl, the tavern door slammed open, and a group of palace guards rushed in. They were followed by Nargul, his face a mask of feigned concern. "What is the meaning of this?" Nargul shouted, his voice cutting through the din. "Cease this at once!"

The guards pulled the combatants apart, but it was clear that Enkidu had emerged victorious. The men lay groaning on the floor, nursing their wounds. Nargul approached Enkidu, his eyes

cold and calculating. "Enkidu, what have you done?" Nargul demanded. "You have caused a disturbance and assaulted these men. This behavior is unbecoming of a friend of the king."

Enkidu glared at Nargul, his chest heaving with exertion. "They provoked me. They insulted me and the king, and they harmed this woman."

Nargul shook his head, his expression one of mock disappointment. "Be that as it may, violence is not the answer. You must come with us to the palace. The king will decide your fate."

As Enkidu was led away by the guards, Aria watched with a mixture of fear and admiration.

* * *

In the throne room, Gilgamesh sat on his grand throne, his face a mask of concern and frustration. Enkidu stood before him, flanked by palace guards, while Nargul and his cohort lurked in the shadows, their expressions smug with satisfaction.

Gilgamesh's voice was calm but stern. "Enkidu, you are my friend and a hero of Uruk, but your actions last night were reckless. Violence, even when provoked, can lead to chaos, and undermine the stability of our city."

Enkidu bowed his head, remorse clear in his eyes. "I am sorry, Gilgamesh. I let my anger get the better of me."

Gilgamesh turned his gaze to Nargul, his eyes narrowing. "Nargul, you brought this matter to my attention with great haste. Tell me, who are these men who provoked Enkidu?"

Nargul stepped forward, his expression one of feigned concern. "They are loyal citizens of Uruk, my king, who were merely enjoying their evening when Enkidu attacked them unprovoked."

Gilgamesh's eyes flashed with anger, but his voice remained steady. "Is that so? Bring them here. Let them speak for themselves."

The men, still nursing their bruises, were brought into the throne room. They cast nervous glances at Nargul, who gave them a subtle nod.

Gilgamesh addressed the leader of the group. "Tell me, what happened at the tavern last night?"

The man hesitated, glancing at Nargul before speaking. "We were sitting peacefully when Enkidu began to insult us. We tried to ignore him, but he attacked us without warning."

Gilgamesh's gaze was piercing. "Is that the truth? Remember, lying to your king is a grave offense."

The man swallowed hard, but before he could speak, another voice rang out. "They lie, my king!"

All eyes turned to Aria, who stepped forward, her face determined. "I was there. These men were the ones who insulted Lord Enkidu. They mocked him and provoked him until he had no choice but to defend himself. They even harmed me."

Gilgamesh leaned forward; his interest piqued. "And who are you?"

"I am Aria, a serving girl at the tavern, my lord. I saw everything."

Gilgamesh nodded thoughtfully. "Thank you for your bravery in coming forward." He then turned to Nargul, his expression hardening. "It seems the truth is quite different from what you presented, Nargul."

Nargul's face paled, but he forced a smile. "Who is she but a slattern! Her words are of no significance."

"She is a citizen of Uruk and shall be heard," thundered the king.

"Perhaps there was a misunderstanding, my king. But still, Enkidu's actions were excessive."

Gilgamesh stood, his voice rising with authority. "There was no misunderstanding. However, we cannot ignore the fact that violence occurred."

Gilgamesh addressed the court, his voice carrying the weight of his authority. "Enkidu acted in defense of his honor and mine. The men who provoked him will be punished for their deceit and disrespect. However, I urge restraint in the future."

The assailants were taken away, their fate now in the hands of the palace guards. Gilgamesh then turned to Nargul, his expression cold and calculating. "Nargul, ensure that justice is served fairly. I will be watching closely."

Nargul bowed, a hint of frustration flickering in his eyes. "As you command, my king."

With the immediate threat dealt with, Gilgamesh turned his attention back to Enkidu. "My friend, I know you struggled to control your anger, but you must understand that our enemies will use any opportunity to bring us down. We must be vigilant and wise."

Enkidu nodded, his respect for Gilgamesh deepening. "I understand, Gilgamesh. I will strive to be worthy of your trust and our friendship."

Gilgamesh smiled, placing a reassuring hand on Enkidu's shoulder. "Together, we will overcome any challenge. Uruk will be stronger because of our unity. Let us fill our bellies! I am as hungry as Ereshkigal when she is in hell!"

Suddenly, Gilgamesh stopped in his tracks, seized by a thought. It did not come from the gods, or at least not in their distinctive voices, always from the right and just out of sight. Nay, it arose from somewhere within himself. The thought—it was his own! He seized Enkidu's wrist tightly.

"I have had a thought!" he exclaimed.

"Well, yes, that is bound to happen when you must rely on your own resources and no other," replied Enkidu. "But we were speaking of filling our bellies?"

"We must seek out the gods and approach them in their lairs."

Enkidu gently freed his wrist from Gilgamesh's grip. "I like not where this is progressing, my friend."

"Hark, if the gods will not come to us..."

"Then we must go to the gods," finished the wild man reluctantly.

Gilgamesh beamed. "What say you?"

"Where are we to find the gods?"

After a hearty meal they returned to the throne room and Gilgamesh summoned for maps and had them spread out upon a large table. "There," he said, pointing at a spot on the map. Enkidu studied the place.

"The Western Cedar Forest? There are a considerable number of cedar woodlands."

"It is a ten-day quick march to the forest. They tell that it is guarded by a great daemon from the underworld named Humbaba."

Enkidu grimaced. "This venture grows ever more daunting."

"Bah! Between the two of us, there is no creature that can best us, noble Enkidu."

"True, but must the abode of the gods lie so far from the comforts of grand Uruk?"

Ninsun was gazing into an azure pool of still water by the light of a single candle as Gilgamesh and Enkidu entered the temple chamber. They stood patiently until the goddess raised her gaze and bestowed upon them a smile.

"Beloved son. It is always a joy and a blessing to behold thee." She turned her amiable gaze toward Enkidu, who could only stare at the floor, so overwhelmed was he by the goddess's beauty and radiance. "Strong and valiant Enkidu, loyal friend to my son. I bid thee welcome."

Enkidu bowed and dared a quick, furtive glance at her. "Great Lady, I am honored."

She then addressed Gilgamesh again. "And are all your preparations complete for this grand undertaking?"

"Aye, divine mother, but we embark not on an adventure. We journey to survey the Western lands for future expansion of our realm," Gilgamesh's voice flowed as smooth as honey.

"Is that so?" Ninsun smiled. "And you, companionable Enkidu, sharest you these sentiments as well?"

"I but follow my friend and King whithersoever he leads. I am a man of the wilderness, dear lady, and give little heed to the affairs of politics or religion. Such paths lead but to a dusty demise."

"Do you ponder our fate through the seeing waters?" Gilgamesh asked indicating the fountain of still water between them.

"I ask the heavens why my son has a restless heart and what may be done to calm him."

"And what do they say?"

"Alas I hear them not as do thee, my son. The future is as a deep mist to mine eyes. It is though another influence is at work. One that is foreign to me. Something ... new."

Enkidu grunted. "I like this not for an auspicious occasion."

"It is not. The future is unknowable to us so we must make do with what we possess. Together Gilgamesh, thee and thy friend may defeat the gods themselves if you but trust in each other."

"It shall be as you will, mother," proclaimed Gilgamesh.

"You are a good man," said Ninsun kissing Gilgamesh's cheeks. She turned to the Wild Man. "And you, noble Enkidu, friend of my son, I do charge you to watch over my son and protect yourself at all costs."

"I do so swear, most gracious and beauteous of gods and mortals," promised Enkidu solemnly.

"And I accept you as a son, O eloquent man of the woods," she stated and kissed Enkidu's cheeks. The wild man colored and backed away silently, his head bowed less he reveal his feelings.

When the two heroes left the temple Ninsun consulted the pool once more.

"Great father, have pity on my sons and let them return to Uruk in triumph. Hear a mother's prayer!" A frigid wind blew in from the West suggesting a bitter future.

* * *

The great Western Forest, also known as the Forest of Enlil, was a place of ancient and untamed majesty, where the wild essence of the earth manifested in towering cedar trees that stretched towards the heavens, their branches weaving a dense canopy that filtered sunlight into verdant, dappled patterns upon the forest floor. This sacred grove, watched over by the god Enlil,

the lord of the wind, was a realm where the divine presence was palpable, imbuing the very air with a sense of awe and reverence.

The trees within this hallowed forest were of such age and size that their roots delved deep into the earth, intertwining with the fabric of the underworld, while their crowns touched the sky, mingling with the realm of the gods. The air was thick with the resinous scent of cedar, a fragrance at once uplifting and grounding, serving as a constant reminder of the forest's sanctity and its connection to the divine.

Beneath the canopy, the forest floor was a labyrinth of ferns and underbrush, a verdant tapestry that was home to a myriad of creatures. Deer, wild boars, and other beasts roamed freely, governed only by the natural laws that ruled this place since the dawn of creation. The sounds of the forest—a symphony of bird calls, the rustling of leaves, and the distant roar of waterfalls—created a harmonious backdrop that spoke of an older world, untouched by the ambitions of cities and kings.

The Forest of Enlil was not merely a physical location but a symbol of the divine mystery and power that governed the world. It stood as a testament to the might of the gods, particularly Enlil, who presided over this natural cathedral as both its creator and protector. Within its confines, the boundary between the mundane and the sacred blurs, offering those who dare enter a glimpse of the eternal and the transcendent.

Yet, for all its beauty and splendor, the forest was also a place of danger. Guarded by Humbaba, a fearsome creature appointed by Enlil to protect the cedar from the hands of mortals, Humbaba's presence ensured that the forest remained a place of awe and respect, a domain where the gods' will was manifest and where the folly of hubris was swiftly met with retribution.

Their journey's commencement had lagged two suns beyond the foretold time, hindered by the machinations of Council Nargul and his unwavering dedication to preparation. Not a single detail could escape scrutiny ere they were permitted to embark.

Scarcely had they set forth when Nargul, his countenance as wily as a desert rat, hastened to the vanguard where King Gilgamesh and Enkidu led the procession.

"O Sovereign of renown," the councilman intoned, his voice a wheedling hiss, awaiting the monarch's recognition. Gilgamesh, in his imperial patience, delayed his response, a silent testament to his weariness of Nargul's presence.

"What is it, Councilman?"

"Do we traverse the Gideon Path to the Western Cedar Forest, my king?"

"Such is our course," the King affirmed.

"And what concern is that of yours, Councilman?" Enkidu interjected; his gaze storm laden.

"Naught but a passing thought, noble companion of the King. My steed bears me well, yet I pondered if the Way of Pandoria might prove less arduous for our footmen, the very sinew and spirit of our grand host," Nargul's voice rose, ensuring his words reached the ears of the advancing soldiers.

"Indeed, the thought had crossed my mind," Gilgamesh replied with a grace, "for the very reasons you mention. Yet, upon deeper reflection, I deemed the Gideon Path less fraught with the peril of barbarian and rogue assaults."

"Is it then, O King, that you doubt the valor of your men to quell such scoundrels?" Nargul chided.

With a laugh as if at a jest, the King retorted, "Far from it! I harbor no fear for any adversary against my warriors' might. Yet, it is the wisdom of a cautious leader to spare his brethren

unnecessary peril. For a soldier's life is ever shadowed by danger; to evade needless risk is the mark of sagacity."

A murmur of assent among the ranks signaled Nargul's failure to kindle discord, while Gilgamesh's stature soared in his people's eyes.

As night descended and camp was established, the men partook in their evening repast before retiring. A few lingered by the fire, sharing in wine and ale, delving into discussions reserved for such gatherings. Nargul mingled amongst them, unveiling a sack of Black Lotus petals, a rare indulgence procured from his dens of vice, promising an unmatched quality. The bag circulated, and as the men savored the dark foliage, laughter erupted sporadically under its influence.

Seizing the moment, Nargul voiced his apprehensions, "My comrades, I fear our expedition might end in misfortune. The Western Forest, gateway to the divine realm, is said to be guarded by Humbaba, a beast of the netherworld! I invoke his name with trepidation, lest he be lured by its utterance!" His audience, now as silent as the enveloping night, stared into the flames, their minds adrift in visions.

"I am but a mortal," Nargul proclaimed, thumping his ornately adorned chest, "Yet history dictates that no commander should knowingly lead his forces into a battle against insurmountable odds, against deities, the supreme entities."

"Gilgamesh, the king, strides ahead, leading the vanguard. Ever is he the foremost to clash in battle. Such a sovereign I shall willingly follow," declared one besotted speaker.

"Verily, a valiant soul he is, that much I concede," mused Nargul with weight. "Were I graced with divinity as he, I too would stand at the forefront. Perceive you not the heightened peril? Gilgamesh bears the supreme risk of meeting his end, and whence then shall we find ourselves without his sage direction? All would crumble to dust before our gaze! Ponder this, my brethren, and comrades, should we be bereft of our godlike ruler, who amongst us shall rise to fill his stead, escort us back to our hearths, and shepherd us towards a resplendent destiny? Who here has not dwelled upon this madness?" It borders on lunacy! Rest easy this night in the Lotus's embrace, for tomorrow's reality may starkly contrast our present comfort." With these words, Nargul secured his Lotus, rose, and departed, leaving a wake of contemplation behind.

Within hearing, back in the shadow of night, Enkidu stood quietly and absorbed the words spoken around the fire. His face was set firm, and his fingers traced delicate patterns over the hilt of his knife.

At last, their journey had borne them to the verge of hallowed grounds, and they established their encampment beside waters that flowed clear and sweet. It was not long thereafter that the sentinels, scouting the perimeter, came upon an iron gate, wrought, and set into the very face of a cliff. This gate, as if carved by the hands of the gods themselves, stood as a silent guardian of mysteries untold.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu, upon hearing of this discovery, accompanied the sentinels to behold the sight. Yet, what greeted them was no mere structure of iron and stone, but a guardian, arrayed in the crimson of dawn's first light. His armor, a fearsome meld of metal chain and spikes sharp enough to pierce the heart of any folly-driven soul, promised a swift end to the unwary. The being stood not more than as high as a mortal man's breast, yet powerful was his physique.

"I like his armor," remarked Enkidu, his voice tinged with the anticipation of battle. "I would peel him out of it as one might shuck a prawn."

"Hold, invaders!" the sentry commanded, his voice echoing against the stone. "This is the Forest of Enlil the wise, and this gate leads to his heavenly domain. None may pass."

Stepping forth, Gilgamesh, his stature as regal as the lineage he bore, declared, "I am Gilgamesh, ruler of Uruk, son of Ninsun the gracious and great Lugalbanda king of men. I bid thee let me and my companion pass, for I would have words with Enlil."

"I am Humbaba, guardian of this forest by the edict of Enlil himself. No mortal may enter these gates, not even one touched by divinity. Do not provoke a battle, for it will not end well for thee."

Enkidu, his patience worn thin by the standoff, snorted dismissively. "Enough of this banter! I am Enkidu the wild! Stand aside or prepare to meet thy doom!"

In response, Humbaba drew forth two long swords, one in each hand, brandishing them with the skill of one who has dedicated a lifetime to the art of war. The air about them seemed to thrum with the tension of impending conflict.

"Behold, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, bold challengers of fate," Humbaba intoned, his voice steady as the ground beneath their feet. "This threshold you seek to cross is not merely a boundary of earth and stone, but of divine will and mortal temerity. I stand as the arbiter of that divide, chosen by Enlil, the all-seeing. Turn back now, and live. Press forward and know that the path you choose leads to consequences not even the gods can foresee."

Thus, before the iron gate, beneath the gaze of ancient cliffs, did the sons of Uruk stand at the cusp of legend. Their names, already whispered by the winds of destiny, were poised to be etched in the annals of time, for better or for ill. The clash of wills, the meeting of mortal ambition and divine decree, was about to unfold, a saga to be sung by the bards of ages yet to come.

Gilgamesh drew his sword and stepped forward, a harsh light burning within his eyes. Enkidu drew as well and circled around to the side. "As you will," intoned Humbaba, dancing away in time to avoid Gilgamesh's blade singing near his throat. His sword flashed and knocked Gilgamesh's aside while blocking Enkidu's attack and kicking him in the chest, sending him flying back. Humbaba's command of the martial arts was beyond anything seen by mortal men. "I warned you fair. And now you reap what you sow!" Spinning in the air, Humbaba knocked the sword from Enkidu's hand and smashed the hilt of the other against Gilgamesh's jaw, forcing him back.

Enkidu, amid the turmoil, sought his weapon with urgency. "My heart tells me that our plan of direct assault was ill-conceived. Verily we have invited disaster upon ourselves!"

"Indeed," Gilgamesh conceded, cleansing his lips of the blood that had been drawn forth. "I am most eager to hear any counsel you might offer, my companion Enkidu."

"Strike with greater force!" was the counsel offered.

Humbaba, wearied by their discourse, interjected with impatience. "Engage in battle or engage in dialogue—which shall it be?" he pressed.

"You have stood against many a warrior seeking passage through this gate, have you not?" Gilgamesh inquired, his breaths coming heavy and laden with fatigue.

"Against all warriors!"

"Surely you are wearied by this ceaseless conflict."

"Aye, but such is the decree bestowed upon me by the heavens, and I shall adhere to it or meet my demise in the endeavor."

"We harbor no ill intent of malice nor dishonor towards the celestial beings. Our wish is to exalt them as they decree and observe them in their sacred edicts. I convey the grave concerns of the people of Uruk which only the deities may resolve."

Humbaba, beneath his armored guise, inclined his head. "My spirit empathizes with the tribulations of thy people, yet my duty forbids me from granting thee passage even should my heart wish it."

"Could you not divert your gaze or perchance be elsewhere?" Enkidu ventured.

"The celestials are not so readily deceived."

"Have you really endeavored; I mean with sincere effort?" pressed the Wild Man. In response, Humbaba surged forth, assailing Enkidu, wielding his swords with fervor, driving Enkidu backward with relentless force.

Gilgamesh hastened towards the fray, and the guardian of the gate engaged them both, alternating his blows with adeptness.

"I possess the stamina to endure this contest indefinitely!" exclaimed Humbaba, his movements as tempestuous as a whirlwind possessed.

"I miss the old times when men talked over a cask of beer and mended their ways," said Enkidu.

"Aye, it's apparent by the scars that cover your body," commented Gilgamesh.

"There are times when physical pressure has its uses, my Lord. I see no end to this battle for many hours, and I would quench my parched throat. Shall we have a short armistice while we refresh ourselves?" Enkidu glanced at his king.

Gilgamesh shrugged. "I could eat," he said. "Would you partake with us, illustrious combatant?" the monarch inquired.

Humbaba's movement halted, his gaze fixed upon the monarch with a mix of wonder and curiosity. "A first it is to receive hospitality from one's foe," declared the warrior with a tone of astonishment. Humbaba, with a dismissive air, unfastened his helm, unveiling a countenance as youthful and serene as a man in his prime, barely a quarter-century old.

"A mere youth!" the monarch voiced in surprise.

"Yet I surpass in age even your forebear, O sovereign of realms," Humbaba retorted with mirth.

Gilgamesh exchanged a glance with his comrade, who had remained peculiarly mute. "The gods' handiwork this must be, Enkidu! Be on your guard," he cautioned.

Enkidu, acknowledging with a nod, made arrangements for refreshments, shade from the sun's fierce embrace, and cushions for their repose upon the earth. Swiftly these comforts were provided, and the trio settled, Enkidu serving the libations, honoring first Gilgamesh as both divinity and monarch, then Humbaba, the esteemed guest, and lastly himself, for the wine's delight was much to his liking.

Raising his bowl, Gilgamesh posed, "To what do we toast?" Humbaba, lifting his own, quipped,

"To your magnanimous welcome, though soon I must claim your life and your comrade's."

"To that, I shall drink," Enkidu concurred, emptying his bowl at once.

A peculiar notion, unsettling and alien, intruded upon Gilgamesh's thoughts. It was not a divine whisper; rather, it emerged from within, a sensation both novel and perplexing. Enkidu's composure seemed at odds with the situation. Gilgamesh recognized his friend's valor, yet his demeanor strayed from their known past, igniting a twinge of doubt and a shadow of sorrow in the monarch's heart.

Humbaba's eyes roved over the opulent setting—the tent, the gem-encrusted vessels. "A duel most lavishly hosted, great King. With riches aplenty, what more do you seek from the deities?"

"Insight," was the monarch's simple answer.

"And what truths do you desire?" Humbaba inquired.

"The silence of the gods, the plight of man—these mysteries I yearn to unravel."

"And think you enlightenment will ease your quest?" Humbaba pondered.

"Indeed. Will you grant us passage?"

"Were the choice mine, noble monarch, freely would I let you pass, endorsing your quest.

Yet bound by divine decree I am. It grieves me to face such a valiant and generous adversary, but I must fulfill the gods' command."

Gilgamesh, understanding, expressed admiration for Humbaba's dedication and prowess.

The monarch's utterances stirred unease in Enkidu, whose heart harbored envy.

Humbaba, savoring his libation, then adorned his crimson visage of dread. "A vintage most exquisite! Shall we to the skirmish prosheed...proceed?"

They departed the tent's shade. Humbaba's step faltered, yet swiftly he regained his stance, unsheathed his blades, and cast them through the air, their songs merging with the wind.

Irritation crossed his features as if sand vexed his eyes, and with a vigorous shake akin to a hound shedding water, he faced his adversaries anew. "Long has it been since such potent brew touched my lips."

Humbaba lurched forward, swinging his own blade with a force that shook the ground. But as the battle wore on, his movements became less precise, his once-terrifying speed dulled, replaced by a clumsy strength. His strikes grew slower, heavier, each one requiring a little more effort to complete as he blinked to keep his vision clear.

"Is that truly the best you have to offer?" Enkidu taunted, sidestepping a clumsy swing that sent Humbaba stumbling forward. Humbaba shook his head, trying to clear it, but his eyes grew glassy, and his swings faltered even further.

"Ha! I'll show you what I have!" Humbaba slurred, though his words were now thick and unsteady. He raised his sword, swaying as he did so, before lurching forward with a poorly aimed thrust that missed Gilgamesh by a wide margin.

"Is something wrong, Humbaba?" Gilgamesh asked dryly, circling him with ease. Humbaba squinted, confusion flashing across his face as he tried to regain his footing, but it was clear that he was losing the battle with his own senses.

His sword dropped from his hand, clattering to the ground, as he staggered. "I... I don't..." he mumbled, his voice trailing off. With one final, unsteady step, Humbaba's knees buckled, and he fell forward, landing with a heavy thud. Within moments, his deep, thunderous snores filled the clearing, his massive form sprawled out on the ground, completely oblivious to his surroundings.

Gilgamesh sheathed his sword, casting an amused look at Enkidu. "It seems our friend doesn't have much of an alcohol tolerance," he remarked, raising an eyebrow.

Enkidu chuckled, setting his sword aside. "A pity. He put up a good fight, though."

They stepped forward, lifting one of Humbaba's arms and rolling him onto his back. With a laugh, Gilgamesh placed a makeshift pillow beneath Humbaba's head, while Enkidu covered him with a blanket they'd brought for the journey.

"Sleep well, mighty Humbaba," Enkidu said with a grin. "Perhaps you'll be a bit more lively in your dreams."

Gilgamesh confessed, eyeing Enkidu with unease, "His defeat remains enigmatic, for I was certain of my own end." Silence fell upon Gilgamesh, seeking solace in Enkidu's gaze.

"The whims of battle and destiny, my Lord, rival even the mysteries of love. Take pride in this victory, for it shall be remembered," Enkidu counseled. With resolve, Gilgamesh approached the contentious gate. Enkidu, lingering, emptied Humbaba's wine, crushing the black lotus petals beneath his foot, then followed Gilgamesh.

The path wound through ancient, towering cedars, their branches forming a canopy that blocked out the sun. The air grew cooler, and a sense of otherworldliness settled over the companions. At last, they reached a clearing where a lush, verdant valley lay before them, teeming with life and beauty.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu stood in awe of the paradise before them. "This place," Gilgamesh said softly, "it feels sacred. Could this be the birthplace of mankind?"

Enkidu's eyes were wide with wonder as he said, "I heard that place was in a garden some leagues south of this place where four river courses meet. There is a great being of light carrying a flaming sword that stands guard at its entrance. This place is a realm untouched by time and sorrow."

They walked further into the valley, observing the harmonious balance of nature. Crystal-clear streams flowed through fields of wildflowers, and animals moved freely, unafraid of the intruders.

As they explored, they encountered a group of people dressed in simple, yet elegant robes made of fine, natural fibers. The inhabitants had a serene and almost ethereal presence, their faces marked by tranquility and contentment. Their eyes reflected a deep sense of inner peace, as though they were unburdened by the concerns of the outside world.

An elder, with silver hair cascading down his shoulders and a staff adorned with intricate carvings, stepped forward to greet them. "Welcome, travelers. I am Elior, the elder of this valley. What brings you to our haven?"

"We have come seeking answers," Gilgamesh began, addressing Elior. "The gods have fallen silent, and our people are suffering."

Elior smiled gently, his eyes filled with a knowing sadness. "Come, rest with us and share in our meal. We will tell you our story."

The inhabitants led Gilgamesh and Enkidu to a shaded grove where a communal area had been set up with low tables surrounded by cushions. The air was filled with the sweet scent of blooming flowers and the soft murmur of a nearby stream. The people moved with grace and purpose, setting out fruits, bread, and bowls of clear, cool water.

As they sat down, Elior began to speak. "We, too, have waited for the gods, prayed for their guidance, but they remain silent. Our ancestors settled here many generations ago, believing this to be a sacred place where the gods would one day return. We may not leave for there is now a guardian at the sacred gate."

Another inhabitant, a woman named Leora, with eyes the color of the sea, continued. "We have everything we need provided by this garden. The earth yields its bounty freely, and the streams flow with pure water. We have no need to labor for our sustenance."

Gilgamesh looked around, noticing that the people indeed seemed to live without want. "But what do you do with your time?" he asked.

Elior sighed softly. "We wait and we pray. Each day, we gather to offer our devotions to the gods, hoping that they will answer. We live in harmony with nature, tending to the plants and animals, but beyond that, we do little else."

Enkidu looked puzzled. "But how do you find purpose without action or striving?"

Leora responded, her voice gentle. "We believe that the gods will one day reveal themselves and provide us with direction. Until then, we wait."

As they spent time with the inhabitants, Gilgamesh began to see the futility in their endless waiting and praying. The people had become complacent, relying entirely on the gods for guidance and purpose, doing nothing to improve their own lives or their understanding of the world.

Gilgamesh stood, feeling a growing sense of frustration. "This is a waste of time and energy," he declared. "Waiting for the gods without taking action will lead to nothing. We must act, but our actions must be based on rational thought and purpose."

Enkidu nodded in agreement. "Our journey has shown us that true strength and purpose come from combining faith with decisive action."

Gilgamesh addressed the inhabitants, his voice filled with conviction. "You have a beautiful place here, but do not let it become a prison of your own making. Use what you have been given to create, to build, to learn. Waiting alone will not bring the gods to you—action, based on wisdom and purpose, will lead you forward."

"Fear not," Enkidu reassured Gilgamesh on their journey back, "We shall find another path to the divine. Your wisdom shall guide us." Yet, Gilgamesh's spirit remained troubled, haunted by an indiscernible guilt, while Enkidu retreated into silence for the remainder of their return.

As they neared the grand walls of Uruk, Gilgamesh and his followers were met with exuberant cheers from the people at the barricades. Entering through the majestic Ishtar gates, they were bathed in flowers and adulations.

Gilgamesh, with a heart swelled with joy, exclaimed to Enkidu, "Behold, friend, the warmth of our people's welcome! Their hearts have surely turned back to us!"

Enkidu, with a voice meant only for the king, murmured, "It is the festivity they cherish, not the hand that sponsors it. The joy of a day without toil overshadows the love for a monarch."

Disturbed by Enkidu's uncharacteristic grimness, Gilgamesh queried, "Why does darkness cloud your spirit, my companion?"

"I distrust masses of men," Enkidu confessed, "An unsettling scent lingers in the air."

Gilgamesh, attempting to lighten the mood, jested, "Since when have you become so delicate to the scents of the earth?"

Enkidu's interest in the banter faded swiftly, as a sudden uproar, like thunder, surged through Uruk's streets, followed by panicked screams. A tide of frightened citizens rushed towards them, fleeing an unseen terror.

"What calamity befalls us?" Gilgamesh called out to the fleeing masses.

Between breaths, a voice from the crowd cried, "The Great Bull of Heaven has broken free, sowing death through the city's heart!" And with that, the bearer of the ill news vanished into the throng, leaving Gilgamesh and Enkidu like stones in a stream of fleeing people.

Amidst the clamor that surged towards them, Gilgamesh and Enkidu exchanged a swift glance, then hastened against the flow of panicked souls to the heart of the turmoil.

In the crossroads of five alleys, a makeshift market thronged until the Bull of Heaven's wrath laid waste, its fury scattering buns and loaves skyward as if birds fleeing their confines. The last of the onlookers vanished into the labyrinth of Uruk, leaving the space to the divine beast and the two heroes.

Gilgamesh, eyeing the chaos, decreed, "We must outlast the creature! Its strength surpasses ours. I shall lead it away, for my speed is unmatched."

Yet Enkidu, with a steady grip, countered, "Let me draw its ire. Your fleetness outshines mine, but endurance is my ally."

After a moment's contemplation, Gilgamesh acquiesced, "Wise as ever. Proceed, and may fortune favor us."

"Ever am I to be correct in all things! It is my curse!" grumbled Enkidu.

As Enkidu diverted the bull's fury with a hurled melon, Gilgamesh ascended a potter's rooftop, overlooking the ensuing chase. Enkidu's ruse led the beast through the city's veins, its breath hot on his trail.

From his vantage, Gilgamesh leaped, descending upon the Bull of Heaven with the force of destiny. Blinded momentarily by the burst of melon, he grappled with the beast's horns, every muscle straining against the divine fury.

The bull's rage knew no bounds, thrashing wildly to dislodge its assailant. Enkidu, seizing the moment, plunged his blades into the creature's flank, eliciting a roar that shook the foundations of Uruk.

Though the bull managed to dislodge Enkidu, the knives remained, a testament to their defiance. Gilgamesh, exploiting the lodged blade, steered the bull into a fatal submission, its massive form fighting his every attempt. He reached out for one of Enkidu's knives, but it was far from his reach.

Enkidu, rejoining the fray, aided Gilgamesh in delivering the coup de grâce by plucking out one of his own knives from the flesh of the beast and tossing it over to Gilgamesh who flipped the blade around and plunged it into the neck of the beast and cut its throat.

The bull stumbled to a stop, its great lungs strained for breath and blood dripped from its mouth and wounds. It gasped a few moments as if it knew it was seeing the world for the last time. It swayed and then keeled over. As it fell, the shadow of Ishtar's temple loomed over them, the goddess herself glaring with untold fury at the defeat of her avenger.

Under Ishtar's screams Enkidu pulled Gilgamesh out from under the great beast and helped him to his feet.

Thus, the great Bull of Heaven lay defeated at the temple's threshold, a sorrowful end near its heavenly domain. Ishtar's wrath was palpable, a storm of divine retribution brewing over the heads of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, heroes of Uruk who dared defy the gods.

In the aftermath of their celestial confrontation, the goddess Ishtar, her visage a tempest of divine ire, proclaimed unto Gilgamesh, "Thou hast felled the sacred Bull of Heaven! Hear now, O King of Uruk, the gods themselves shall rise against thee. Thy fate in the netherworld is sealed, a realm of shadows and obscurity, where thy name shall be swallowed by the void, unremembered by history and song."

Enkidu, standing beside the vanquished beast, remarked upon the goddess's wrath, "Her fury is unleashed upon us. What transgression have we wrought now?"

Gilgamesh, with a weight of uncertainty, replied, "It perplexes the mind. We returned her bull, expecting perhaps gratitude."

"Aye, one would think so," Enkidu mused, then jestingly suggested, "Perchance she desires a portion of the offering, for it was her beast." Without another word Enkidu cut the Pride of the Bull of Heaven from its body and flung the bloody meat at the queen of heaven striking her about the visage.

The two heroes, mindful of the deity's angered state, chose to depart, Gilgamesh uttering a regretful acknowledgment of the goddess's power and their own mortal limitations.

Angry Ishtar met with cunning Nargul deep within the private chambers of her temple where many men entered but few ever left alive. Still raging from the insults hurled at her by Gilgamesh and Enkidu. "They must be punished for desecrating the divine sacrifice and the mortal form I use. I wish Gilgamesh to suffer as he has made me suffer! I shall take from him that which is most precious!" She grabbed Nargul by the robes and shook him savagely. "And you, loyal Nargul shall be the instrument of my revenge! Together we shall rid this kingdom of the malevolent ruler and his dog!"

"And the manner of his end, gracious mistress?" asked Nargul in honeyed tones.

"I care not so long as it drawn out and painful, his last moments an agony of existence."

Nargul pondered a moment and then his eyes lit up as a thought formed. "Ah! I believe I know the method of approach! It is one that you know well, my goddess."

With the bull of Heaven dead, a festival was held to make up for the cancelled sacrificial holiday. Gilgamesh held sway on a raised platform outside the palace where all Uruk were welcomed with wine, music, dancing, and lots of steaks. It was a splendid party, and the people of the city said to each other how much the King has changed since his friendship with the Wildman of the woods. They praised Enkidu as a wise and thoughtful man who was like an older brother to the king, and they were well pleased.

Enkidu enjoyed the festivities more than anyone, savoring every bite, every drink, and every laugh that rose from the crowd. His joy was unbridled, his laughter ringing through the air as he reveled in the company of friends and the adoration of Uruk. As dusk began to fall, he found himself slumped comfortably in a chair beside Gilgamesh, his bowl empty.

"More wine!" he called impatiently, and a thunderous belch roared out of his mouth. He laughed, waving a hand to the cheering crowd, and shouted, "Count yourself fortunate it chose to exit from that end!"

The crowd roared its approval, echoing his laughter as a servant handed him a new bowl brimming with rich wine. Enkidu, without a moment's hesitation, drained the bowl in one long pull, tossing it aside with a satisfied sigh. Rising from his seat, he took a step forward, but stumbled, catching himself at the last moment. He opened his mouth as if to say something to Gilgamesh, but no words came. Instead, his gaze grew unfocused, and he clutched his chest as an unnatural pallor began to creep across his face.

Gilgamesh, sensing that something was terribly wrong, locked eyes with Enkidu. In that silent exchange, Gilgamesh understood his friend's pain and felt a sinking dread tighten his chest. Before he could react, Enkidu fell to the floor like a stone, his massive form slumped in silence. Those nearby laughed, thinking the Wildman had finally met his match in wine, but Gilgamesh knew differently. Leaping over the table, he reached Enkidu's side and lifted him, cradling his friend in his arms.

"Enkidu!" he cried; his voice thick with fear. Enkidu's head lolled back, his breaths shallow and labored, his gaze struggling to hold steady. With trembling hands, he gripped Gilgamesh's arm, a tear of blood tracing down his cheek.

"Gilgamesh," he whispered, his voice a frail shadow of its usual strength, "I... I die, great King, and best of friends."

The laughter of the crowd faded into silence as those around realized the gravity of the scene. Enkidu, breathing unevenly, looked up at Gilgamesh, his eyes clouded with a haunting mix of sorrow and love.

"You have been more than a friend to me—you are my brother, my king, the other half of my soul," he said, his voice growing weaker. "Together, we have tasted life's sweetest wine and

fought as one heart in battle. You brought me from the wilds to know the warmth of brotherhood, to laugh, to love, to live as only men can live."

Gilgamesh's hands trembled as he held Enkidu, his heart torn between grief and disbelief. "You will not die, my friend," he whispered, his voice tight with determination. "You are strong; nothing can take you from me."

But Enkidu shook his head, a sad smile on his lips. "It is the gods' vengeance on me now... vengeance for my pride, for what I did to Humbaba. I knew it was wrong... spiking his drink, robbing him of his senses, making him helpless before us." He paused; his face drawn with pain. "I have betrayed the sacred, Gilgamesh. I knew, and I still did it—for you, for our glory. And now... the gods demand a price."

As Gilgamesh clutched him tighter, Ziusudra, the healer, hurried forward, kneeling beside them. She laid her hands upon Enkidu, her face darkening as she examined him. She touched the bloody tear with a finger.

"Poison," she murmured, a flash of horror crossing her face. "I know this. A cruel, silent poison—one known well as the work of Ishtar."

Gilgamesh's eyes blazed, anger swelling within him like a storm. "Ishtar..." he whispered, his voice filled with rage and grief. But Ziusudra shook her head gently.

"There is no proof, my king," she said softly. "Only the knowledge that this poison is one her hands have touched before."

Enkidu gasped, his breathing shallow and his hand trembling as it reached for Gilgamesh's arm, gripping it with a sorrow that went deeper than pain. "Forgive me, my friend... forgive me for what I have brought upon us both. I would give anything for one more day by your side, one more victory to share... but the gods have claimed me." His voice softened, his strength fading. "Go on, my king, with the courage we forged together. Remember me, not in sorrow but in strength."

And with that, Enkidu's hand fell still, his spirit leaving with the unspoken promise that their bond would endure beyond the reach of death itself.

A deep, anguished howl tore from Gilgamesh's throat, echoing across the silent crowd, piercing the night as his grief overflowed. He clung to Enkidu's lifeless form, refusing to let go even as the weight of his loss bore down upon him. And as one, the people of Uruk knelt upon the ground and grieved for their fallen hero.

For three days, Gilgamesh refused to leave his friend's side, holding vigil, fighting against the truth that Enkidu was truly gone. At last, the odor of decay drove him to allow the body to be laid upon the pyre. Gilgamesh stood, hollow and numb, as the flames took his friend, his brother, his other half. The ashes were gathered reverently into an urn, still warm from the fire, which he carried to the temple of Ninsun. He placed it before her altar, whispering, "Care for him, Mother, as you cared for me, for he was your son as much as I."

And thus, Enkidu's spirit was entrusted to the care of Ninsun, to remain in the temple of Uruk for all eternity, guarded by the one who had loved both him and Gilgamesh as her own. But the shadow of Ishtar lingered, her poison's touch forever staining the bond that had been the greatest joy in Gilgamesh's life. And in the heart of the grieving king, a spark of defiance grew, his grief hardening into a resolve that would drive him to seek justice, no matter the cost.

For many days, Gilgamesh ventured not into the gaze of the public. He decreed silence upon the streets that bordered his palace and entertained no visitors. Thus, the city languished under the shadow of their sovereign's seclusion.

Ninsun, with a determination that brooked no denial, breached the guard to the royal chamber, ignoring their protests as she strode in. There, upon his throne, did Gilgamesh repose, his visage buried within the cradle of his hands, ensnared in deep contemplation. The weight of his sorrow had left his once-vibrant face drawn and haunted, as if the light of life itself had dimmed within him.

“O my son,” she implored, her voice both tender and firm, “thy mourning for thy brother hath endured too long. 'Tis time thou shouldered thy kingly duties once more. Thy people yearn for thy leadership, their voices soft without the guidance of their king.”

Yet Gilgamesh offered no reply, so consumed was he within the labyrinth of his sorrows, his heart heavy with the ache of Enkidu’s death. He seemed lost, as if he alone bore the weight of his grief, and none might understand.

“O Gish!” Ninsun exclaimed, her words sharper, edged with worry.

At the sound of his childhood name, Gilgamesh’s gaze stirred, his eyes lifting to meet the divine visage of his mother. “Mother,” he murmured, his voice distant and hollow, “thou wert not summoned.”

“Must I await an invocation as though a mere handmaiden?” she countered, coming to him with open arms. “I am thy mother, and by such right, I claim audience.” She drew close and enfolded him in a gentle embrace, feeling the weight of his burden as if it were her own. “Tell me, Gish, what burdens thy heart beyond the grief of thy companion’s demise?”

Gilgamesh leaned into her, his head resting upon her shoulder as though he were a boy once more, weary from some long and arduous journey. “In witnessing the life fade from Enkidu’s eyes, a dread unknown to me before took hold. I am tormented by visions of my own end. What purpose serves a life if it but ends as his did, like a wisp of smoke?” His voice grew tight, a mixture of anger and despair. “To then dwell in the netherworld, a realm of shadows and regret, mourning what once was—how can I find peace in the face of such an end?”

Ninsun stroked his hair, her own heart heavy with compassion. “Listen well, O King of Uruk,” she said softly. “A son unmoved by the plight of the mortal coil would bring me no pride. The veil of the future is obscured from mortal eyes, lest the knowledge of thy fate bind thee to despair and shadow.”

Gilgamesh shook his head, his voice hollow. “But I do know the future, Mother. The loss of all that one has attained within this brief lifetime—of the loves, the victories, the memories that fade with us. What meaning does it hold if it all ends so swiftly?”

She sighed, holding his hand as if to tether him to the present. “Thou art two-thirds divine, my son. Thy lifetime may be far greater than that of a mortal. Consider, then, how thou spends this gift. It is what thou dost with the time that holds meaning, not its brevity or length.”

He pulled away slightly, his expression one of frustration. “Easy words from an eternal spirit of the celestial realm,” he said, his voice edged with bitterness. “My days are but an eye-blink to you.”

Ninsun studied him for a moment, then spoke, her tone firmer. “My son, you must lift thyself up from this self-imposed suffering. As thou suffers, so too do thy people. A king is the soul of his people and must lead from the front, that all may follow with strength and resolve.”

Gilgamesh closed his eyes, her words washing over him, but his heart remained restless, filled with shadows. “Mother,” he whispered, his voice softened by an ache that could not be soothed, “I cannot bear the thought that I, too, will fade, leaving nothing but memory in my wake.”

Ninsun's hand tightened around his, and she took a deep breath, as though weighing her words carefully. "My son, perhaps there is more that troubles thee than the shadow of mortality. There is another shadow within these walls, a shadow whose presence disturbs me greatly. I speak of Lalitu, my once-beloved friend, whose voice I have not heard in many moons."

Gilgamesh frowned; his grief momentarily softened by confusion. "Lalitu? She has not been seen for some time; it is true. I thought it merely the way of goddesses to move between realms."

Ninsun's gaze darkened, her voice lowered with solemnity. "There was a time when I might have thought the same. But now... her absence troubles me deeply. It is not merely that she is unseen; it is that the essence I once knew has faded entirely. Each time I see her face in the court, it is not Lalitu's warmth I feel. It is... something else, something colder. It is as though a stranger has taken her place, wearing her face."

Gilgamesh looked at her, the weight of her words sinking in, drawing his thoughts away from his grief, albeit reluctantly. "You believe Ishtar has claimed her entirely?"

Ninsun nodded slowly. "To take mortal form, a god must draw deeply upon the spirit that holds it. If Lalitu's voice is silenced, it may be that Ishtar has consumed her essence to sustain her own. She is... changed, Gilgamesh. No longer the friend I once knew."

Gilgamesh's face hardened, a new resolve mingling with his sorrow. "Then I grieve not only for Enkidu but for all that Ishtar has taken in her claim to power. And if she can take Lalitu, what power could she not wield against those who stand in her way?"

Ninsun placed her hand on his shoulder, her expression filled with both pride and fear. "It is not yet time to draw such conclusions, my son. But take heed. In this hour of darkness, hold fast to the memories of those who brought thee joy. Let not thy grief consume thee, for in that path lies the shadow that would see thee fall."

Gilgamesh bowed his head, her words echoing in his heart. He could feel Enkidu's absence keenly, but now he was haunted by yet another loss—the quiet vanishing of Lalitu, whose fate was shrouded in silence. As Ninsun departed, he felt her presence leave with a weighty finality, and for the first time, the fire of his own grief began to stir into something different. The king rose, bearing the memories of his friend and the unsettling thought of the goddess who had slipped into their midst, wearing the face of a friend now lost.

* * *

One day a messenger from the Oracle of Ereshkigal arrived and would leave word in the King's ear only was the orders that she was given. After much persuasion Gilgamesh came out to see the messenger. At first it was difficult for the messenger to believe that the vagabond standing before her was the great ruler of Uruk.

"O Great King!" stammered the messenger bowing at his feet. "I come with word from the Oracle!"

"And what does our loyal friend the Oracle of Ereshkigal say?"

"She summons you, great lord, for a convening. She has much to tell but it is for your ears only and concerns the future of you and your kingdom. Will you come?"

For the first time since the death of Enkidu Gilgamesh found his interests aroused. He called for his horse and guards, mounted, and rode off with the messenger.

* * *

The Oracle lifted her gaze from the deep violet fumes that rose from the fissures in the cave's floor. "Hail, Gilgamesh, King of Uruk! I deliver tidings from Shamash, sovereign of the heavens and the firmament. Seek out Utnapishtim, the deathless one, and his consort, the sole survivors of the great deluge unleashed by Enlil to quell the clamor of humankind. By virtue of his sagacity, the deities bestowed upon Utnapishtim the boon of everlasting life. He dwells at the foot of Mount Nimush, where two rivers converge at the world's brink. Yet, take heed! The domain of the twin rivers marks the boundary betwixt the lands of mortals and the divine. Venture not across, lest you forfeit your earthly essence and dissolve into naught."

"What purpose serves this quest for the man?" demanded Gilgamesh.

"In Utnapishtim lies the resolution to the enigmas that vex thee. Thine odyssey shall surpass the bounds of any before thee. Perils great and many await, yet so too does renown and everlasting glory, shouldst thou prevail."

"Naught do I hold for fame and fleeting glory, mere ephemera and worthless."

"Heed my words, O King among men, thy name shall endure and be revered long after Uruk is but dunes of dust. Thus, thou shalt attain a semblance of immortality."

"Fame, fortune, and the echo of my name upon future lips, even as I turn to dust?" He furrowed his brow and shook his head. "Such rewards hold no value to me. I seek the everlasting, true immortality!"

"Such a gift lies within the purview of the gods alone."

"You speak of a veil thin as aged parchment, separating mortal from divine. Could one such as I breach it and seize the ultimate gift?"

"To fail is to face oblivion. Seek Utnapishtim for thy answers." With these words, the Oracle vanished into the swirling purple mists, and Gilgamesh was led from the cavern and handed his steed. Thus dismissed, he journeyed back to Uruk.

* * *

Gilgamesh rode a steed of grey, a mighty Percheron, through uncharted wilds unknown to men, under the moon's watch for many cycles, until at last he approached a pass leading to the twin summits of the Mashu Mountains. Scattered along the path lay the bones of great beasts and men alike, more of the latter than any beast. The air was thick with the stench of decay, most foul.

As night's veil threatened to fall, Gilgamesh aimed to navigate the pass ere he sought rest. His mount, sensing the unseen, flicked its ears and snorted. Gilgamesh soothed the beast with gentle words. "Steady, my companion, I too perceive them." Loosening his sword in its sheath, he readied himself for whatever lurked, for he had caught the low menace of growls, the grunt of unseen beasts, and the sinister click of talons upon stone. The horse, a magnificent beast of unparalleled stature, bore the weight of its rider with ease. This was no ordinary mount; it was a breed forged from the legends themselves, with muscles rippling under a coat that shimmered like liquid night. Gilgamesh, a figure of imposing strength, held his sword at the ready, his eyes scanning the treacherous terrain for the path that would lead him through the mountains.

As the sun began its descent, casting long shadows that danced like specters, an ominous silence enveloped the land. It was in this stillness that danger lurked, for not far ahead, two mountain lions, large and ferocious, with eyes that glowed with a hunger that was both primal and terrifying, lay in wait. Their bodies were sleek yet powerful, muscles coiled with the promise

of lethal grace. They had stalked the warrior and his horse, drawn by the scent of life in the deathly quiet of their domain.

Suddenly, as if summoned by the tumult of the heavens, the lions mounted their assault, their roars cleaving the stillness with the force of tempests. The steed reared, torn between the instincts of flight and combat, yet Gilgamesh's voice, steady and authoritative, anchored the creature, even as his hand brandished the sword, its edge gleaming ominously in the waning light.

The ensuing clash was fierce and fraught with desperation. Atop his mount, the King wielded his blade with adeptness, his every parry and thrust a reflection of years honed in the arts of war. The lions, lithe and unyielding, coordinated their attack, one engaging the warrior's attention whilst the other sought a fatal breach, their talons keen as the blades of scimitars.

Fate took a grievous turn as one lion, in a bound, fastened its jaws upon the horse's neck. The noble beast, for all its might and courage, succumbed, its legs folding beneath it as it issued a cry of anguish that rent Gilgamesh's soul. With a bellow of fury and grief, he alighted, his stance firm upon the earth, his blade lifted in a vow unspoken.

The air was taut with the imminence of strife as Gilgamesh, bereft of his mount, confronted the lions afoot, his sorrow igniting a fervor that steeled his resolve. The skirmish persisted, his sword cleaving the dusk with its lethal hymn, a fusion of wrath and precision, a ballet of demise.

Victorious yet solitary, Gilgamesh stood, his breaths heavy, his sword a testament to his triumph, the lions vanquished, their predatory gaze quenched in perpetuity. He turned to his steed, his spirit laden with the weight of loss, and knelt, his touch upon the creature tender, a mute pledge that its end would not fade into oblivion.

As the celestial bodies emerged, silent observers to the conflict's close, Gilgamesh erected a cairn for his valiant steed. To the zephyrs, he imparted his adieu, utterances that evoked valor, fidelity, and the indissoluble bonds wrought in the crucible of combat.

Sheathing his sword and burdened with melancholy, Gilgamesh resumed his passage afoot, bearing the remembrance of a confrontation valiantly engaged and a comrade gallantly fallen. The mountains, erstwhile a domain of danger, now resonated with the elegy of a steed that had borne its rider through the vale of shadows, only to meet its demise in the maw of the wild.

* * *

In the dim glow of Ishtar's temple, shadows danced across the ancient stone walls, their flickers echoing the machinations within. Nargul approached Ishtar with a measured calm, though his eyes betrayed the satisfaction of a recent success. Enkidu, the Wild Man, was dead, and Gilgamesh's strength had been shaken. Now, they turned their attention to an even greater ambition.

Unseen, Ziusudra watched from the shadows, her presence hidden, her breath held steady. She listened closely, her heart beating in quiet horror as their words unfolded.

Ishtar's gaze remained fixed on the holy flames as she spoke, her voice steady and matter of fact. "Enkidu served his purpose. His death will appear to the people as divine retribution. But with him gone, Gilgamesh grows vulnerable."

Nargul inclined his head, his tone smug. "The poison was effective, as promised. Enkidu's death came in the very midst of celebration—a reminder to Gilgamesh that the gods' will is not to be trifled with." He gave a slight, sardonic smile. "And who would dare suspect? To all, it was a hand of justice."

Ishtar allowed herself a faint, approving smile. "Yet, there is more. I have watched Gilgamesh closely in his grief, and there is something amiss. I do not believe he hears the gods as he once did."

Nargul's smile faded, replaced by intrigue. "You think he's lost the connection? Surely such a revelation would leave him exposed—without the gods' guidance, he is but a man."

Ishtar nodded, her eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "Exactly. His strength of rule is tied to that divine favor, to the belief that he walks hand in hand with the gods. If he has lost that voice... then he is nothing more than a mortal wearing the crown."

Nargul crossed his arms, considering. "If this is true, it is our chance to strike not only at his spirit but at his very claim to the throne. Without divine guidance, the people will begin to see him as a ruler weakened, unfit."

Ishtar's smile returned, more calculating now. "We will let the rumors spread quietly, whispers that his grief has clouded his senses, that he is no longer fit to lead. Gilgamesh himself may falter, revealing his own isolation and insecurity. And with each passing day, his grip on Uruk will weaken."

Nargul's eyes gleamed with dark satisfaction. "And with the council primed, they will look elsewhere for leadership. To one who holds divine favor... or at least appears to." He paused, nodding as the final pieces of their plan fell into place. "Enkidu's death, tragic though it may seem, has cleared the way. Now, Gilgamesh must fall without force—only by the weight of his own doubt."

Ishtar's gaze returned to the holy flames; her expression as unwavering as stone. "Let the people see him as a king alone, abandoned by the gods. And when he reaches for support, he will find none. We will ensure he is dethroned by the very people he claims to rule. Come, faithful Nargul, we begin our course at the council meeting!"

Hidden within the shadows, Ziusudra felt the weight of her discovery settle upon her like a stone. They had not only murdered Enkidu but now sought to dismantle Gilgamesh's very claim to rule by eroding his divine connection. This was no mere ambition, but an act of betrayal aimed at the heart of Uruk.

She slipped away from the temple as silently as she had come, her heart set on warning Gilgamesh of the true nature of the threats that surrounded him. And in her mind, she vowed that Enkidu's death would not go unavenged, nor would Uruk fall to those who schemed from its shadows.

* * *

In the heart of Uruk, beneath the towering shadows of its majestic ziggurat, the council chambers echoed with the murmurs of unrest. The room, adorned with tapestries depicting the valorous deeds of Gilgamesh and his forebears, now played host to a gathering clouded by uncertainty. The council, an assembly of Uruk's most esteemed—warriors, priests, and scholars alike—found themselves at a crossroads in the absence of their king.

At the head of the long, cedar table, where Gilgamesh's throne stood conspicuously empty, Ishtar rose to address the council. "We stand at the helm of Uruk in our king's stead," she began, her voice resonant within the chamber's vaulted confines. "It falls upon us to shepherd the city, to maintain order and prosperity until Gilgamesh's return."

Nods of agreement rippled among the members, a silent testament to their resolve. Yet, as the council deliberated plans for the city's welfare—allocating resources, bolstering defenses, and ensuring the continuance of trade—a shadow loomed at the chamber's edge.

Nargul, his visage a mask of veiled ambition, waited patiently for his turn to speak. When the moment arrived, he stepped forward, his gaze sweeping across the faces of his peers. "Esteemed council," he intoned, "while we labor here, our king quests for immortality, forsaking his throne and people. Is it not folly to chase after the gods' domain, neglecting the realm entrusted to him?"

A murmur of dissent greeted his words, and Kudur-Amurri, Nabu-zuqu's replacement countered, "Gilgamesh seeks not only for himself but for the enlightenment of us all. His journey is one of sacrifice, not abandonment."

Nargul's retort was swift, "Enlightenment? Or a legacy of neglect? How shall we answer the people when they ask of their king's whereabouts?"

Ziusudra, the healer, her voice calm yet firm, added, "Our duty is clear. We must uphold the city's spirit, not sow seeds of doubt. Gilgamesh's heart beats for Uruk, and his quest, however perilous, is borne of a desire to protect us all."

As the council members voiced their support for the king, rallying behind his vision for Uruk's future, Nargul found himself increasingly isolated. His attempts to sway the council to his perspective met with a steadfast unity, a barrier as impenetrable as the city walls.

Frustration boiling within him, Nargul made one final plea, "Consider the power vacuum his absence creates! Are we to stand idly by while Uruk's fate hangs in the balance?"

But the council's decision was unanimous. "We shall continue the king's work," Nimsun declared, "ensuring that when Gilgamesh returns, he finds a city as strong and vibrant as when he left it."

Defeated, Nargul retreated into the shadows, his schemes thwarted for the moment. The council's allegiance to Gilgamesh remained unbroken, their dedication to Uruk's prosperity unwavering. And as the meeting adjourned, each member set forth to fulfill their duties, the bonds of loyalty and friendship fortifying the heart of Uruk against the trials to come.

* * *

Upon his arduous journey, Gilgamesh, the mighty sovereign, arrived at the foot of the twin-peaked Mount Mashu, where each day the sun begins and ends its course. A vast portal within the mountains summoned him, the gateway to Dilman, realm of eternal rest, abode of Utnapishtim, the sage who outlived the deluge.

Nearing the entrance, Gilgamesh beheld a formidable guardian clad in armor of crimson, as if forged from the very carapace of a colossal scorpion, standing sentinel at the threshold.

As the distance between them narrowed, the scarlet guardian extended his arm in forbiddance. "Cease your advance, mortal. This path permits no passage. Turn back from whence you came."

"I bear the name Gilgamesh, sovereign of majestic Uruk, offspring of Ninsun, the sage goddess, thrice divine in essence. I seek audience with the ancient Utnapishtim, as decreed by the Oracle of Ereshkigal."

The Guardian of the Scorpion visage stroked his chin, contemplation upon his brow. "This matter of divine proportion perplexes me. Tales of demi-gods, half divine, are known to me, yet this claim of two-thirds divine eludes my grasp."

"It is a matter of lineage," Gilgamesh elucidated. "My mother, a deity in her own right, and my father, progeny of divine lineage, thus bestowing upon me a divinity of two-thirds."

The Scorpion Guardian, fingers engaged in calculation, pondered anew. "Surely this accounts not to three-quarters divine?"

"A wishful musing," confessed the King.

"Thine divine prerogative may grant thee passage into the mountain, yet heed my caution, O Gilgamesh of Uruk, mightiest amongst mortals. None who have dared its depths have returned to the realm of the living, and I foresee no different fate for thee."

With reverence and a heart full of gratitude, the King bowed deeply, his hand upon his chest. "Thy warnings are received with great respect, O Scarlet Warrior, yet I am bound by fate to pursue my sacred quest."

In acknowledgment, the Warrior inclined his head, placing his hand upon his heart. "By the laws that govern this land, I am compelled to challenge all who seek entry into the mountain," he mused. "Yet, our contest need not end in death or defeat; a trial of will suffices. Let us engage in a riddle."

"This can be done?" asked the King.

"The rules say there must be a contest, they do not specify what it must be. In this regard, I consider it within my purview.

To this, Gilgamesh assented, and the Scorpion Warrior posed his enigma. "O Gilgamesh, with a word or name, define the essence of thy journey, thy quest, thy purpose."

Gilgamesh pondered, understanding the question sought not trickery but truth. "Friendship," he declared.

"And how does this speak to thy quest?" inquired the Warrior.

"In mourning my dearest Enkidu, closer to me than any kin, I seek answers to the great enigmas that plague mankind. His loss has rent a wound within my soul that refuses to mend."

The Scorpion Man nodded in approval. "Thy answer is just. May the gods accompany thee on thy journey, O King Gilgamesh!"

"I seek their audience," Gilgamesh replied, sheathing his blade, and stepping into the mountain's shadow.

* * *

For three days, Gilgamesh traversed the pitch-black tunnel until emerging into a wondrous valley-garden, abundant with lush fruit, sweet waters, plentiful game, and absent of peril. For another three days, Gilgamesh journeyed, his garments tattered, his hair and beard unkempt, his body cloaked in the dust of his travels as if it were a second skin.

At journey's end, he beheld a vast sea, its shores offering no passage, save for a solitary mudbrick abode. There, Siduri, the Alewife, stood, her gaze fixed upon the approaching wanderer.

"Hail, towering stranger. I am Siduri, keeper of the ale," she hailed. "Who are you and what brings you to this desolate place on the edge of the Waters of Death," she inquired.

"I am Gilgamesh, son of Ninsun and King of Uruk, in search of Utnapishtim, the undying."

"Your voice betrays the length of your travels. Come, ease your exhaustion, and partake of my ale, sweet as nectar," she proffered. "Yet, before you do imbibe, cleanse yourself, for your filth offends the senses."

"You suggest I wash in the Waters of Death? An ill-omened name that bodes not well."

"Indeed, such an act would be folly. A mere droplet of those waters would fell the mightiest warrior. To immerse oneself is to ensure perpetual cleanliness by meeting death! Yonder, a barrel of rainwater awaits."

Thus, King Gilgamesh, in humility, divested himself of his tattered garb and bathed within an aged cedar barrel, as would the most impoverished of souls. Upon his return, he discovered fresh robes, homespun yet unblemished and whole, laid out for him. Clad anew, he entered the tavern upon the shores of the Waters of Death, its doors open till the midnight hour.

Therein, Gilgamesh feasted upon generous servings of ale, bread freshly baked, and meats of beef, chicken, and fish. As he dined, he recounted to Siduri, the alewife, his quest for undying Utnapishtim and the trials he had braved.

"The ancient dwells across the sea, and passage is no longer possible. Once there was a tunnel, yet it was vanquished by the rising floods and now rests not a hundred paces from the land's end beneath the deep."

"Tell me, Siduri, does the entirety of this passage lie submerged?" the king inquired.

"Nay, my lord. The entry is but inundated for a few strides before it ascends, and thereafter the way should be as parched as the bones of the earth. Yet know, O King, that Dilmun is no common shore—it lies veiled and shielded by the gods themselves. Only by this hidden route may it be reached, for the waters above it are cursed. Ships that dare approach are cast back by tempests and whirlpools conjured by the ancient guardians of those waters."

Siduri nodded, her gaze distant as though seeing that fabled passage herself. "It is said that the tunnel itself serves as a final rite of purification, Gilgamesh. Only those prepared to walk through darkness and silence may reach the light at the other end. And know this, lord of Uruk, the way is perilous not merely by water but by what one must surrender in order to emerge on the other side. Dilmun, as you know, rests at the boundary between mortal and divine realms, and such passage leaves its mark upon even the hardiest."

"I was told the Ferryman, Ushanabi would aid me in my quest."

"The sole craft in these lands belongs to Urshanabi, a curmudgeonly soul, scarce found in amiable temper. Furthermore, I hear tell his assistant has fled."

"And where might I find this ferryman, Urshanabi? I shall seek him out and undertake what must be done."

Siduri, her hair shimmering like the dusk, pointed down the coast. "He is but a short trek. Follow the shoreline and you shall spy his boat if it still floats. I shall show you." And with that statement Siduri closed the alehouse and led the king in homespun wool down the coast.

Siduri, with forthrightness, exclaimed, "None venture to Utnapishtim save those craving his eternal life, yet none have returned transformed or otherwise. Immortality lies solely within the purview of the gods, bestowed but once."

"I was told by the Oracle that he would lead me to Dilman. I have ought else."

"O King, the pursuit of eternity is a venture fraught with folly! What gains have your quests brought you? You speak of a companion's loss; can any deed retrieve him from the netherworld? In your questing, you have forsaken your duties to thy city and its folk, neglected the chance for a consort and heirs to ensure Uruk's legacy!"

"Verily, much have I sacrificed in pursuit of this quest, and not in vain shall it be if I but reach Dilmun. It lies within reach!" he exclaimed; his hand outstretched towards the perilous sea.

Siduri, her lips tight, acknowledged his plight. "You are ensnared by a profound dread and shall find no peace till thy journey's end is reached. I bid you well, Gilgamesh, yet fear the

revelations you seek shall not please." With a heavy heart, she added, "Some truths are learned through the harshest of trials. For this, my sorrow is yours."

As they neared the boat Siduri held Gilgamesh back. "I hope that you regain what you have lost within yourself; the ability to take joy in the small things in life, a child's laugh, a beautiful sunset, one who loves you above all others, good food and drink, the things of the moment. All this you have lost, and these things are life!" Seeing her words fall on deaf ears she remained silent until they reached the boat.

The boat of Urshanabi lay moored by the shore, a weathered husk bearing scars of many seasons spent battling waves and wind. Its hull, once grand and capable of slicing through water like a drawn blade, was now pockmarked with rot and furred with patches of green moss and barnacles clinging to it as if to hold the boat together.

Gilgamesh was crestfallen at the sight of the dilapidated scow.

The boat had a deep, sturdy hull made from an impermeable wood treated with special oils and enchantments to repel the deadly water. Its shape, sleek to minimize contact with the water, with a catamaran design for stability. The most distinctive feature was a fully enclosed cabin with watertight doors and windows made from clear transparent crystal polished to a high shine. The cabin was elevated above the hull on a platform to keep it away from the water.

Around doors, windows, and any other openings, there were advanced sealing mechanisms of magical runes and pitch that repelled all moisture.

A retractable covered boarding ramp allowed passengers to enter and exit the boat without encountering the water.

Upon the waters, the craft did list grievously to one side, where at the verge of the deep, a vast breach of shattered timbers was laid bare.

From the abyss, bubbles did rise, stirring the waters to form ripples like the dance of divine spirits upon the surface. These orbs of air did journey towards the shore, until from the froth and tumult of the waves emerged a visage most wondrous: a helmet of bronze, graced with a disk of polished transparent crystal at its fore, through which the eyes of a man could be spied as the waters fell away. It was Urshanabi, the ferryman, his form clad in a garb of bronze and leather, stitched cunningly to defy the ingress of the sea.

The figure stopped before them and removed the bronze helmet and thus, they beheld Urshanabi the ferryman. His eyes, ablaze like embers beneath his curly hair, flickered between Siduri and the formidable presence of Gilgamesh. His visage was dark and drawn, his eyes vast and luminous as the night sky. Gilgamesh and Urshanabi exchanged nods of acknowledgment as the boatman began to divest himself of his suit.

"What manner of toil is this that occupies you?" inquired the sovereign.

"To mend my vessel," replied the ferryman. "She was cast upon the stones by the tempest's fury. This garb allows me to undertake her repair without the curse of the waters' touch."

"And when shall she be fit to traverse the vast deep once more?"

"Within the span of two moons, perhaps less. The monsoons then arrive, and a half year must pass ere the seas calm."

"I have ventured too far to falter now," declared Gilgamesh. "I was told by an oracle that you would transport me to Dilman."

Urshanabi laughed loudly and slapped Gilgamesh on the back with joy. "It is impossible my friend. To traverse the sea and seek the land of Dilmun, to pursue Utnapishtim the ageless, is folly. It is no place for the living. The gods guard their domain with envy, and the sea itself spells doom for those who touch its waters. Does this not reveal you are unwelcome?"

"It matters not," declared Gilgamesh. "My endeavor is on behalf of all humanity, and rest shall elude me till I grasp the answers I seek!" declared he with the fervor of a deity.

Urshanabi, will you convey me across the treacherous waters?"

"Your resolve is apparent, and I would aid you if it were within my power." Urshanabi looked at Gilgamesh with the unflinching intensity of a man who had witnessed things too grim for words. He squared his shoulders, his voice low and steady, carrying the weight of unyielding truth.

"King of Uruk," he began, "you must hear me plainly. The waters around Dilmun are forbidden, not just by mortal law, but by the will of the gods themselves. No vessel, no matter its strength or the skill of its helmsman, may approach that shore uninvited. It is death that guards that land, and death who welcomes those who seek to trespass."

Urshanabi leaned closer, his tone laced with warning. "To land upon Dilmun is to challenge forces no man may conquer. Not even a king. Not even one blessed by gods. The waters become poison to any craft that dares draw near. The waves twist and pull as though they are alive, eager to pull men under and keep them there."

He gestured towards his battered boat. "If I were to set course for those shores, this old hull would be torn apart, and we would be swallowed by the sea. There would be no glory, no tale to tell, only silence beneath the waves."

Urshanabi fixed his gaze on Gilgamesh, his eyes resolute. "The passage through the tunnel was the only way and it's gone. To attempt anything else is certain death."

"Might your garment for breathing beneath the waves, the one used in mending this craft, be strong enough to carry me to the mouth of the tunnel?"

Urshanabi's face grew grave. "Aye, it is within the realm of possibility, though the task is fraught with challenge to don such a suit. The only breath within that suit is what air it holds when donned—a scant measure, enough for perhaps three hundred heartbeats and no more. For the waters that guard Dilmun do not belong wholly to our realm. They hold the fury of the gods and the bones of those who have tried to reach it by force, guardians of deep knowledge that spare none. The tunnel alone, woven by hands divine, was ever intended to allow passage to the few deemed worthy. The way was set to test endurance and courage, to reveal those pure in heart and steadfast in purpose."

"I shall acquire skill sufficient in the repair of your vessel," Gilgamesh vowed, a determination kindling within his breast.

* * *

On the training fields, where warriors danced with shadows, casting steel against the dying light, Nargul found Naram-Sin, a figure as formidable as the legends that shadowed him. The air was thick with the clangor of combat, a testament to Uruk's undying spirit.

"Naram-Sin, champion of Gilgamesh's armies," Nargul addressed, his presence quelling the din of battle. "Your king wanders in pursuit of phantoms, leaving our city's might to wither. Under guidance, your valor shall carve a path to glory."

Naram-Sin, his visage a mask of stoic resolve, weighed Nargul's words. "And if I stand against you?

"Nargul's reply was a veiled threat, a sword drawn in the shadows. "Then Uruk might find itself bereft of its shield, and its warriors without a cause."

Thus, Naram-Sin was swayed, not by faith, but by the foreboding of storms Nargul could summon.

* * *

In the fullness of time, before the onset of the monsoons, by their ceaseless toil from the first light of dawn to the dusk's last gleam, Gilgamesh and Urshanabi had wrought repairs upon the vessel, restoring her to her seaworthy state. In the spirit of parting, with libations poured upon the sands, they bid farewell to Siduri, who stood watchful upon the shore, and embarked upon their craft, now ready to brave the deep once more.

As they positioned their craft precisely above the submerged pathway, hidden from the eyes of mortals, within its sanctum of waterproof enclosure, Gilgamesh, clad for the final time in the garb of the deep, awaited on deck. Weeks of labor had granted him a profound kinship with the suit, its weight now familiar as armor.

With a signal from Urshanabi, that they were aligned with the ancient passage below, Gilgamesh descended into the Waters of Death. The entrance lay not deep, a mere ten feet beneath the surface, an oval portal carved with ancient symbols and pictograms narrating tales of yore. Though the passage was a tight fit for the mighty Gilgamesh, he soon ascended, emerging into a cavern of awe, its walls adorned with vibrant frescoes depicting the pantheon in their eternal sagas.

Beyond the water's grasp, he removed his helm and brandishing his sword, he ventured deeper, only to be halted by a formidable barrier — a congregation of stone effigies representing the divine assembly, barring passage with their silent vigil.

Gilgamesh's torchlight flickered over the stone effigies, casting shadows that twisted and turned, giving the gods' faces a life they no longer possessed. Massive statues of Enlil, Anu, Ereshkigal and the rest, loomed in the narrow passage, their stony eyes staring down with an implacable authority. He felt their unyielding presence pressing on him, as if daring him to go further, as if the gods themselves had decreed this threshold impassable.

He clenched his fists, jaw set as he addressed the silent figures.

"Always you block my path!" he spat, the words echoing in the chamber. "Am I some toy you play games with, a pawn in your divine schemes?"

He moved closer, studying each face, his breath heavy with defiance. "I have crossed deserts, mountains, and seas. I have faced death and bent fate to my will. Yet still you stand in my way, as if your stone and silent gazes hold power over me."

He raised his fist, his voice a low, seething growl. "You wish to be obstacles in my path? Then you will be rubble beneath my feet!"

With a roar that shook the ancient walls, he struck the effigies, his blows echoing in defiance as he shattered their faces, one by one, casting the remnants of their godly images into dust.

Seized by a tempest of fury, divine energy surged within Gilgamesh. With cries that echoed the wrath of deities, he shattered the stone visages, his outcry resonating through the passage as if heralding the approach of Death itself. As the last idol fell, leaving only rubble in his wake, Gilgamesh, breaths heavy with exertion, cast aside his fractured blade, and stepped over the remnants of the gods to continue his journey, the crunch of his sandals on sand the sole testament to his passage.

For countless hours, Gilgamesh pressed onward, guided not by the light of torches but by a celestial glow emanating from a luminescent fungus adorning the passage walls, casting a soft

radiance akin to the stars themselves. The path steepened, leading him towards a distant light, growing ever larger, reminiscent of the divine luminescence of the goddess of love, seen from afar in her heavenly throne. Nearing this beacon, it became clear — the end of the tunnel was at hand, promising an exit from the depths and into the realm of light and air.

And Gilgamesh entered the blinding light and when his eyes had grown accustomed, they beheld an amazing sight seen by only a handful of men throughout history.

* * *

When Gilgamesh first gazed upon Dilmun, it unveiled itself as a sanctuary of pristine allure, a singular garden cradled by the cosmos. The ambiance, warmed by the tender sun, was perfumed with the fragrance of blossoms in myriad shades, a visual ode set against the lush tableau of an everlasting spring. Trees, laden with fruits diverse and plentiful, extended their bounty generously, while streams of unparalleled clarity composed hymns of welcome, their waters caressing the land.

Gilgamesh, treading lightly upon Dilmun's soil, encountered the serenity of a realm beyond the tyranny of time, where each instant unfurled into infinity. The splendor of Dilmun was unspoiled by extravagance; it was a beauty conceived from equilibrium and modesty. The scant structures that Utnapishtim and his partner proclaimed as their abode merged indistinguishably with the natural world, mirroring their profound reverence for the land that had granted them unending life.

Within this secluded refuge, Utnapishtim and his consort abode in consonance with the earth. Their dwellings, modest and sparing, were wrought from the land itself, standing as monuments to their austere life amid such magnificence. Encircling these homes, fields and gardens flourished, nurtured with devotion, yielding sustenance and shelter for the assortment of beasts they cultivated. The fauna of Dilmun, both tame and wild, roamed without constraint, embodying the serenity that governed this domain.

As Gilgamesh meandered through this idyllic landscape, his spirit was imbued with both marvel and a deep-seated wistfulness, a longing for the tranquility and simplicity that seemed beyond the grasp of the realm beyond Dilmun's veiled confines. Here, in the fellowship of Utnapishtim and his consort, amid the abundance of the earth and the silent bliss of being, Gilgamesh beheld a vision of what existence might be—a paradisiacal vision, unmarred by grief or the ravages of time, where humankind and nature coexisted in sublime harmony.

Beneath the shadow of the portal to his humble abode, a venerable man stood, observing Gilgamesh as he neared. Venturing forth into the brilliance, he shielded his gaze from the sun's glare.

"Salutations, towering wanderer," he uttered with a demeanor both courteous and amiable. His voice harbored neither malice nor trepidation, emanating a poise and authority. He presented himself as a sage of unparalleled calm and discernment. His visage, marked by eons, mirrored a profound grasp and a serene resignation to the ebb and flow of existence. His garb was of unassuming elegance, appropriate for one who had risen above worldly desires.

The depths of Utnapishtim's gaze were most revealing, echoing the vastness of seas he had once traversed, imbued with wisdom and yet, a tender empathy. Such eyes met Gilgamesh not merely as one mortal to another but as a soul who had beheld the immutable verities of life. His presence, though commanding deference, radiated a welcoming warmth, beckoning Gilgamesh to partake of his deep-seated wisdom.

"I honor you, Utnapishtim the ageless. I am Gilgamesh, in pursuit of your lore and sagacity."

"Ah, you are one of those," Utnapishtim intoned, a tinge of disillusionment in his voice.

"Which kind?"

"The seekers of everlasting life. You folk are relentless. I bear no boon for you. Return to your realm, for you have erred in your quest for me. Depart!" With those words, the elder moved to seal the entrance.

Gilgamesh, driven by urgency, advanced. "Hold! Are you not Utnapishtim, the deluge's survivor, who, by virtue of your prudence and valor, was bestowed with never-ending days by the deities?"

Utnapishtim, touched by the monarch's plea, paused at the threshold. "There was no cataclysmic deluge," he spoke softly, eyes cast downward.

"But there was..." Gilgamesh started.

"Regrettably, no deluge of such magnitude ever purged the earth. We resided by the Euphrates' banks, far to the south, and occasionally, the river would swell. That era, the inundation surpassed any in living memory. Our raft, usually for fishery, became our salvation as the waters ascended. Carried far from our homeland by the torrent, we alighted upon this haven. Deeming it flawless, I erected a dwelling for my spouse and myself, and here we abide. This is not the realm of the gods, or at least I've never seen them here."

Bewildered, Gilgamesh sought to persuade Utnapishtim of his undying nature, yet Utnapishtim remained unswayed.

"Should this land not be the abode of deities, then whence comes your safeguard by the Waters of Death?" Gilgamesh implored, gesturing towards the sea.

"People shun not a domain dubbed the Sea Where Naught Occurs," he replied with forbearance. Gilgamesh, befuddled, beheld him. "The sea brings not demise with but a droplet. One may partake of its waters, though they bear an alkaline savor ill-suited to my palate."

At the doorway, a woman, akin in aspect to Utnapishtim, made her presence known, nudging him with her elbow. "What kind of host leaves our visitor in the swelter without even a draught of cool water to quench his thirst?" She faced Gilgamesh, beckoning him inside. "Pray, noble sir, step into our modest dwelling and be refreshed. Mind your head, tall one!" The woman guided Gilgamesh by the arm into their home. "Pardon my consort; such infrequent are our guests that he neglects the courtesies of hospitality."

A stout wooden chair was offered to Gilgamesh at the dining board. It creaked beneath the weight of the mighty man but stood steadfast. To rejuvenate him, cool sweet water was served, followed by wine and ale to enliven the spirit.

Inquired Gilgamesh, with trepidation in his voice: "Then, are all these tales' falsehoods?" Both Utnapishtim and his wife regarded the formidable hero with eyes filled with sympathy.

"Falsehoods? Nay," replied Utnapishtim. "Misinterpretations, perchance. Stories are passed down and embellished until they stray far from their origins. The great deluge was but a brief surge of waters for a fleeting moment."

"And did not the gods grant you eternal life?" inquired Gilgamesh.

"Alas, they did not," lamented Utnapishtim. "I maintain my well-being through exercise, proper nourishment, and ample fresh air. Yet, immortality eludes me. I anticipate meeting my fate at its appointed hour. May it not be today."

"Or in three days' time, when we have plans for a market visit," interjected his wife.

"No eternal life?" Gilgamesh pressed further.

Utnapishtim placed a consoling hand upon Gilgamesh's shoulder. "All men are immortal until the hour of their demise. Live your life with this understanding, and live it nobly, young man."

"Shall we speak of the Ankida plant?" inquired Utnapishtim's wife.

Utnapishtim scowled at his wife, perturbed, then shrugged. "There exists a plant within the Waters of Death. It bestows vigor and vitality upon mortal men, though not eternity. Accessing it is not arduous, but the perils of the waters persist, even if they do not bring death themselves."

"If it is a creature of my world then I have no fear," declared Gilgamesh.

* * *

Under the decree of Utnapishtim, the ancient and wise, Gilgamesh was ferried across the vast, silent waters in a vessel carved of cedar and bound with aged bronze. Utnapishtim himself held the oar, his gaze fixed upon the horizon, his face carved by years of wisdom and sorrow. The boat creaked and groaned as it cut through the water, seeming both a relic and a lifeline, its hull bearing symbols and faded glyphs from a time before time.

As they approached the place where the magic plant of rejuvenation was said to lie, the air grew thick with salt and brine, each wave bringing the weight of ages and depths. Gilgamesh stood upon the vessel's prow, clad in the formidable suit Urshanabi had provided for his descent. He gazed over the water's shimmering surface, knowing the plant lay beneath, hidden in depths untrodden by mortal feet.

Utnapishtim's voice, deep as the waters themselves, broke the silence. "This is where the currents twist and coil, where light fades into darkness. Beyond this point, the breath of gods does not reach. Steel yourself, Gilgamesh. What lies below has devoured even the boldest."

With a steady breath, Gilgamesh met the old man's gaze. "I have crossed deserts, mountains, and faced beasts that walked in shadow. I fear no depth that leads me to life."

With a resolute breath, Gilgamesh dove into the depths, the chill of the water a sharp jolt as he descended, muscles taut against the pressure enveloping him. Guided by the echoes of Utnapishtim's counsel, his diligent search bore fruit as he espied the sought-after foliage, nestled amidst the seabed's shifting sands. With practiced hands, he plucked the precious plants from their resting place, their vibrant verdure a beacon of hope amidst the aquatic gloom. His lungs burned as he clutched the plant, and with a single powerful motion, he tucked it close, preparing to ascend.

Yet the weight of the water pressed upon him, an unyielding force, as if the depths themselves wished to keep him prisoner. Sinking down further with each heartbeat, Gilgamesh's vision blurred, the dim flickers of light above twisting and bending as he strained against the pull of the deep. Shadows seemed to close around him, an ancient darkness whispering of forgotten gods and trials yet unmet, as he hovered, caught between the triumph of his prize and the silent vastness of the sea.

Yet, as Gilgamesh celebrated his triumph, a sudden disturbance ruptured the tranquility of the serene waters. From the shadowed depths emerged a colossal form, its sinuous tentacles unfurling in a menacing display of power. An primeval progenitor of the octopus, ancient and formidable, its eyes gleaming with predatory intent, sought to thwart Gilgamesh's quest and claim him as prey.

Undeterred by the looming specter from the abyss, Gilgamesh drew his knife from his belt, the blade gleaming faintly in the murky light, and steadied himself, muscles coiled, for the

struggle that awaited him in the cold silence of the deep. A clash of titans ensued, the ocean's depths bearing witness to a contest of strength and will. With each decisive stroke, Gilgamesh sought to repel the octopus's relentless assault, his movements fluid and precise amidst the swirling currents.

Yet, the creature's onslaught proved relentless, its sinewy tentacles coiling around Gilgamesh with unyielding tenacity. In a desperate struggle for survival, Gilgamesh grappled with the beast, his every movement a testament to his indomitable spirit.

As the battle raged on, disaster struck. The octopus, emboldened by Gilgamesh's faltering defenses, seized upon a moment of vulnerability and rent his diving suit asunder, exposing him to the frigid embrace of the ocean's depths. Denied the life-giving sustenance of air, Gilgamesh's lungs burned with an agonizing thirst for breath, his strength waning with each passing moment.

The creature lunged forward, its tentacles coiling around Gilgamesh like living chains. With a fierce, guttural cry that echoed even in the crushing silence of the deep, Gilgamesh twisted his body, gripping his knife tightly. He slashed at the monstrous limbs, but they only tightened, pulling him closer to the creature's massive, unblinking eyes. Summoning every last ounce of strength, Gilgamesh drove his blade deep into one of the creature's gleaming orbs. Instantly, black, inky blood erupted from the wound, darkening the waters around him and filling the depths with a cloud of shadow. Stunned and wounded, the beast recoiled, releasing its hold on him and retreating swiftly, thrashing in pain as it vanished into the ocean's gloom, leaving Gilgamesh victorious but breathless in the haunting quiet. With the echoes of battle fading into the silent expanse, Gilgamesh ascended with all haste, his lungs aflame with the desperate need for air. With a gasp of deliverance, he breached the surface, bathed in the radiant light of the sun's embrace, his triumph won at the precipice of peril and death.

Gilgamesh, with great toil, hoisted himself aboard the vessel, his limbs heavy with the weight of the sea and his hard-won prize. Utnapishtim, seated resolutely within the steering cabin, observed him in silence. Upon reaching the sanctuary of the deck, Gilgamesh reverently placed his prize upon the timbered planks, casting aside the remnants of his diving garb. He commanded the vessel's return to Dilman, where it docked near the abode of Utnapishtim. The venerable consort greeted their arrival with victuals and libations prepared in advance.

As they gathered around the Ankida plant, its petals fashioned from an oily substance akin to tarpaper, their countenances betrayed no hint of appetite. Utnapishtim elucidated the sacred rite for procuring the Ankida flower: "Firstly, thou shalt cleave the petals asunder, boiling them in water. Next, you must partake in a sanctified ablution, purging thyself of all transgressions and cleansing thy soul. Finally, imbibe the resultant concoction whilst reciting the incantations of primordial magic, uttered since the dawning of time."

Gilgamesh, upon his own accord, journeyed unto a cascading waterfall, where he kindled a flame and, with keen precision, cleaved the petals of the Ankida plant. Placing them into a vessel of boiling water, he patiently awaited the brewing of the potion. In the interim, he arranged himself a space and divested himself of his garments, immersing his form into the crystalline pool that nestled beneath the waterfall's embrace. As the water cascaded around him, he intoned the sacred words prescribed for the proper cleansing of body and soul.

Unseen by Gilgamesh in his reverent cleansing, a serpentine form slithered stealthily into the clearing, drawn by the scent of the Ankida plant's concoction. Curling itself near the vessel, it reveled in the warmth that emanated from its contents, its sinuous tongue darting inquisitively as it sampled the elixir within. In an inadvertent gesture, the great serpent's bulk dislodged the vessel, causing its contents to spill upon the earth, where they seeped into the fertile soil below.

The serpent, lured by the intoxicating fragrance, lapped eagerly at the spilled potion, only to convulse in sudden agony, as if beset by unseen forces.

Oblivious to the serpent's plight, Gilgamesh concluded his purifying ablutions, stepping forth from the waters onto the earth's firm embrace. Returning to the vessel containing the Ankida flower, he was dismayed to find it emptied, replaced instead by a burgeoning cluster of verdant foliage and blossoms, sprouting forth from the very spot where the elixir had been spilled. Nearby lay the discarded husk of the great serpent, its previous inhabitant vanished without a trace.

Gilgamesh, seated upon the shore, found himself consumed by a profound sense of dismay and frustration. It appeared to him that the deities, in their celestial abodes, remained indifferent to his fervent pleas for enlightenment and deliverance from the specter of mortality. The absence of Anu's voice left him feeling abandoned. Was this silence a test, a punishment, or simply the gods' way of urging him to find his own path?

Utnapishtim, perceiving the despondency that weighed heavily upon the monarch's brow, took his place beside the grieving ruler.

"So, you have met with defeat in your endeavors," remarked Utnapishtim, his tone tinged with a hint of wry amusement. "Do you intend to embark once more upon the same path?"

Gilgamesh, his gaze fixed upon the grains of sand strewn at his feet, shook his head solemnly. "Nay, I shall not," he replied, his voice heavy with resignation. "It is evident, even to one such as I, that the divine beings have forsaken me, showing no favor towards my plight."

"And what course of action do you now contemplate?" inquired Utnapishtim.

"I know not," confessed Gilgamesh, his countenance etched with uncertainty. "My aspirations were solely fixed upon the attainment of immortality. Beyond that, I had made no provisions for the future."

"And yet, here you stand, a mortal among mortals," observed Utnapishtim.

"What path should I now tread?" questioned Gilgamesh, his voice tinged with a hint of desperation.

"It appears to me to be a straightforward matter," declared Utnapishtim. "Live your life with integrity and virtue. Govern your people with fairness and compassion. Provide them with tranquility, liberty, and safeguard them from harm. Be a beacon of justice, loyalty, and nobility. In doing so, you shall leave behind a legacy that shall endure through the ages, immortalizing your name alongside your illustrious exploits. It is a noble heritage to bequeath to posterity."

Though Gilgamesh acknowledged the righteousness of Utnapishtim's counsel, a sense of discontent gnawed at his heart. He had faltered in his most fervent quest, returning home burdened by dishonor and defeat. How could he now face his subjects, bearing the weight of his failure upon his shoulders?

As Gilgamesh embarked on his journey homeward from the abode of Utnapishtim, his thoughts were as tumultuous as the swirling currents of the Euphrates. With each step, he pondered the revelations bestowed upon him by the mortal sage, the weight of their wisdom heavy upon his heart.

As he traversed the winding paths that led back to Uruk, Gilgamesh found himself immersed in deep contemplation. He reflected on the fleeting nature of mortal existence, the ephemeral span of life measured against the vast expanse of eternity. The words of Utnapishtim echoed in his mind, reminding him of the folly of his quest for immortality and the futility of striving against the inexorable march of time.

Yet amidst the somber realization of his own mortality, Gilgamesh also found solace in the knowledge that true greatness lay not in the pursuit of eternal life, but in the embrace of life's fleeting moments. He thought of the city of Uruk, lively with the hustle and bustle of its people, and felt a renewed sense of purpose in his role as its protector and guardian.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting its golden hues upon the fertile plains of Mesopotamia, Gilgamesh's thoughts turned to the legacy he would leave behind. He vowed to rule with wisdom and compassion, to lead his people with courage and integrity, and to cherish each passing moment as a precious gift bestowed upon him by the gods.

And so, with resolve in his heart and determination in his stride, Gilgamesh journeyed homeward, guided by the light of the stars and the whispers of the ancient winds. Though the road ahead was fraught with challenges and uncertainties, he knew that he would face them with strength and fortitude, for he was Gilgamesh, the mighty king of Uruk, and his destiny lay waiting for him on the horizon.

* * *

Ziusudra delved further into the hidden chambers of the temple, her hands grew familiar with the ancient, crumbling records stashed away in dark alcoves. The deeper she looked, the clearer the patterns became—disappearances, seemingly unrelated at first glance, all converged on one common point: Ishtar. Whispers of midnight rites, veiled ceremonies conducted in secrecy, and young men gone missing after receiving Ishtar's favor circulated in fragments around her. She read by torchlight, uncovering record after record with grim realization—these men were sacrifices, offered to her, to Ishtar, as part of some twisted, blood-bound ritual.

One night, desperate to confirm the horror she had uncovered, Ziusudra stole into the temple after the last echo of evening prayer had faded. She moved silently through the darkened halls, her figure concealed in the shadows. At last, she reached the grand chamber, a cavernous room scented with burning incense. She kept to the shadows, her heart pounding as she watched from a hidden alcove.

Flickering torches cast macabre shadows on the walls as Ishtar appeared, a silhouette adorned in shimmering robes that caught the dim light, lending her an otherworldly gleam. Before her knelt a young man, his head bowed in reverence, his form nearly trembling beneath the weight of his awe. He was the son of one of Uruk's noblest families, Ziusudra recognized him instantly. His father, a trusted ally of Gilgamesh, had reported him missing not a week past.

Ishtar's voice, cold and commanding, echoed off the walls. She lifted the young man's chin with a gentle touch, and for a moment, her expression softened—a lover's tenderness playing across her face. But it was only a passing illusion. Her gaze hardened as she raised her hands, a gilded dagger gleaming as she invoked her dark prayer, her voice rising to a fevered pitch as she addressed the gods she served.

Ziusudra's breath caught as Ishtar completed her final words, and without hesitation, plunged the dagger into the young man's heart. Blood pooled and spread across the sacred stones, and Ziusudra's body recoiled, a gasp slipping from her lips. She shrank back, pressing her hand over her mouth to silence herself, but it was too late.

Ishtar froze, her gaze darting toward the shadows where Ziusudra hid. The goddess's eyes narrowed, and her mouth twisted into a smirk, as though daring the hidden watcher to step forward. But Ziusudra remained hidden, her pulse thunderous in her ears, waiting until Ishtar

returned her attention to the lifeless body before her, muttering ancient words over the still-warm blood.

As Ishtar finally turned to leave, Ziusudra slipped back, retreating into the darkness, her hands trembling as she clutched the evidence she'd gathered. She knew she had to get back to Gilgamesh before Ishtar suspected her presence, and knew as well that her life hung in the balance. This was no longer mere suspicion—she had seen it with her own eyes. Ishtar was sacrificing the sons of Uruk, taking them in lust, then offering them in blood. And she could feel it in her bones: the goddess would not let such knowledge go unpunished.

With her heart a twisted knot of fear and resolve, Ziusudra fled the temple, clutching the damning documents to her chest as though they could shield her. She knew what she had seen would change Uruk forever.

Ziusudra edged her way out of the grand chamber, her breath shallow, she barely dared to think of escape, but the weight of the clay tablets pressed to her chest reminded her of the urgency. Each step was a calculated effort in silence, her heart drumming as she moved down shadowed corridors, trying to avoid the patrolling priests and guards of Ishtar's temple. Every instinct told her to run, but she knew a single misstep would mean death.

The air grew colder as she neared the outer gates, where she could see the faint outline of moonlight seeping in through the stone archway. Freedom was so close, the city beyond just within reach—when a swift, forceful blow struck her from the shadows, sending her stumbling backward. Her hand went instinctively to her side as a sharp pain erupted, her fingers coming away wet with blood.

Nargul, his expression sharp and calculating, stepped out of the darkness, his eyes cold and unyielding as he regarded her with a knowing smirk. He loomed over her, dagger in hand, poised to strike again.

“Thought you could simply walk out with those, did you?” he sneered, gesturing toward the clay tablets clutched against her chest. “You’ve meddled too far, healer. Ishtar’s secrets are not yours to carry.”

Ziusudra, her breath coming in gasps as she tried to suppress the pain, held her ground, clutching the tablets to her chest even tighter. She could feel her strength waning, but her determination only grew. She would not let Ishtar’s dark deeds remain hidden. Not now.

With a sudden burst of desperation, Ziusudra swung her arm, catching Nargul off guard as she scraped her nails across his face. He stumbled back, momentarily blinded, and she took her chance, pushing past him with all the strength she could muster. Her side burned, and her vision blurred as she staggered forward, but she pressed on, clutching the precious tablets like a lifeline.

The temple gates loomed closer, and with a final burst of strength, she flung herself into the open air, collapsing against the cool stones of the temple courtyard. Her blood trailed behind her as she scrambled to her feet, casting one last glance over her shoulder to see Nargul emerging from the shadows, rage twisting his face.

But Ziusudra was already moving, her steps faltering yet relentless as she escaped into the labyrinthine streets of Uruk, leaving Nargul cursing her name behind her. She could feel the life ebbing from her with each step, but her resolve remained unbroken. She had seen the truth with her own eyes, and she had the proof in her hands.

When Gilgamesh returned to Uruk, he was met with a sight of utter chaos. The streets, usually lined with reverent townsfolk eager to catch a glimpse of their king, were packed with throngs of people shouting and brandishing makeshift weapons. Smoke drifted up from scattered fires, and groups of citizens clashed violently in the open squares, each side shouting over the other in a cacophony of rage and fear.

“Justice for Ziusudra!” one faction roared, thrusting their fists toward the palace. Many bore crude signs with Ziusudra’s name etched into them, her role as the city’s beloved healer now emblazoned as a symbol of defiance.

Opposite them stood Ishtar’s loyalists, smaller in number but fiercely defiant. They shouted counterclaims, calling Ziusudra a traitor and claiming that anyone who opposed the goddess herself was a threat to Uruk’s prosperity and favor with the heavens. Cries of “Divine retribution!” rang out among them, voices swelling in fervor, and a few brawls erupted as the two sides crashed together, neither willing to back down.

Gilgamesh, with a grim determination, moved purposefully toward the palace steps. His presence cut a path through the crowd as people stopped to watch their king’s reaction. The sight of him, fierce and unshaken, quelled some of the immediate violence; the tension in the air hung thick as the people began to mutter in anticipation, waiting to see what he would do.

Gilgamesh raised his hand, signaling silence, and the crowd’s angry muttering died down. “People of Uruk!” he bellowed, his voice echoing across the square. “You clamor for justice, yet tear your own city apart in its name. Is this what Ziusudra would want?” His voice was calm yet edged with steel, a king commanding both respect and obedience.

A ripple went through the crowd as both sides listened, some looking shamefaced as they took in his words. “You who call for blood—do you know for certain who spilled it? And you,” he pointed to Ishtar’s supporters, “who call for allegiance to the goddess—do you believe she desires such destruction?”

Silence fell, and murmurs of doubt crept into the faces of even Ishtar’s most devout followers. Gilgamesh’s gaze swept across the gathered crowd, his eyes sharp with controlled anger. “I have heard the whispers that Nargul and Ishtar had a hand in the attack on Ziusudra. Such matters of justice cannot be dealt with in riot or rumor.”

He looked to the guards at his side and commanded, “Bring forth those who speak for each side. I will hear these charges myself. All will have the chance to speak and present what they know.”

With his command, representatives from both factions hesitantly stepped forward, wary of standing so close to one another yet united in their need to be heard. Gilgamesh motioned for them to follow him to the palace courtyard, where he could address them in a place of formality and fairness, away from the clamor of the streets.

As he led them to the courtyard, the people began to follow, filling the open space and lining the palace steps. Each voice added to the crowd’s swell as they chanted for justice and truth. Gilgamesh, once again raising his hands to call for silence, gazed upon the assembly.

“Uruk has suffered enough,” he began, looking each representative in the eyes as though weighing their very souls. “We shall seek the truth, and justice will be done. I summon all witnesses, all who have knowledge of these dark deeds, to stand before me in trial.”

The crowd, once a mob fueled by anger and desperation, quieted, their energy now bound by a sense of solemnity and expectation. They watched their king, aware that his word would decide the course of their city. And as Gilgamesh signaled for the trial to commence, a tense hush fell over Uruk, as if the city itself held its breath, waiting for justice to be served.

* * *

In the courtyard, where sunlight barely touched the ground through the heavy shadows of high stone walls, a solemn quiet settled over the crowd. Guards stepped aside to clear a path as four men carefully lifted a stretcher through the gathered throngs, bearing Ziusudra, her frail form covered in cloth that could not fully mask the injuries beneath. Her face was pale, etched with pain and exhaustion, but her eyes held a steady determination as they met Gilgamesh's across the courtyard.

Gilgamesh's gaze softened as he saw her struggle to lift her head, yet she waved off any assistance, determined to rise on her own. With a faint nod from Gilgamesh, a guard brought a stool, and she used what strength she had left to sit upright, visibly bracing herself.

"Ziusudra," Gilgamesh spoke with measured calm, yet his voice carried an undertone of quiet fury, "you have risked your life for this truth, for justice. Speak, that we may hear it, and let no shadow remain upon Uruk."

The healer took a shallow breath, wincing as she gathered her words. Her voice, though weakened, carried a clarity that made each word pierce the silence. "My king," she began, her gaze never wavering, "I bear witness to the unspeakable acts carried out within Ishtar's temple." Her voice faltered as she looked upon the crowd, some of whom turned away, unwilling to hear yet unable to leave.

"Many young men, sons of our people, sacrificed... by Ishtar's own command," she continued, her tone laden with grief. "And there, in the night's darkest hours, I saw the very blood of Uruk's sons spilled upon the altar after they had been lured under the guise of divine favor."

A collective gasp spread through the crowd, as if the courtyard itself shuddered in response. Gilgamesh stood unmoving, his jaw set, his eyes darkened with barely suppressed rage.

"Was it Nargul who did this?" he asked, his voice a thin thread of control.

Ziusudra nodded. "Nargul acted as the goddess's hand, ensuring none left her chambers alive." Her hand shook as she gestured to the small clay tablets clutched tightly to her chest, bearing the seal of the temple. "I carry these records, stolen from within, that bear witness to the names of the dead and the orders that condemned them."

Murmurs of shock and horror rippled through the crowd as all eyes turned to Nargul, who stood rigid, his face betraying no guilt. But Gilgamesh's gaze returned to Ziusudra, his expression hard as iron.

"And why, healer, do you lay these crimes at the goddess's feet?" he asked, though his tone was more a challenge than a question.

Ziusudra's lips trembled, and her voice was a whisper now, as though naming the truth itself brought its own curse. "Because she... she is no longer the goddess we knew. I have seen her in the grip of a darkness... a force that has devoured her spirit, replacing it with a hunger for death."

Her words hung in the air, the crowd too stunned to move, waiting for Gilgamesh to act. Finally, with a slow, measured breath, Gilgamesh raised his hand, calling the court to order.

"Let these testimonies be weighed, here in the light of truth," he declared. "And let those who stand accused, answer to the city, for their crimes against Uruk and against life itself."

"Great King," Ziusudra began, her voice steady yet imbued with an urgency that commanded attention, "there is more. In the days of your absence, I have pursued an inquiry, one that bears heavily upon the heart and the conscience of our city."

Gilgamesh, his interest piqued by the healer's solemn tone, gestured for her to continue.

"It concerns the passing of our beloved Enkidu," she continued, her gaze meeting Gilgamesh's, a mirror of shared grief. "Upon your departure, driven by a disquieting suspicion, I delved into the circumstances surrounding his illness. My investigations have unveiled a truth most sinister."

A hush fell over the chamber as Ziusudra recounted her findings. With meticulous care, she had traced the origins of the rare vintage that Enkidu had partaken of, a gift that had preceded the onset of his fatal malady. Her inquiries led her to a shadowy web of transactions and whispers that pointed inexorably towards Nargul, whose ambition and enmity had long festered in the dark.

"Nargul," Gilgamesh uttered, the name a bitter taste upon his tongue. "And what proof do we hold of his involvement?"

Ziusudra presented the evidence she had gathered: correspondences hidden in the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the palace, testimonies from those who had unwittingly played a part in Nargul's schemes, and the damning account of a merchant who had supplied the poison, believing it intended for a more benign purpose.

"You," Gilgamesh growled at Nargul, each word a thunderous judgment. "Did you poison the one who was dearer to me than my own life? Speak, or your silence shall be met with torment."

Nargul, pale and quivering, attempted to deflect, to twist words, yet he could not escape the merciless scrutiny of the king. The hall filled with silence, thick and suffocating, as Gilgamesh's patience waned. When the answers did not come freely, the king's resolve hardened. He signaled to his guards, and the murmurs of the court died as Gilgamesh resorted to means that few ever saw—a sharpened blade, a heated brand, the agonizing weight of truth demanded at all costs. Nargul, knowing the fate that awaited him, broke under the unbearable tension, spilling forth the confession that he had been the one to deliver the poison.

With the truth finally laid bare, Gilgamesh's expression turned colder, his fury replaced by a chilling resolve. He loomed over Nargul, who now lay prostrate, his face pressed to the stone floor, awaiting whatever fate his king deemed just.

"For the life you have stolen, there shall be no mercy," Gilgamesh intoned, his voice ringing through the hall. He drew his sword, its edge glinting like a shard of bitter ice,

The hall fell silent as Nargul's trembling voice echoed in accusation. "It was not my doing, my king! I was but a tool—forced by a power far beyond my own!" he stammered, his eyes wide with desperation as he looked up at Gilgamesh, who loomed above him, sword at the ready.

Gilgamesh's expression remained stony, his voice a cold command. "Name the one who ordered you to poison Enkidu."

A murmur rippled through the assembly, the council and attendants watching with bated breath. Nargul's gaze darted nervously through the room before he cast a furtive glance toward the edge of the gathering.

“The goddess Ishtar!” he cried out, his voice cracking with fear. “She compelled me to commit this treachery. She herself—”

“Ishtar!” Gilgamesh called; his voice thunderous as he pointed his sword forward. “Step before me and answer these accusations!”

The crowd shifted, parting as Ishtar glided forward, her face an unreadable mask, cold and imperious. She took her place beside Nargul, a faint glint of amusement playing at the corners of her lips. The accused and the accuser stood together before the king, yet it was clear to all that only one wielded power here.

Nargul, emboldened by Gilgamesh’s demand, turned to Ishtar, his face paling as he accused her once more. “You, goddess, forced my hand. It was by your will that Enkidu was condemned—by your hand that he suffered—”

In a flash, Ishtar’s hand slipped beneath her robes, producing a small, sharp-bladed ritual knife. With a swift, furious motion, she plunged the blade into Nargul’s chest, silencing him mid-cry. His eyes widened in shock as he fell forward, collapsing at her feet. Blood pooled around the lifeless form, staining the stones beneath them.

The crowd gasped, recoiling in horror as the queen of the heavens herself now stood, blood-splattered and defiant, facing them down as they stared at her with a dawning realization.

Ninsun, her eyes glistening with pain and grief, approached slowly, her gaze fixed upon Ishtar. “There is no mistaking this,” she said softly. “This is no mortal’s wrath, but that of a goddess unchecked. Lalitu, as we knew her, is no more.”

The council stood in tense silence, each member fixed upon Ishtar with equal measures of fear and revulsion, their minds reeling from the revelation. And though Ishtar’s face was composed, even disdainful, the weight of their condemnation seemed to settle heavily over the gathering.

As Ishtar’s gaze swept the crowd, untouched by remorse, Gilgamesh felt a new fire rising within him. Enkidu’s death had demanded a reckoning, and now he saw the true shape of his foe—a deity who saw herself above both law and justice. His own rage simmered beneath his skin, for he now understood: this battle was no longer one against flesh and bone, but against the tyranny of the heavens. He would bring his friend vengeance, even if it meant defying the very gods themselves.

“How dare thee bring forth such accusations, mortal king,” Ishtar spat, her words cutting through the silence. “Thou think to question the will of a goddess? Thee who do not comprehend even the smallest whisper of the divine?”

Gilgamesh raised his voice. “You have taken Lalitu, stolen her form, and brought ruin to the life of Enkidu. Your cruelty knows no bounds, Ishtar!”

Ishtar’s expression twisted, her lips pulling back as if ready to bare teeth, her fury palpable. “Lies! Blasphemy! Lalitu remains, as I remain. She lives because I allow her to live within me, protected and exalted beyond the reach of mortal pain or suffering. None among you,” she seethed, her voice rising to a near-shriek, “can grasp the mysteries of the gods or judge their intent.”

She looked around, eyes darting between the gathered people and the accusing stare of Gilgamesh, her defenses crumbling into an animalistic anger tinged with dread. “I will not answer to these pathetic claims, these... delusions of guilt you dream up to soothe your weakness.”

The crowd had gathered in uneasy silence, forming a wide circle within the great hall of the temple. Gilgamesh, resolute and unyielding, stood at the center, his gaze locked on Ishtar, who,

though restrained, emanated fury and a wild, primal fear. She was no longer the revered goddess, adored and worshipped—she was cornered, her powers suppressed, a goddess among mortals yet powerless.

Gilgamesh's voice broke the silence, deep and commanding, as he addressed Ishtar. "You, who once bore the mantle of love and war, have brought not honor but ruin upon Uruk. Through deceit, you defiled what is sacred, poisoning the veins of the innocent. Is this the justice of the gods?"

Ishtar snarled; her eyes aflame. "How dare you? I am no mere mortal; I am a goddess eternal! Do you, Gilgamesh, presume to pass judgment on one such as I?"

But Gilgamesh remained unmoved. His tone was colder now, filled with unrelenting determination. "I cannot execute a god, but I shall punish your mortal form. For your crimes, Ishtar, you shall know no more freedom. From this day, you are bound to your temple. There, where you once wielded your powers unchecked, shall now be the bounds of your existence. No more shall you set foot beyond these walls or claim dominion over those who live freely."

A ripple of unease moved through the assembled crowd as they watched the goddess tremble, soon to be restrained by the very walls that had once echoed with the chants of her worship. Gilgamesh's voice, low but firm, cut through the silence. "Let this temple be your prison, Ishtar. You will know the passing of the years, but Uruk will live on without you, your name fading as forgotten stone."

The priests, taking Gilgamesh's silent command, began to chant. Ishtar was dragged screaming her rage and defiance to her temple. Sacred symbols were drawn in the air and pressed to the stones, as the temple itself seemed to close in, ensnaring the goddess within her own sanctuary. Ishtar struggled, her power faltering against the restraints binding her to this place. Panic flickered across her face as the realization dawned—she was truly imprisoned.

Before Gilgamesh turned to leave, he looked upon her one last time, his expression grim. "May you watch and witness, Ishtar, as Uruk rises without you. A goddess bound in her own temple, your powers but shadows of what they once were. And in time, the world shall forget."

With these final words, Gilgamesh stepped back, nodding to the priests who completed the binding with words both ancient and final. One by one, those gathered filed out of the temple, leaving Ishtar behind, enclosed within walls that now served as her eternal prison. In her isolation, she remained as the years would pass, her presence and power fading, as Gilgamesh's decree held her bound to a world that would soon leave her behind.

As Gilgamesh turned from the temple's dimly lit depths, he made his way through the throng of priests and nobles, their faces solemn and reverent. He stepped out onto the wide stone balcony overlooking Uruk, and as he emerged into the open air, a murmur passed through the assembled crowd below, who had gathered in anticipation and fear, uncertain of what fate had befallen the goddess within.

With a steady, measured grace, Gilgamesh strode to the edge of the balcony, his form tall and resolute against the reddening horizon. He raised his hands, palms open to the people, calling for silence, for their hearts to be stilled, and for the weight of his words to bear upon them all.

"People of Uruk!" His voice rolled forth like thunder, reaching even the furthest listener. "The goddess Ishtar, who sought to betray our city with poison and deceit, shall trouble Uruk no longer. She is bound within her own temple, her powers sealed, her reach halted. No more shall her wrath or whimsy taint the lives of those who labor, who love, who honor the gods in earnest."

A quiet awe descended upon the people. Gilgamesh took a breath, his gaze sweeping across the crowd, each face lifted toward him in the dusk. "Today, we do not bow to terror, nor bend our heads to one who would turn the sacred to ash. By the decree of justice, Uruk is made whole, and from this day forth, we walk free from the yoke of false gods."

The people erupted into a roar of relief and triumph; voices lifted to the heavens. Gilgamesh, with a fierce pride in his eyes, allowed them their cheer, his hands raised high in a symbol of strength and solidarity. And as the sound of the city's joy rose to meet the twilight, Gilgamesh stood, unmoved and unyielding—a king who had defended his people, his duty fulfilled.

"Let this day mark a new chapter between the divine and the people of Uruk," Gilgamesh declared, his voice echoing through the temple. "May our actions reflect the respect and reverence we hold for the gods, and may our deeds honor the balance that governs all." As the ceremony concluded, the people of Uruk spilled into the streets, their spirits lifted by the resolution of a conflict that had once cast a shadow over their city. Festivities ensued, a celebration of unity between the mortal and the divine, a testament to the enduring legacy of Gilgamesh's reign.

In the lingering twilight that draped over Uruk, casting its ancient stones in hues of gold and shadow, Gilgamesh sought the solace of his divine mother, Ninsun. The city, abuzz with the remnants of festivity and the whisperings of divine reconciliation, seemed to hold its breath as the King moved through its heart, a figure of contemplation amid the exhalations of his people.

Ninsun awaited him in her sacred chamber, a realm where the mortal intertwined with the divine, where the air itself seemed imbued with wisdom and timelessness. As Gilgamesh entered, the weight of his journey, both of the soul and the soles, seemed to lift, leaving behind only the essence of the man, the king, the son.

"Mother," he began, his voice a reflection of the myriad paths he had trodden, "I have stood before gods and monsters, sought the unattainable, and have come to know the depth of my own mortality."

Ninsun, her gaze bearing the serenity of the celestial and the warmth of the maternal, listened, her presence a beacon for his tumultuous thoughts.

"In my quest, I sought to defy the very fabric of our existence, to grasp at eternity as though it were but a trinket within my reach. Yet, in the silence of the gods, in the absence of their voices, I have found a clarity I did not know I sought."

He paused, the flickering light of the chamber casting shadows that danced upon his features, echoes of the battles fought, the wisdom gained.

"It is not the eternity of the gods I desire, Mother, but to live the days granted to me with purpose, to lead our people to prosperity, and to be remembered not as the king who reached for the impossible, but as one who cherished the very essence of life."

Ninsun, moving with the grace that belied her divine heritage, approached her son, placing a hand upon his shoulder, a gesture that bridged the realms of the divine and the mortal.

"My son," she spoke, her voice the whisper of the wind through the cedars, "thy journey has been one of awakening. Thou hast discovered that the true measure of a life is not in the days that span its length, but in the depth of its impact. Thou, Gilgamesh, will be remembered, not as a man who defied his fate, but as one who embraced it with courage and grace."

Her eyes, pools of the infinite, gazed upon him with a foresight born of divinity. "Thy name will endure through the ages, whispered in reverence and awe, a beacon for those who seek to find their own path amidst the tempests of existence."

In that moment, Gilgamesh saw not through the eyes of a king, burdened with the weight of his crown, but through the soul of a man who had traversed the abyss and emerged whole. A sense of peace, profound and all-encompassing, settled upon him, a mantle woven from the threads of his trials and triumphs.

"Then let it be so," he affirmed, his voice steady, his resolve unshaken. "I shall live the days granted to me with honor and purpose, and when the annals of time bear my name into the future, let them speak of a king who loved his people deeply, who fought valiantly for their prosperity, and who walked with the gods, yet chose the path of mortality with wisdom and grace. Let my legacy be a testament to the strength found in embracing our humanity, in facing our fears, and in the pursuit of a life lived fully, with every fleeting moment cherished and every challenge met with courage."

Amat, her eyes alight with pride and a love that transcended the boundaries between the divine and the mortal, drew Gilgamesh into an embrace that seemed to envelop him in the warmth of the sun and the tranquility of the moonlit night combined. "So shall it be, my son. Your journey, your struggles, and your revelations shall be the light that guides the generations to come. In you, they will find the hero, the king, and the man who dared to dream, to question, and ultimately, to understand."

Stepping out from the sacred chamber, Gilgamesh cast his gaze upon Uruk, its walls standing tall and proud under the starlit sky, a symbol of all he had fought for, of all he had learned to hold dear. With a heart now unburdened and a spirit invigorated by the acceptance of his mortal journey, Gilgamesh vowed to lead his people with the wisdom of the gods, but with the heart of a man who had known the depth of loss, the height of ambition, and the value of life.

There was a moment's silence, the weight of all that had passed hanging between them, and then Amat, with a sly glint in her eye, lifted her chin and asked, "Now, my son, when do you plan to marry and bring me grandchildren?"

And so, under the watchful eyes of the heavens, Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, embarked on the next chapter of his reign, his steps firm with the resolve of a man who had faced the divine and found his truth in the quiet spaces between the stars, where the silence of the gods had become his greatest counsel.

In the days that followed, Uruk flourished as never before, its fields fertile, its granaries full, and its people content. Gilgamesh, having faced the gods and emerged with their favor, dedicated himself anew to the prosperity of his kingdom, ruling with wisdom and compassion, his heart at peace with the knowledge that the gods watched over Uruk with a benevolent gaze.

THE END

A Note From the Author:

This story was my way of exploring what life might have been like if Julian Jaynes' theory of the Bicameral Mind was correct. For those unfamiliar with Jaynes' hypothesis, he proposed that early humans operated with a split consciousness: one part of the brain "spoke" as the gods

and another part listened, obeying these divine voices as literal commands. Over time, as societies developed, this bicameral structure shifted, merging into the unified consciousness we understand today. I've often wondered what that transition must have felt like for those at the threshold between two forms of awareness.

Gilgamesh's world seemed the perfect setting for such a journey. As the protagonist of one of humanity's earliest stories, he exists in a time where gods and men walk closely together, when the boundaries between mortal and divine will, between self and command, are blurred. Gilgamesh stands at a crucial moment when human minds, influenced by gods, began to shift toward autonomy—a story of how the voices of gods, perhaps, began to quiet, leaving humans to discern their own thoughts and forge their own paths.

Thank you for joining me on this journey into ancient memory and the awakening mind.

Mark
October 2024