

ISHTAR AND GILGAMESH, AND THE DEATH OF ENKIDU

Gilgamesh and Enkidu returned, triumphant, to the city of Uruk. Gilgamesh washed and perfumed his hair, put on his purple cloak and his crown. And the goddess Ishtar was stunned by his beauty. "Be my bridegroom, Gilgamesh," she begged, on fire with longing. "I will give you riches in abundance, chariots of lapis lazuli with wheels of gold. Princes will kneel to you; kings will send you tribute from far and wide." "You are the Queen of Love. What can I give you?" Gilgamesh replied. "My mother did not raise a broken-winged bird; you will use and discard me as you have all of your husbands."

Furious, Ishtar went to heaven, to complain to her father Anu that Gilgamesh had insulted her. Anu shrugged. "Maybe you gave him reason, daughter." "Give me the Bull of Heaven, father," she insisted. "I want to trample Gilgamesh, the arrogant one." "The Bull of Heaven will not only trample Gilgamesh," warned Anu. "The city of Uruk will suffer seven years of drought." Ishtar assured her father that she would prepare the city for the coming drought, so Anu released the Bull of Heaven to his angry daughter.

With each stamp of the huge bull's hoof, the ground in Uruk opened up, swallowing its people. "I'll grab him by the tail," called Enkidu to Gilgamesh. "You slit his throat. Standing together, we two can prevail." And so the two heroes slew the Bull of Heaven. Ishtar stood on the walls of Uruk, wailing, "Gilgamesh has killed the Bull of Heaven." Enkidu cut off one of the bull's haunches and threw it with contempt toward Ishtar. "I would do the same to you." "I am the strongest here," Gilgamesh exulted, and the people of Uruk rejoiced with their king. But that night, Enkidu had a foreboding dream.

This was Enkidu's dream: The gods of the heavens held a council. Anu and Enlil blamed Shamash the Sun. "You helped Gilgamesh, and he killed Humbaba, guardian of my cedar forest," claimed Enlil, the ruler of the earth. "And now he has killed my Bull of Heaven," added Anu, father of the gods. "One of these two must die." "Let it be Enkidu," Enlil decreed.

Enkidu began to waste away. Neither brother wanted to lose the other. Enkidu cursed the trapper who found him, and Shamhat who seduced him. But Shamash reminded him. "Did Shamhat not bring you to Uruk? Did she not lead you to Gilgamesh? To Gilgamesh--a king without rival and your beloved companion." Enkidu grew calm, but his sleep was troubled. In his dreams, he journeyed to the dark Underworld, to the House of Dust. Day after day, he withered. On the twelfth day, he begged Gilgamesh: "Do not forget how we stood together. Alas, I do not die in battle. I am cursed. Who will remember my name?"

Gilgamesh pulled a shroud over the face of his beloved. The King of Uruk raised this lament: "Enkidu, may the gazelles of the grassland mourn you, and the animals at the watering hole. May the path that winds through the cedar forest mourn you, by day and by night. May the elders of strong-walled Uruk mourn you. May Shamhat mourn you in the Temple of Ishtar. Hear me: The

young men who cheered for us weep for you now. The rivers weep for you, and the mountains too.” Gilgamesh tore at his hair and his clothing. Grave goods he gathered—sheathed in precious ivory, gold, and lapis lazuli—to accompany his friend to the Underworld.

THE SEARCH FOR IMMORTALITY

Gilgamesh wandered the wild plains outside the walls of Uruk. Howling his grief, he chased the wind and would not be comforted. “Where are you going?” asked Shamash. Gilgamesh replied, “How can I rest? I am stalked by death. Alone, I can never prevail. I must find Uta-napishti, he who survived the Flood. Only Uta-napishti can tell me how to escape death.”

Gilgamesh resolved to find Uta-napishti. After a long and wearisome journey, he finally arrived at the great mountains where the sun rises and sets. Two scorpions guarded the mountain pass. With a terrible gaze, they doled out death. And yet, Gilgamesh mustered his courage and walked toward them. “Only a god would dare approach us,” said one of the scorpions. “Two thirds god,” corrected the other. “One third man.” “Why have you traveled so far,” demanded the first scorpion. “I need to question Uta-napishti about the secret of life and death,” answered Gilgamesh. “No mortal has ever crossed these mountains,” warned the scorpions. “No light shines within them, and the darkness is dense.” “I must cross these mountains. Let me pass,” the king replied. The scorpions stepped aside. “You may go, Gilgamesh. May the mountains allow you to pass safely.”

Gilgamesh entered the mountain pass alone. Utter darkness pressed him from all sides. He traveled many long and weary leagues alone in profound darkness. “If I had a companion,” he muttered. “We two . . .” But darkness swallowed his words, and still he pressed on blindly. At ten leagues, the blessed wind played over his face. At eleven leagues, welcome dawn streaked the horizon. At twelve leagues, the sun finally rose on a glistening garden. Beyond the garden stretched the sea.

Siduri the tavern keeper lived by the sea. She had seen Gilgamesh from a distance, his face etched in sorrow, despair in his heart. Fearful, she barred her gate against him. But Gilgamesh begged entry, insisting, “I am Gilgamesh, King of Uruk--He who killed Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven.” “If you are Gilgamesh, slayer of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, why are your cheeks so hollow and your clothing so wild?” Siduri retorted. “Why shouldn’t I have hollow cheeks? I grieve for Enkidu, my companion. Death has stalked every step of my long journey.” Siduri spoke softly: “Gilgamesh, did you not know that all men must die? The gods keep immortality for themselves. Wash yourself, put on new clothes. Fill your stomach with good food and fine wine. Hold your wife and your child. Cherish the life you have.”

Silencing the tavern keeper, Gilgamesh insisted, “I must cross the ocean to find Uta-napishti.” “Only Shamash the Sun can cross the ocean,” said Siduri. “The waters of death are treacherous. And once you have crossed the ocean, what will you do then? Ah, Gilgamesh. Uta-napishti has a boatman named Urshanabi. Seek him down by the water. Let him see your sorrow-etched face. Maybe he will ferry you across the waters. If he won’t, then you must go back.”

Enraged, Gilgamesh crept down to the water and took an axe to the boat rigging. “Who are you,” shouted Urshanabi? “I am Gilgamesh, the King of Uruk.” “Why are your cheeks so hollow?” asked Urshanabi, “and your heart so heavy?” “My cheeks are hollow and my heart is heavy because my brother is dead. Enkidu, my beloved companion, is dead. And I am tormented by one question: Must I die too? I have journeyed this long way to find Uta-napishti and to learn the secret of life and death.” Pointing to the broken rigging, Urshanabi explained that Gilgamesh had destroyed the only way across the ocean. But together, they fashioned poles to ferry across the waters of death.

The old man Uta-napishti saw them from a distance and wondered who could be traveling with Urshanabi, his face etched in sorrow, despair in his heart. Disembarking, Gilgamesh told Uta-napishti his story—how he and Enkidu became companions and vanquished many a foe together, how Enkidu had angered Ishtar and died, how he, Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, had journeyed through the dark mountains to Siduri’s tavern, how Urshanabi had taken pity on him and ferried him across the waters of death.

“Ah Gilgamesh,” sighed Uta-napishti. “Stop chasing sorrow. Death takes all—the handsome young man and the old one as well. But no one sees the face of Death or hears his voice. Life and death the gods have established.”