

Gilgamesh in the Outback

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Faust. First I will question thee about hell.

Tell me, where is the place that men call hell?

Meph. Under the heavens.

Faust. Ay, but whereabouts?

Meph. Within the bowels of these elements,

Where we are tortur'd and remain for ever:
Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscrib'd
In one self place; for where we are is hell,
And where hell is, there must we ever be:
And, to conclude, when all the world dissolves,
And every creature shall be purified,
All places shall be hell that are not heaven.

Faust. Come, I think hell's a fable.

Meph. Ay, think so still, till experience change thy mind.

Marlowe: *Dr. Faustus*

Jagged green lightning danced on the horizon and the wind came ripping like a blade out of the east, skinning the flat land bare and sending up clouds of gray-brown dust. Gilgamesh grinned broadly. By Enlil, now that was a wind! A lion-killing wind it was, a wind that turned the air dry and crackling. The beasts of the field gave you the greatest joy in their hunting when the wind was like that, hard and sharp and cruel.

He narrowed his eyes and stared into the distance, searching for this day's prey. His bow of several fine woods, the bow that no man but he was strong enough to draw—no man but he and Enkidu his beloved thrice-lost friend—hung loosely from his hand. His body was poised and ready. Come now, you beasts! Come and be slain! It is Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, who would make his sport with you this day!

Other men in this land, when they went about their hunting, made use of guns, those foul machines that the New Dead had brought, which hurled death from a great distance along with much noise and fire and smoke; or they employed the even deadlier laser devices from whose ugly snouts came spurts of blue-white flame. Cowardly things, all those killing machines! Gilgamesh loathed them, as he did most instruments of the New Dead, those slick and bustling Johnny-come-latelies of Hell. He would not touch them if he could help it. In all the thousands of years he had dwelled in this nether world he had never used any weapons but those he had known during his first lifetime: the javelin, the spear, the double-headed axe, the hunting bow, the good bronze sword. It took some skill, hunting with such weapons as those. And there was physical effort; there was more than a little risk. Hunting was a contest, was it not? Then it must make demands. Why, if the idea was merely to slaughter one's prey in the fastest and easiest and safest way, then the sensible thing to do would be to ride high above the hunting grounds in a weapons platform and drop a little nuke, eh, and lay waste five kingdoms' worth of beasts at a single stroke!

He knew that there were those who thought him a fool for such ideas. Caesar, for one. Cocksure coldblooded Julius with the gleaming pistols thrust into his belt and the submachine gun slung across his shoulders. "Why don't you admit it?" Caesar had asked him once, riding up in his jeep as Gilgamesh was making ready to set forth toward Hell's open wilderness. "It's a pure affectation, Gilgamesh, all this insistence on arrows and javelins and spears. This isn't old Sumer you're living in now."

Gilgamesh spat. "Hunt with 9-millimeter automatics? Hunt with grenades and cluster bombs and lasers? You call that sport, Caesar?"

"I call it acceptance of reality. Is it technology you hate? What's the difference between using a bow and arrow and using a gun? They're both technology, Gilgamesh. It isn't as though you kill the animals with your bare hands."

"I have done that, too," said Gilgamesh.

"Bah! I'm on to your game. Big hulking Gilgamesh, the simple innocent oversized Bronze Age hero! That's just an affectation, too, my friend! You pretend to be a stupid, stubborn thick-skulled barbarian because it suits you to be left alone to your hunting and your wandering, and that's all you claim that you really want. But secretly you regard yourself as superior to anybody who lived in an era softer than your own. You mean to restore the bad old filthy ways of the ancient ancients, isn't that so? If I read you the right way you're just biding your time, skulking around with your bow and arrow in the dreary Outback until you think it's the right moment to launch the *putsch* that carries you to supreme power here. Isn't that it, Gilgamesh? You've got some crazy fantasy of overthrowing Satan himself and lording it over all of us. And then we'll live in mud cities again and make little chicken scratches on clay tablets, the way we were meant to do. What do you say?"

"I say this is great nonsense, Caesar."

"Is it? This place is full of kings and emperors and sultans and pharaohs and shahs and presidents and dictators, and every single one of them wants to be Number One again. My guess is that you're no exception."

"In this you are very wrong."

"I doubt that. I suspect you believe you're the best of us all: you, the sturdy warrior, the great hunter, the maker of bricks, the builder of vast temples and lofty walls, the shining beacon of ancient heroism. You think we're all decadent rascally degenerates and that you're the one true virtuous man. But you're as proud and ambitious as any of us. Isn't that how it is? You're a fraud, Gilgamesh, a huge musclebound fraud!"

"At least I am no slippery tricky serpent like you, Caesar, who dons a wig and spies on women at their mysteries if it pleases him."

Caesar looked untroubled by the thrust. "And so you pass three-quarters of your time killing stupid monstrous creatures in the Outback and you make sure everyone knows that you're too pious to have anything to do with modern weapons while you do it. You don't fool me. It isn't virtue that keeps you from doing your killing with a decent

double-barreled .470 Springfield. It's intellectual pride, or maybe simple laziness. The bow just happens to be the weapon you grew up with, who knows how many thousands of years ago. You like it because it's familiar. But what language are you speaking now, eh? Is it your thick-tongued Euphrates gibberish? No, it seems to be English, doesn't it? Did you grow up speaking English too, Gilgamesh? Did you grow up riding around in jeeps and choppers? Apparently *some* of the new ways are acceptable to you."

Gilgamesh shrugged. "I speak English with you because that is what is spoken now in this place. In my heart I speak the old tongue, Caesar. In my heart I am still Gilgamesh of Uruk, and I will hunt as I hunt."

"Uruk's long gone to dust. This is the life after life, my friend. We've been here a long time. We'll be here for all time to come, unless I miss my guess. New people constantly bring new ideas to this place, and it's impossible to ignore them. Even you can't do it. Isn't that a wristwatch I see on your arm, Gilgamesh? *Adigital* watch, no less?"

"I will hunt as I hunt," said Gilgamesh. "There is no sport in it, when you do it with guns. There is no grace in it."

Caesar shook his head. "I never could understand hunting for sport, anyway. Killing a few stags, yes, or a boar or two, when you're bivouacked in some dismal Gaulish forest and your men want meat. But hunting? Slaughtering hideous animals that aren't even edible? By Apollo, it's all nonsense to me!"

"My point exactly."

"But if you must hunt, to scorn the use of a decent hunting rifle—"

"You will never convince me."

"No," Caesar said with a sigh. "I suppose I won't. I should know better than to argue with a reactionary."

"Reactionary! In my time I was thought to be a radical," said Gilgamesh. "When I was king in Uruk—"

"Just so," Caesar said, laughing. "King in Uruk. Was there ever a king who wasn't reactionary? You put a crown on your head and it addles your brains instantly. Three times Antonius offered me a crown, Gilgamesh. Three times, and—"

"—you did thrice refuse it, yes. I know all that. 'Was this ambition?' You thought you'd have the power without the emblem. Who were you fooling, Caesar? Not Brutus, so I hear. Brutus said you were ambitious. And Brutus—"

That stung him. "Damn you, don't say it!"

"—was an honorable man," Gilgamesh concluded, enjoying Caesar's discomfiture.

Caesar groaned. "If I hear that line once more—"

“Some say this is a place of torment,” said Gilgamesh serenely. “If in truth it is, yours is to be swallowed up in another man's poetry. Leave me to my bows and arrows, Caesar, and return to your jeep and your trivial intrigues. I am a fool and a reactionary, yes. But you know nothing of hunting. Nor do you understand anything of me.”

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All that had been a year ago, or two, or maybe five—with or without a wristwatch, there was no keeping proper track of time in Hell, where the unmoving ruddy eye of the sun never budged from the sky—and now Gilgamesh was far from Caesar and all his minions, far from the troublesome center of Hell and the tiresome squabbling of those like Caesar and Alexander and Napoleon and that sordid little Guevara man who maneuvered for power in this place.

Let them maneuver all they liked, those shoddy new men of the latter days. Some day they might learn wisdom, and was not that the purpose of this place, if it had any purpose at all?

Gilgamesh preferred to withdraw. Unlike the rest of those fallen emperors and kings and pharaohs and shahs, he felt no yearning to reshape Hell in his own image. Caesar was as wrong about Gilgamesh's ambitions as he was about the reasons for his preferences in hunting gear. Out here in the Outback, in the bleak dry chilly hinterlands of Hell, Gilgamesh hoped to find peace. That was all he wanted now: peace. He had wanted much more, once, but that had been long ago.

There was a stirring in the scraggly underbrush.

A lion, maybe?

No, Gilgamesh thought. There were no lions to be found in Hell, only the strange nether-world beasts. Ugly hairy things with flat noses and many legs and dull baleful eyes, and slick shiny things with the faces of women and the bodies of malformed dogs, and worse, much worse. Some had drooping leathery wings, and some were armed with spiked tails that rose like a scorpion's, and some had mouths that opened wide enough to swallow an elephant at a gulp. They all were demons of one sort or another, Gilgamesh knew. No matter. Hunting was hunting; the prey was the prey; all beasts were one in the contest of the field. That fop Caesar could never begin to comprehend that.

Drawing an arrow from his quiver, Gilgamesh laid it lightly across his bow and waited.

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“If you ever had come to Texas, H.P., this here's a lot like what you'd have seen,” said the big barrel-chested man with the powerful arms and the deeply tanned skin. Gesturing sweepingly with one hand, he held the wheel of the Land Rover lightly with three fingers of the other, casually guiding the vehicle in jouncing zigs and zags over the flat trackless landscape. Gnarled gray-green shrubs matted the gritty ground. The sky was black with swirling dust. Far off in the distance barren mountains rose like dark jagged teeth. “Beautiful. Beautiful. As close to Texas in look as makes no

never mind, this countryside is.”

“Beautiful?” said the other man uncertainly. “Hell?”

“This stretch sure is. But if you think Hell's beautiful, you should have seen Texas!”

The burly man laughed and gunned the engine, and the Land Rover went leaping and bouncing onward at a stupefying speed.

His traveling companion, a gaunt, lantern-jawed man as pale as the other was bronzed, sat very still in the passenger seat, knees together and elbows digging in against his ribs, as if he expected a fiery crash at any moment. The two of them had been journeying across the interminable parched wastes of the Outback for many days now—how many, not even the Elder Gods could tell. They were ambassadors, these two: Their Excellencies Robert E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft of the Kingdom of New Holy Diabolic England, envoys of His Britannic Majesty Henry VIII to the court of Prester John.

In another life they had been writers, fantasists, inventors of fables; but now they found themselves caught up in something far more fantastic than anything to be found in any of their tales, for this was no fable, this was no fantasy. This was the reality of Hell.

“Robert—” said the pale man nervously.

“A lot like Texas, yes,” Howard went on, “only Hell's just a faint carbon copy of the genuine item. Just a rough first draft, is all. You see that sandstorm rising out thataway? *We* had sandstorms, they covered entire counties! You see that lightning? In Texas that would be just a flicker!”

“If you could drive just a little more slowly, Bob—”

“More slowly? Chthulu's whiskers, man, *I am* driving slowly!”

“Yes, I'm quite sure you believe that you are.”

“And the way I always heard it, H.P., you loved for people to drive you around at top speed. Seventy, eighty miles an hour, that was what you liked best, so the story goes.”

“In the other life one dies only once, and then all pain ceases,” Lovecraft replied. “But here, where one can go to the Undertaker again and again, and when one returns one remembers every final agony in the brightest of hues—here, dear friend Bob, death's much more to be feared, for the pain of it stays with one forever, and one may die a thousand deaths.” Lovecraft managed a pale baleful smile. “Speak of that to some professional warrior, Bob, some Trojan or Hun or Assyrian—or one of the gladiators, maybe, someone who has died and died and died again. Ask him about it: the dying and the rebirth, and the pain, the hideous torment, reliving every detail. It is a dreadful thing to die in Hell. I fear dying here far more than I ever did in life. I will take no needless risks here.”

Howard snorted. “Gawd, try and figure you out! When you thought you lived only

once, you made people go roaring along with you on the highway a mile a minute. Here where no one stays dead for very long you want me to drive like an old woman. Well, I'll attempt it, H.P., but everything in me cries out to go like the wind. When you live in big country, you learn to cover the territory the way it has to be covered. And Texas is the biggest country there is. It isn't just a place, it's a state of mind."

"As is Hell," said Lovecraft. "Though I grant you that Hell isn't Texas."

"Texas!" Howard boomed. "God damn, I wish you could have seen it! By God, H.P., what a time we'd have had, you and me, if you'd come to Texas. Two gentlemen of letters like us riding together all to hell and gone from Corpus Christi to El Paso and back again, seeing it all and telling each other wondrous stories all the way! I swear, it would have enlarged your soul, H.P. Beauty such as perhaps even you couldn't have imagined. That big sky. That blazing sun. And the open space! Whole empires could fit into Texas and never be seen again! That Rhode Island of yours, H.P.—we could drop it down just back of Cross Plains and lose it behind a medium-size prickly pear! What you see here, it just gives you the merest idea of that glorious beauty. Though I admit this is plenty beautiful itself, this here."

"I wish I could share your joy in this landscape, Robert," Lovecraft said quietly, when it seemed that Howard had said all he meant to say.

"You don't care for it?" Howard asked, sounding surprised and a little wounded.

"I can say one good thing for it: at least it's far from the sea."

"You'll give it that much, will you?"

"You know how I hate the sea and all that the sea contains! Its odious creatures—that hideous reek of salt air hovering above it—" Lovecraft shuddered fastidiously. "But this land—this bitter desert—you don't find it somber? You don't find it forbidding?"

"It's the most beautiful place I've seen since I came to Hell."

"Perhaps the beauty is too subtle for my eye. Perhaps it escapes me altogether. I was always a man for cities, myself."

"What you're trying to say, I reckon, is that all this looks real hateful to you. Is that it? As grim and ghastly as the Plateau of Leng, eh, H.P.?" Howard laughed. "Sterile hills of gray granite ... dim wastes of rock and ice and snow ... " Hearing himself quoted, Lovecraft laughed too, though not exuberantly. Howard went on. "I look around at the Outback of Hell and I see something a whole lot like Texas, and I love it. For you it's as sinister as dark frosty Leng, where people have horns and hooves and munch on corpses and sing hymns to Nyarlathotep. Oh, H.P., H.P., there's no accounting for tastes, is there? Why, there's even some people who—whoa, now! Look there!"

He braked the Land Rover suddenly and brought it to a jolting halt. A small malevolent-looking something with blazing eyes and a scaly body had broken from cover and gone scuttering across the path just in front of them. Now it faced them, glaring up out of the road, snarling and hissing flame.

“Hell-cat!” Howard cried. “Hell-coyote! *Look* at that critter, H.P. You ever see so much ugliness packed into such a small package? Scare the toenails off a shoggoth, that one would!”

“Can you drive past it?” Lovecraft asked, looking dismayed.

“I want a closer look, first.” Howard rummaged down by his boots and pulled a pistol from the clutter on the floor of the car. “Don't it give you the shivers, driving around in a land full of critters that could have come right out of one of your stories, or mine? I want to look this little ghoul-cat right in the eye.”

“Robert—”

“You wait here. I'll only be but a minute.”

Howard swung himself down from the Land Rover and marched stolidly toward the hissing little beast, which stood its ground. Lovecraft watched fretfully. At any moment the creature might leap upon Bob Howard and rip out his throat with a swipe of its horrid yellow talons, perhaps—or burrow snout-deep into his chest, seeking the Texan's warm, throbbing heart

They stood staring at each other, Howard and the small monster, no more than a dozen feet apart. For a long moment neither one moved. Howard, gun in hand, leaned forward to inspect the beast as one might look at a feral cat guarding the mouth of an alleyway. Did he mean to shoot it? No, Lovecraft thought: beneath his bluster the robust Howard seemed surprisingly squeamish about bloodshed and violence of any sort.

Then things began happening very quickly. Out of a thicket to the left a much larger animal abruptly emerged: a ravening Hell-creature with a crocodile head and powerful thick-thighed legs that ended in monstrous curving claws. An arrow ran through the quivering dewlaps of its heavy throat from side to side, and a hideous dark ichor streamed from the wound down the beast's repellent blue-gray fur. The small animal, seeing the larger one wounded this way, instantly sprang upon its back and sank its fangs joyously into its shoulder. But a moment later there burst from the same thicket a man of astonishing size, a great dark-haired black-bearded man clad only in a bit of cloth about his waist. Plainly he was the huntsman who had wounded the larger monster, for there was a bow of awesome dimensions in his hand and a quiver of arrows on his back. In utter fearlessness the giant plucked the foul little creature from the wounded beast's back and hurled it far out of sight; then, swinging around, he drew a gleaming bronze dagger, and with a single fierce thrust, drove it into the breast of his prey as the coup de grace that brought the animal crashing heavily down.

All this took only an instant. Lovecraft, peering through the window of the Land Rover, was dazzled by the strength and speed of the dispatch and awed by the size and agility of the half-naked huntsman. He glanced toward Howard, who stood to one side, his own considerable frame utterly dwarfed by the black-bearded man.

For a moment Howard seemed dumbstruck, paralyzed with wonder and amazement.

But then he was the first to speak.

“By Crom,” he muttered, staring at the giant. “Surely this is Conan of Aquilonia and none other!” He was trembling. He took a lurching step toward the huge man, holding out both his hands in a strange gesture—submission, was it? “Lord Conan?” Howard murmured. “Great king, is it you? Conan? Conan?” And before Lovecraft’s astounded eyes Howard fell to his knees next to the dying beast, and looked up with awe and something like rapture in his eyes at the towering huntsman.

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It had been a decent day’s hunting so far. Three beasts brought down after long and satisfying chase; every shaft fairly placed; each animal skillfully dressed, the meat set out as bait for other hell-beasts, the hide and head carefully put aside for proper cleaning at nightfall. There was true pleasure in work done so well.

Yet there was a hollowness at the heart of it all, Gilgamesh thought, that left him leaden and cheerless no matter how cleanly his arrows sped to their mark. He never felt that true fulfillment, that clean sense of completion, that joy of accomplishment, which was ultimately the only thing he sought.

Why was that? Was it—as the Christian dead so drearily insisted—because this was Hell, where by definition there could be no delight?

To Gilgamesh that was foolishness. Those who came here expecting eternal punishment did indeed get eternal punishment, and it was even more horrendous than anything they had anticipated. It served them right, those true believers, those gullible New Dead, that army of credulous Christians.

He had been amazed when their kind first came flocking into Hell, Enki only knew how many thousands of years ago. The things they talked of! Rivers of boiling oil! Lakes of pitch! Demons with pitchforks! That was what they expected, and the Administration was happy to oblige them. There were Torture Towns aplenty for those who wanted them. Gilgamesh had trouble understanding why anyone would. Nobody among the Old Dead really could figure them out, those absurd New Dead with their obsession with punishment. What was it Sargon called them? Masochists, that was the word. Pathetic masochists. But then that sly little Machiavelli had begged to disagree, saying, “No, my lord, it would be a violation of the nature of Hell to send a true masochist off to the torments. The only ones who go are the strong ones—the bullies, the braggarts, the ones who are cowards at the core of their souls.” Augustus had had something to say on the matter too, and Caesar, and that Egyptian bitch Hatshepsut had butted in, she of the false beard and the startling eyes, and then all of them had jabbered at once, trying yet again to make sense of the Christian New Dead. Until finally Gilgamesh had said, before stalking out of the room, “The trouble with all of you is that you keep trying to make sense out of this place. But when you’ve been here as long as I have—”

Well, perhaps Hell *was* a place of punishment. Certainly there were some disagreeable aspects to it. The business about sex, for example. Never being able to come, even if you pumped away all day and all night. And the whole digestive complication, allowing you to eat real food but giving you an unholy hard time when it came to passing the stuff through your gut. But Gilgamesh tended to believe that

those were merely the incidental consequences of being dead: this place was not, after all, the land of the living, and there was no reason why things should work the same way here as they did back there.

He had to admit that the reality of Hell had turned out to be nothing at all like what the priests had promised it would be. The House of Dust and Darkness, was what they had called it in Uruk long ago. A place where the dead lived in eternal night and sadness, clad like birds, with wings for garments. Where the dwellers had dust for their bread, and clay for their meat. Where the kings of the earth, the masters, the high rulers, lived humbly without their crowns, and were forced to wait on the demons like servants. Small wonder that he had dreaded death as he had, believing that that was what awaited him for all time to come!

Well, in fact all that had been mere myth and folly. Gilgamesh could still remember Hell as it had been when he first had come to it: a place much like Uruk, so it seemed, with low flat-roofed buildings of whitewashed brick, and temples rising on high platforms of many steps. And there he found all the heroes of olden days, living as they had always lived: Lugalbanda, his father; and Enmerkar, his father's father; and Ziusudra who built the vessel by which mankind survived the Flood; and others on and on, back to the dawn of time. At least that was what it was like where Gilgamesh first found himself; there were other districts, he discovered later, that were quite different—places where people lived in caves, or in pits in the ground, or in flimsy houses of reeds, and still other places where the Hairy Men dwelled and had no houses at all. Most of that was gone now, greatly transformed by all those who had come to Hell in the latter days, and indeed a lot of nonsensical ugliness and ideological foolishness had entered in recent centuries in the baggage of the New Dead. But still, the idea that this whole vast realm—ininitely bigger than his own beloved Land of the Two Rivers—existed merely for the sake of chastising the dead for their sins, struck Gilgamesh as too silly for serious contemplation.

Why, then, was the joy of his hunting so pale and hollow? Why none of the old ecstasy when spying the prey, when drawing the great bow, when sending the arrow true to its mark?

Gilgamesh thought he knew why, and it had nothing to do with punishment. There had been joy aplenty in the hunting for many a thousand years of his life in Hell. If the joy had gone from it now, it was only that in these latter days he hunted alone; that Enkidu—his friend, his true brother, his other self—was not with him. That and nothing but that: for he had never felt complete without Enkidu since they first had met and wrestled and come to love one another after the manner of brothers, long ago in the city of Uruk. That great burly man, broad and tall and strong as Gilgamesh himself, that shaggy wild creature out of the high ridges: Gilgamesh had never loved anyone as he loved Enkidu.

But it was the fate of Gilgamesh, so it seemed, to lose him again and again. Enkidu had been ripped from him the first time long ago when they still dwelled in Uruk, on that dark day when the gods had had revenge upon them for their great pride and had sent the fever to take Enkidu's life. In time Gilgamesh too had yielded to death and was taken into Hell, which he found nothing at all like the Hell that the scribes and priests of the Land had taught; and there he had searched for Enkidu, and one glorious day he had found him. Hell had been a much smaller place, then, and everyone

seemed to know everyone else; but even so it had taken an age to track him down. Oh, the rejoicing that day in Hell! Oh, the singing and the dancing, the vast festival that went on and on! There was great kindness among the denizens of Hell in those days, and everyone was glad for Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Minos of Crete gave the first great party in honor of their reunion, and then it was Amenhotep's turn, and then Agamemnon's. And on the fourth day the host was dark slender Varuna, the Meluhhan king, and then on the fifth the heroes gathered in the ancient hall of the Ice-Hunter folk where one-eyed Vy-otin was chieftain and the floor was strewn with mammoth tusks, and after that

Well, and it went on for some long time, the great celebration of the reunion. This was long before the hordes of New Dead had come, all those grubby little unheroic people out of unheroic times, carrying with them their nasty little demons and their dark twisted apparatus of damnation and punishment. Before they had come, Hell had simply been a place to live in the time after life. It was all very different then, a far happier place.

For uncountable years Gilgamesh and Enkidu dwelled together in Gilgamesh's palace in Hell as they had in the old days in the Land of the Two Rivers. And all was well with them, with much hunting and feasting, and they were happy in Hell even after the New Dead began to come in, bringing all their terrible changes.

They were shoddy folk, these New Dead, confused of soul and flimsy of intellect, and their petty trifling rivalries and vain strutting poses were a great nuisance. But Gilgamesh and Enkidu kept their distance from them while they replayed all the follies of their lives, their nonsensical Crusades and their idiotic trade wars and their preposterous theological squabbles. The trouble was that they had brought not only their lunatic ideas to Hell but also their accursed diabolical modern gadgets, and the worst of those were the vile weapons called guns, that slaughtered noisily from afar in the most shameful cowardly way. Heroes know how to parry the blow of a battle-axe or the thrust of a sword; but what can even a hero do about a bullet from afar? It was Enkidu's bad luck to fall between two quarreling bands of these gun-wielders, a flock of babbling Spaniards and a rabble of arrogant Englanders, for whom he tried to make peace. Of course they would have no peace, and soon shots were flying, and Gilgamesh arrived at the scene just as a bolt from an arquebus tore through his dear Enkidu's noble heart.

No one dies in Hell forever; but some are dead a long time, and that was how it was with Enkidu. It pleased the Undertaker this time to keep him in limbo some hundreds of years, or however many it was—tallying such matters in Hell is always difficult. It was, at any rate, a dreadful long while, and Gilgamesh once more felt that terrible inrush of loneliness that only the presence of Enkidu might cure. Hell continued to change, and now the changes were coming at a stupefying, overwhelming rate. There seemed to be far more people in the world than there ever had been in the old days, and great armies of them marched into Hell every day, a swarming rabble of uncouth strangers who after only a little interval of disorientation and bewilderment would swiftly set out to reshape the whole place into something as discordant and repellent as the world they had left behind. The steam engine came, with its clamor and clangor, and something called the dynamo, and then harsh glittering electrical lights blazed in every street where the lamps had been, and factories arose and began pouring out all manner of strange things. And more and more and more, relentlessly,

unceasingly. Railroads. Telephones. Automobiles. Noise, smoke, soot everywhere, and no way to hide from it. The Industrial Revolution, they called it. Satan and his swarm of Administration bureaucrats seemed to love all the new things, and so did almost everyone else, except for Gilgamesh and a few other cranky conservatives. “What are they trying to do?” Rabelais asked one day. “Turn the place into Hell?” Now the New Dead were bringing in such devices as radios and helicopters and computers, and everyone was speaking English, so that once again Gilgamesh, who had grudgingly learned the newfangled Greek long ago when Agamemnon and his crew had insisted on it, was forced to master yet another tongue-twisting, intricate language. It was a dreary time for him. And then at last did Enkidu reappear, far away in one of the cold northern domains. He made his way south, and for a time, they were reunited again, and once more all was well for Gilgamesh of Uruk in Hell.

But now they were separated again, this time by something colder and more cruel than death itself. It was beyond all belief, but they had quarreled. There had been words between them, ugly words on both sides—such a dispute as never in thousands of years had passed between them in the land of the living or in the land of Hell—and at last Enkidu had said that which Gilgamesh had never dreamed he would ever hear, which was, “I want no more of you, king of Uruk. If you cross my path again I will have your life.” Could that have been Enkidu speaking, or was it, Gilgamesh wondered, some demon of Hell in Enkidu's form?

In any case he was gone. He vanished into the turmoil and intricacy of Hell and placed himself beyond Gilgamesh's finding. And when Gilgamesh sent forth inquiries, back came only the report, “He will not speak with you. He has no love for you, Gilgamesh.”

It could not be. It must be a spell of witchcraft, thought Gilgamesh. Surely this was some dark working of the Hell of the New Dead, that could turn brother against brother and lead Enkidu to persist in his wrath. In time, Gilgamesh was sure, Enkidu would be triumphant over this sorcery that gripped his soul, and he would open himself once more to the love of Gilgamesh. But time went on, after the strange circuitous fashion of Hell, and Enkidu did not return to his brother's arms.

What was there to do but hunt, and wait, and hope?

* * * *

So this day Gilgamesh hunted in Hell's parched outback. He had killed and killed and killed again, and now late in the day he had put his arrow through the throat of a monster more foul even than the usual run of creatures of Hell; but there was a terrible vitality to the thing, and it went thundering off, dripping dark blood from its pierced maw.

Gilgamesh gave pursuit. It is sinful to strike and wound and not to kill. For a long weary hour he ran, crisscrossing this harsh land. Thorny plants slashed at him with the malevolence of imps, and the hard wind flailed him with clouds of dust sharp as whips. Still the evil-looking beast outpaced him, though its blood drained in torrents from it to the dry ground.

Gilgamesh would not let himself tire, for there was god-power in him by virtue of his descent from the divine Lugalbanda, his great father who was both king and god. But

he was hard pressed to keep going. Three times he lost sight of his quarry, and tracked it only by the spoor of its blood-droppings. The bleak red motionless eye that was the sun of Hell seemed to mock him, hovering forever before him as though willing him to run without cease.

Then he saw the creature, still strong but plainly staggering, lurching about at the edge of a thicket of little twisted, greasy-leaved trees. Unhesitatingly Gilgamesh plunged forward. The trees stroked him lasciviously, coating him with their slime, trying like raucous courtesans to insinuate their leaves between his legs; but he slapped them away, and emerged finally into a clearing where he could confront his animal.

Some repellent little hell-beast was clinging to the back of his prey, ripping out bloody gobbets of flesh and ruining the hide. A Land Rover was parked nearby, and a pale, strange-looking man with a long jaw was peering from its window. A second man, red-faced and beefy-looking, stood close by Gilgamesh's roaring, snorting quarry.

First things first. Gilgamesh reached out, scooped the foul hissing little carrion-seeker from the bigger animal's back, flung it aside. Then with all his force he rammed his dagger toward what he hoped was the heart of the wounded animal. In the moment of his thrust Gilgamesh felt a great convulsion within the monster's breast and its hell-life left it in an instant.

The work was done. Again, no exultation, no sense of fulfillment; only a kind of dull ashen release from an unfinished chore. Gilgamesh caught his breath and looked around.

What was this? The red-faced man seemed to be having a crazy fit. Quivering, shaking, sweating, dropping to his knees, his eyes gleaming insanely—

“Lord Conan?” the man cried. “Great king?”

“Conan is not one of my titles,” said Gilgamesh, mystified. “And I was a king once in Uruk, but I reign over nothing at all in this place. Come, man, get off your knees!”

“But you are Conan to the life!” moaned the red-faced man hoarsely. “To the absolute life!”

Gilgamesh felt a surge of intense dislike for this fellow. He would be slobbering in another moment. Conan? Conan? That name meant nothing at all. No, wait: he had known a Conan once, some little Celtic fellow he had encountered in a tavern, a chap with a blunt nose and heavy cheekbones and dark hair tumbling down his face, a drunken twitchy little man forever invoking forgotten godlets of no consequence—yes, he had called himself Conan, so Gilgamesh thought. Drank too much, caused trouble for the barmaid, even took a swing at her, that was the one. Gilgamesh had dropped him down an open cesspool to teach him manners. But how could this blustery-faced fellow here mistake me for that one? He was still mumbling on, too, babbling about lands whose names meant nothing to Gilgamesh—Cimmeria, Aquilonia, Hyrkania, Zamora. Total nonsense. There were no such places.

And that glow in the fellow's eyes—what sort of look was that? A look of adoration, almost the sort of look a woman might give a man when she has decided to yield herself utterly to his will.

Gilgamesh had seen such looks aplenty in his day, from women and men both; and he had welcomed them from women, but never from a man. He scowled. What does he think I am? Does he think, as so many have wrongly thought, that because I loved Enkidu with so great a love that I am a man who will embrace a man in the fashion of men and women? Because it is not so. Not even here in Hell is it so, said Gilgamesh to himself. Nor will it ever be.

“Tell me everything!” the red-faced man was imploring. “All those exploits that I dreamed in your name, Conan: tell me how they really were! That time in the snow fields, when you met the frost giant's daughter—and when you sailed the *Tigress* with the Black Coast's queen—and that time you stormed the Aquilonian capital, and slew King Numedides on his own throne—”

Gilgamesh stared in distaste at the man groveling at his feet.

“Come, fellow, stop this blather now,” he said sourly. “Up with you! You mistake me greatly, I think.”

The second man was out of the Land Rover now, and on his way over to join them. An odd-looking creature he was, too, skeleton-thin and corpse-white, with a neck like a water-bird's that seemed barely able to support his long, big-chinned head. He was dressed oddly too, all in black, and swathed in layer upon layer as if he dreaded the faintest chill. Yet he had a gentle and thoughtful way about him, quite unlike the wild-eyed and feverish manner of his friend. He might be a scribe, Gilgamesh thought, or a priest; but what the other one could be, the gods alone would know.

The thin man touched the other's shoulder and said, “Take command of yourself, man. This is surely not your Conan here.”

“To the life! To the very life! His size—his grandeur—the way he killed that beast—”

“Bob—Bob, Conan's a figment! Conan's a fantasy! You spun him out of whole cloth. Come, now. Up. Up.” To Gilgamesh he said, “A thousand pardons, good sir. My friend is—sometimes excitable—”

Gilgamesh turned away, shrugging, and looked to his quarry. He had no need for dealings with these two. Skinning the huge beast properly might take him the rest of the day; and then to haul the great hide back to his camp, and determine what he wanted of it as a trophy—

Behind him he heard the booming voice of the red-faced man. “A figment, H.P.? How can you be sure of that? I thought I invented Conan, too; but what if he really lived, what if I had merely tapped into some powerful primordial archetype, what if the authentic Conan stands here before us this very moment—”

“Dear Bob, your Conan had blue eyes, did he not? And this man's eyes are dark as

night.”

“Well—” Grudgingly.

“You were so excited you failed to notice. But I did. This is some barbarian warrior, yes, some great huntsman beyond any doubt—a Nimrod, an Ajax. But not Conan, Bob! Grant him his own identity. He's no invention of yours.” Coming up beside Gilgamesh, the long-jawed man said, speaking in a formal and courtly way, “Good sir, I am Howard Phillips Lovecraft, formerly of Providence, Rhode Island, and my companion is Robert E. Howard of Texas, whose other life was lived, as was mine, in the twentieth century after Christ. At that time we were tale-tellers by trade, and I think he confuses you with a hero of his own devising. Put his mind at ease, I pray you, and let us know your name.”

Gilgamesh looked up. He rubbed his wrist across his forehead to clear it of a smear of the monster's gore and met the other man's gaze evenly. This one, at least, was no madman, strange though he looked.

Quietly Gilgamesh said, “I think his mind may be beyond putting at any ease. But know you that I am called Gilgamesh, the son of Lugalbanda.”

“Gilgamesh the Sumerian?” Lovecraft whispered. “Gilgamesh who sought to live forever?”

“Gilgamesh am I, yes, who was king in Uruk when that was the greatest city of the Land of the Two Rivers, and who in his folly thought there was a way of cheating death.”

“Do you hear that, Bob?”

“Incredible. Beyond all belief!” muttered the other.

Rising until he towered above them both, Gilgamesh drew in his breath deeply and said with awesome resonance, “I am Gilgamesh to whom all things were made known, the secret things, the truths of life and death, most especially those of death. I have coupled with Inanna the goddess in the bed of the Sacred Marriage; I have slain demons and spoken with gods; I am two parts god myself, and only one part mortal.” He paused and stared at them, letting it sink in, those words that he had recited so many times in situations much like this. Then in a quieter tone he went on, “When death took me I came to this nether world they call Hell, and here I pass my time as a huntsman, and I ask you now to excuse me, for as you see I have my tasks.”

Once more he turned away.

“Gilgamesh!” said Lovecraft again in wonder. And the other said, “If I live here till the end of time, H.P., I'll never grow used to it. This is more fantastic than running into Conan would have been! Imagine it: *Gilgamesh!*”

A tiresome business, Gilgamesh thought: all this awe, all this adulation.

The problem was that damned epic, of course. He could see why Caesar grew so

irritable when people tried to suck up to him with quotations out of Shakespeare's verses. "Why, man, he doth bstride the narrow world like a Colossus," and all that: Caesar grew livid by the third syllable. Once they put you into poetry, Gilgamesh had discovered, as had Odysseus and Achilles and Caesar after him and many another, your own real self can begin to disappear and the self of the poem overwhelms you entirely and turns you into a walking cliché. Shakespeare had been particularly villainous that way, Gilgamesh thought: ask Richard III, ask Macbeth, ask Owen Glendower. You found them skulking around Hell with perpetual chips on their shoulders, because every time they opened their mouths people expected them to say something like "My kingdom for a horse!" or "Is this a dagger which I see before me?" or "I can call spirits from the vasty deep." Gilgamesh had had to live with that kind of thing almost from the time he had first come to Hell, for they had written the poems about him soon after. All that pompous brooding stuff, a whole raft of Gilgamesh tales of varying degrees of basis in reality. And then the Babylonians and the Assyrians, and even those smelly garlic-gobbling Hittites, had gone on translating and embroidering them for another thousand years so that everybody from one end of the known world to the other knew them by heart. And even after all those peoples were gone and their languages had been forgotten, there was no surcease, because these twentieth-century folk had found the whole thing and deciphered the text somehow and made it famous all over again. Over the centuries they had turned him into everybody's favorite all-purpose hero, which was a hell of a burden to bear: there was a piece of him in the Prometheus legend, and in the Heracles stuff, and in that story of Odysseus' wanderings, and even in the Celtic myths, which was probably why this creepy Howard fellow kept calling him Conan. At least that other Conan, that ratty little sniveling drunken one, had been a Celt. Enlil's ears, but it was wearying to have everyone expecting you to live up to the mythic exploits of twenty or thirty very different culture-heroes! And embarrassing, too, considering that the original non-mythical Heracles and Odysseus and some of the others dwelled here too and tended to be pretty possessive about the myths that had attached *to them*, even when they were simply variants on his own much older ones.

There was substance to the Gilgamesh stories, of course, especially the parts about him and Enkidu. But the poet had salted the story with a lot of pretentious arty nonsense too, as poets always will, and in any case you got very tired of having everybody boil your long and complex life down into the same twelve chapters and the same little turns of phrase. It got so that Gilgamesh found himself quoting the main Gilgamesh poem too, the one about his quest for eternal life—well, that one wasn't too far from the essence of the truth, though they had mucked up a lot of the details with precious little "imaginative" touches—by way of making introduction for himself: "I am the man to whom all things were made known, the secret things, the truths of life and death." Straight out of the poet's mouth, those lines. Tiresome. Tiresome. Angrily he jabbed his dagger beneath the dead monster's hide, and set about his task of flaying, while the two little men behind him went on muttering and mumbling to one another in astonishment at having run into Gilgamesh of Uruk in this bleak and lonely corner of Hell.

* * * *

There were strange emotions stirring in Robert Howard's soul, and he did not care for them at all. He could forgive himself for believing for that one giddy moment that this Gilgamesh was his Conan. That was nothing more than the artistic temperament at work, sweeping him up in a bit of rash feverish enthusiasm. To come suddenly upon a

great muscular giant of a man in a loincloth who was hacking away at some fiendish monster with a little bronze dagger, and to think that he must surely be the mighty Cimmerian—well, that was a pardonable enough thing. Here in Hell you learned very quickly that you might run into anybody at all. You could find yourself playing at dice with Lord Byron or sharing a mug of mulled wine with Menelaos or arguing with Plato about the ideas of Nietzsche, who was standing right there making faces, and after a time you came to take most such things for granted, more or less.

So why not think that this fellow was Conan? No matter that Conan's eyes had been of a different color. That was a trifle. He looked like Conan in all the important ways. He was of Conan's size and strength. And he was kingly in more than physique. He seemed to have Conan's cool intelligence and complexity of soul, his regal courage and indomitable spirit.

The trouble was that Conan, the wondrous Cimmerian warrior from 19,000 B.C., had never existed except in Howard's own imagination. And there were no fictional characters in Hell. You might meet Richard Wagner, but you weren't likely to encounter Siegfried. Theseus was here somewhere, but not the Minotaur. William the Conqueror, yes; William Tell, no.

That was all right, Howard told himself. His little fantasy of meeting Conan here in Hell was nothing but a bit of mawkish narcissism: he was better off without it. Coming across the authentic Gilgamesh—ah, how much more interesting that was! A genuine Sumerian king—an actual titan out of history's dawn, not some trumped-up figure fashioned from cardboard and hard-breathing wish-fulfilling dreams. A flesh-and-blood mortal who lived a lusty life and had fought great battles and had walked eye to eye with the ancient gods. A man who had struggled against the inevitability of death, and who in dying had taken on the immortality of mythic archetype—ah, now there was someone worth getting to know! Whereas Howard had to admit that he would learn no more from a conversation with Conan than he could discover by interrogating his own image in the mirror. Or else a meeting with the “real” Conan, if it was in any way possible, would surely cast him into terrible confusions and contradictions of soul from which there would be no recovering. No, Howard thought. Better that this man be Gilgamesh than Conan, by all means. He was reconciled to that.

But this other business—this sudden bewildering urge to throw himself at the giant's feet, to be swept up in his arms, to be crushed in a fierce embrace—

What was that? Where had *that* come from? By the blazing Heart of Ahriman, what could it mean?

Howard remembered a time in his former life when he had gone down to the Cisco Dam and watched the construction men strip and dive in: well-built men, confident, graceful, at ease in their bodies. For a short while he had looked at them and had revelled in their physical perfection. They could have been naked Greek statues come alive, a band of lusty Apollos and Zeuses. And then as he listened to them shouting and laughing and crying out in their foul-mouthed way he began to grow angry, suddenly seeing them as mere thoughtless animals who were the natural enemies of dreamers like himself. He hated them as the weak always must hate the strong, those splendid swine who could trample the dreamers and their dreams as they wished. But

then he had reminded himself that he was no weakling himself, that he who once had been spindly and frail had by hard effort made himself big and strong and burly. Not beautiful of body as these men were—too fleshy for that, too husky—but nevertheless, he had told himself, there was no man there whose ribs he could not crush if it came to a struggle. And he had gone away from that place full of rage and thoughts of bloody violence.

What had that been all about? That barely suppressed fury—was it some sort of dark hidden lust, some craving for the most bestial sort of sinfulness? Was the anger that had arisen in him masking an anger he should have directed at himself, for looking upon those naked men and taking pleasure in it?

No. No. No. No. He wasn't any kind of degenerate. He was certain of that.

The desire of men for men was a mark of decadence, of the decline of civilization. He was a man of the frontier, not some feeble limp-wristed sodomite who reveled in filth and wanton evil. If he had never in his short life known a woman's love, it was for lack of opportunity, not out of a preference for that other shameful kind. Living out his days in that small and remote prairie town, devoting himself to his mother and to his writing, he had chosen not to avail himself of prostitutes or shallow women, but he was sure that if he had lived a few years longer and the woman who was his true mate had ever made herself known to him, he would certainly have reached toward her in passion and high abandon.

And yet—and yet—that moment when he first spied the giant Gilgamesh, and thought he was Conan—

That surge of electricity through his entire body, and most intensely through his loins—what else could it have been but desire, instant and intense and overwhelming? For *aman*? Unthinkable! Even this glorious hero—even this magnificent kingly creature—

No. No. No. No.

I am in Hell, and this is my torment, Howard told himself.

He paced furiously up and down alongside the Land Rover. Desperately he fought off the black anguish that threatened to settle over him now, as it had done so many times in his former life and in this life after life. These sudden corrupt and depraved feelings, Howard thought: they are nothing but diabolical perversions of my natural spirit, intended to cast me into despair and self-loathing! By Crom, I will resist! By the breasts of Ishtar, I will not yield to this foulness!

All the same he found his eyes straying to the edge of the nearby thicket, where Gilgamesh still knelt over the animal he had killed.

What extraordinary muscles rippling in that broad back, in those iron-hard thighs! What careless abandon in the way he was peeling back the creature's shaggy hide, though he had to wallow in dark gore to do it! That cascade of lustrous black hair lightly bound by a jewelled circlet, that dense black beard curling in tight ringlets—

Howard's throat went dry. Something at the base of his belly was tightening into a terrible knot.

Lovecraft said, "You want a chance to talk with him, don't you?"

Howard swung around. He felt his cheeks go scarlet. He was utterly certain that his guilt must be emblazoned incontrovertibly on his face.

"What the hell do you mean?" he growled. His hands knotted of their own accord into fists. There seemed to be a band of fire across his forehead. "What would I want to talk with him about, anyway?"

Lovecraft looked startled by the ferocity of Howard's tone and posture. He took a step backward and threw up his hand almost as though to protect himself. "What a strange thing to say! You, of all people, with your love of antique times, your deep and abiding passion for the lost mysteries of those steamy Oriental empires that perished so long ago! Why, man, is there nothing you want to know about the kingdoms of Sumer? Uruk, Nippur, Ur of the Chaldees? The secret rites of the goddess Inanna in the dark passageways beneath the ziggurat? The incantations that opened the gates of the Underworld, the libations that loosed and bound the demons of the worlds beyond the stars? Who knows what he could tell us? There stands a man six thousand years old, a hero from the dawn of time, Bob!"

Howard snorted. "I don't reckon that oversized son of a bitch would want to tell us a damned thing. All that interests him is getting the hide off that bloody critter of his."

"He's nearly done with that. Why not wait, Bob? And invite him to sit with us a little while. And draw him out, lure him into telling us tales of life beside the Euphrates!" Now Lovecraft's dark eyes were gleaming as though he too felt some strange lust, and his forehead was surprisingly bright with uncharacteristic perspiration; but Howard knew that in Lovecraft's case what had taken possession of him was only the lust for knowledge, the hunger for the arcane lore of high antiquity that Lovecraft imagined would spill from the lips of this Mesopotamian hero. That same lust ached in him as well. To speak with this man who had lived before Babylon was, who had walked the streets of Ur when Abraham was yet unborn—

But there were other lusts besides that hunger for knowledge, sinister lusts that must be denied at any cost—

"No," said Howard brusquely. "Let's get the hell out of here right now, H.P. This damned foul bleak countryside is getting on my nerves."

Lovecraft gave him a strange look. "But weren't you just telling me how beautiful—"

"Damnation take whatever I was telling you! King Henry's expecting us to negotiate an alliance for him. We aren't going to get the job done out here in the boondocks."

"The what?"

"Boondocks. Wild uncivilized country. Term that came into use after our time, H.P. The backwoods, you know? You never did pay much heed to the vernacular, did

you?" He tugged at Lovecraft's sleeve. "Come on. That big bloody ape over there isn't going to tell us a thing about his life and times, I guarantee. Probably doesn't remember anything worth telling, anyway. And he bores me. Pardon me, H.P., but I find him an enormous pain in the butt, all right? I don't have any further hankering for his company. Do you mind, H.P.? Can we move along, do you think?"

"I must confess that you mystify me sometimes, Bob. But of course if you—" Suddenly Lovecraft's eyes widened in amazement. "Get down, Bob! Behind the car! Fast!"

"What—"

An arrow came singing through the air and passed just alongside Howard's left ear. Then another, and another. One arrow ricocheted off the flank of the Land Rover with a sickening thumping sound. Another struck straight on and stuck quivering an inch deep in the metal.

Howard whirled. He saw horsemen—a dozen, perhaps a dozen and a half—bearing down on them out of the darkness to the east, loosing shafts as they came.

They were lean compact men of some Oriental stock in crimson leather jerkins, riding like fiends. Their mounts were little flat-headed, fiery-eyed gray Hell-horses that moved as if their short, fiercely pistoning legs could carry them to the far boundaries of the nether world without the need of a moment's rest.

Chanting, howling, the yellow-skinned warriors seemed to be in a frenzy of rage. Mongols? Turks? Whoever they were, they were pounding toward the Land Rover like the emissaries of Death himself. Some brandished long, wickedly curved blades, but most wielded curious-looking small bows from which they showered one arrow after another with phenomenal rapidity.

Crouching behind the Land Rover with Lovecraft beside him, Howard gaped at the attackers in a paralysis of astonishment. How often had he written of scenes like this? Waving plumes, bristling lances, a whistling cloud of cloth-yard shafts! Thundering hooves, wild war cries, the thunk of barbarian arrowheads against Aquilonian shields! Horses rearing and throwing their riders.... Knights in bloodied armor tumbling to the ground.... Steel-clad forms littering the slopes of the battlefield....

But this was no swashbuckling tale of Hyborean derring-do that was unfolding now. Those were real horsemen—as real as anything was, in this place—rampaging across this chilly wind-swept plain in the outer reaches of Hell. Those were real arrows; and they would rip their way into his flesh with real impact and inflict real agony of the most frightful kind.

He looked across the way at Gilgamesh. The giant Sumerian was hunkered down behind the overturned bulk of the animal he had slain. His mighty bow was in his hand. As Howard watched in awe, Gilgamesh aimed and let fly. The shaft struck the nearest horseman, traveling through jerkin and rib cage and all, and emerging from the man's back. But still the onrushing warrior managed to release one last arrow before he fell. It traveled on an erratic trajectory, humming quickly toward Gilgamesh on a wild wobbly arc and skewering him through the flesh of his left forearm.

Coolly the Sumerian glanced down at the arrow jutting from his arm. He scowled and shook his head, the way he might if he had been stung by a hornet. Then—as Conan might have done, how very much like Conan!—Gilgamesh inclined his head toward his shoulder and *bit* the arrow in half just below the fletching. Bright blood spouted from the wound as he pulled the two pieces of the arrow from his arm.

As though nothing very significant had happened, Gilgamesh lifted his bow and reached for a second shaft. Blood was streaming in rivulets down his arm, but he seemed not even to be aware of it.

Howard watched as if in a stupor. He could not move; he barely had the will to draw breath. A haze of nausea threatened to overwhelm him. It had been nothing at all for him to heap up great bloody mounds of severed heads and arms and legs with cheerful abandon in his stories; but in fact, real bloodshed and violence of any sort had horrified him whenever he had even a glimpse of it.

“The gun, Bob!” said Lovecraft urgently beside him. “Use the *gun* !”

“What?”

“There. There.”

Howard looked down. Thrust through his belt was the pistol he had taken from the Land Rover when he had come out to investigate that little beast in the road. He drew it now and stared at it, glassy-eyed, as though it were a basilisk's egg that rested on the palm of his hand.

“What are you doing?” Lovecraft asked. “Ah. Ah. Give it to me.” He snatched the gun impatiently from Howard's frozen fingers and studied it a moment as though he had never held a weapon before. Perhaps he never had. But then, grasping the pistol with both his hands, he rose warily above the hood of the Land Rover and squeezed off a shot.

The tremendous sound of an explosion cut through the shrill cries of the horsemen. Lovecraft laughed. “Got one! Who would ever have imagined—”

He fired again. In the same moment Gilgamesh brought down one more of the attackers with his bow.

“They're backing off!” Lovecraft cried. “By Alhazred, they didn't expect *this* , I wager!” He laughed again and poked the gun up into a firing position. “*Ia!*” he cried, in a voice Howard had never heard out of the shy and scholarly Lovecraft before. “*Shub-Niggurath!*” Lovecraft fired a third time. “*Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn!*”

Howard felt sweat rolling down his body. This inaction of his—this paralysis, this shame—what would Conan make of it? What would Gilgamesh? And Lovecraft, that timid and sheltered man, he who dreaded the fishes of the sea and the cold winds of his New England winters and so many other things, was laughing and bellowing his wondrous gibberish and blazing away like any gangster, having the time of his life—

Shame! Shame!

Heedless of the risk, Howard scrambled up into the cab of the Land Rover and groped around for the second gun that was lying down there on the floor somewhere. He found it and knelt beside the window. Seven or eight of the Asiatic horsemen lay strewn about, dead or dying, within a hundred-yard radius of the car. The others had withdrawn to a considerable distance and were cantering in uneasy circles. They appeared taken aback by the unexpectedly fierce resistance they had encountered on what they had probably expected to have been an easy bit of jolly slaughter in these untracked frontierlands.

What were they doing now? Drawing together, a tight little group, horses nose to nose. Conferring. And now two of them were pulling what seemed to be some sort of war-banner from a saddlebag and hoisting it between them on bamboo poles: a long yellow streamer with fluttering blood-red tips, on which bold Oriental characters were painted in shining black. Serious business, obviously. Now they were lining themselves up in a row, facing the Land Rover. Getting ready for a desperate suicide charge—that was the way things appeared.

Gilgamesh, standing erect in full view, calmly nocked yet another arrow. He took aim and waited for them to come. Lovecraft, looking flushed with excitement, wholly transformed by the alien joys of armed combat, was leaning forward, staring intently, his pistol cocked and ready.

Howard shivered. Shame rode him with burning spurs. *How could* he cower here while those two bore the brunt of the struggle? Though his hand was shaking, he thrust the pistol out the window and drew a bead on the closest horseman. His finger tightened on the trigger. Would it be possible to score a hit at such a distance? Yes. Yes. Go ahead. You know how to use a gun, all right. High time you put some of that skill to use. Knock that little yellow bastard off his horse with one bark of the Colt .380, yes. Send him straight to Hell—no, he's in Hell already, send him off to the Undertaker for recycling. Yes, that's it. Ready—aim—

“Wait,” Lovecraft said. “Don't shoot.”

What was this? As Howard, with an effort, lowered his gun and let his rigid quivering hand go slack, Lovecraft, shading his eyes against the eerie glare of the motionless sun, peered closely at the enemy warriors a long silent moment. Then he turned, reached up into the rear of the Land Rover, groped around for a moment, finally pulled out the manila envelope that held their royal commission from King Henry.

And then—what was he doing?

Stepping out into plain view, arms raised high, waving the envelope around, walking toward the enemy?

“They'll kill you, H.P.! Get down! Get down!”

Lovecraft, without looking back, gestured brusquely for Howard to be silent. He

continued to walk steadily toward the far-off horsemen. They seemed just as mystified as Howard was. They sat without moving, their bows held stiffly out before them, a dozen arrows trained on the middle of Lovecraft's body.

He's gone completely off the deep end, Howard thought in dismay. He never was really well balanced, was he? Half believing all his stuff about Elder Gods and dimensional gateways and blasphemous rites on dark New England hillsides. And now all this shooting—the excitement—

“Hold your weapons, all of you!” Lovecraft cried in a voice of amazing strength and presence. “In the name of Prester John, I bid you hold your weapons! We are not your enemies! We are ambassadors to your emperor!”

Howard gasped. He began to understand. No, Lovecraft hadn't gone crazy after all!

He took another look at that long yellow war-banner. Yes, yes, it bore the emblems of Prester John! These berserk horsemen must be part of the border patrol of the very nation whose ruler they had traveled so long to find. Howard felt abashed, realizing that in the fury of the battle Lovecraft had had the sense actually to pause long enough to give the banner's legend close examination—and the courage to walk out there waving his diplomatic credentials. The parchment scroll of their royal commission was in his hand, and he was pointing to the little red-ribboned seal of King Henry.

The horsemen stared, muttered among themselves, lowered their bows. Gilgamesh, lowering his great bow also, looked on in puzzlement. “Do you see?” Lovecraft called. “We are heralds of King Henry! We claim the protection of your master the August Sovereign Yeh-lu Ta-shih!” Glancing back over his shoulder, he called to Howard to join him; and after only an instant's hesitation, Howard leaped down from the Land Rover and trotted forward. It was a giddy feeling, exposing himself to those somber yellow archers this way. It felt almost like standing on the edge of some colossal precipice.

Lovecraft smiled. “It's all going to be all right, Bob! That banner they unfurled, it bears the markings of Prester John—”

“Yes, yes. I see.”

“And look—they're making a safe-conduct sign. They understand what I'm saying, Bob! They believe me!”

Howard nodded. He felt a great upsurge of relief and even a sort of joy. He clapped Lovecraft lustily on the back. “Fine going, H.P.! I didn't think you had it in you!” Coming up out of his funk, now, he felt a manic exuberance seize his spirit. He gestured to the horsemen, wigwagging his arms with wild vigor. “Hoy! Royal commissioners!” he bellowed. “Envoys from His Britannic Majesty King Henry VIII! Take us to your emperor!” Then he looked toward Gilgamesh, who stood frowning, his bow still at the ready. “Hoy there, king of Uruk! Put away the weapons! Everything's all right now! We're going to be escorted to the court of Prester John!”

* * * *

Gilgamesh wasn't at all sure why he had let himself go along. He had no interest in visiting Prester John's court, or anybody else's. He wanted nothing more than to be left alone to hunt and roam in the wilderness and thereby to find some ease for his sorrows.

But the gaunt long-necked man and his blustery red-faced friend had beckoned him to ride with them in their Land Rover, and while he stood there frowning over that, the ugly flat-featured little yellow warriors had indicated with quick impatient gestures that he should get in. And he had. They looked as though they would try to compel him to get in if he balked; and though he had no fear of them, none whatever, some impulse that he could not begin to understand had led him to step back from the likelihood of yet another battle and simply climb aboard the vehicle. Perhaps he had had enough of solitary hunting for a while. Or perhaps it was just that the wound in his arm was beginning to throb and ache, now that the excitement of the fray was receding, and it seemed like a good idea to have it looked after by a surgeon. The flesh all around it was badly swollen and bruised. That arrow had pierced him through and through. He would have the wound cleaned and dressed, and then he would move along.

Well, then, so he was going to the court of Prester John. Here he was, sitting back silent and somber in the rear of this musty, mildew-flecked car, riding with these two very odd New Dead types, these scribes or tale-tellers or whatever it was they claimed to be, as the horsemen of Prester John led them to the encampment of their monarch.

The one who called himself Howard, the one who could not help stealing sly little glances at him like an infatuated schoolgirl, was at the wheel. Glancing back at his passenger now, he said, "Tell me, Gilgamesh: have you had dealings with Prester John before?"

"I have heard the name, that much I know," replied the Sumerian. "But it means little to me."

"The legendary Christian emperor," said the other, the thin one, Lovecraft. "He who was said to rule a secret kingdom somewhere in the misty hinterlands of Central Asia—although it was in Africa, according to some—"

Asia, Africa—names, only names, Gilgamesh thought bleakly. They were places somewhere in the other world, but he had no idea where they might be.

Such a multitude of places, so many names! It was impossible to keep it all straight. There was no sense of any of it. The world—his world, the Land—had been bordered by the Two Rivers, the Idigna and the Buranunu, which the Greeks had preferred to call the Tigris and the Euphrates. Who were the Greeks, and by what right had they renamed the rivers? Everyone used those names now, even Gilgamesh himself, except in the inwardness of his soul.

And beyond the Two Rivers? Why, there was the vassal state of Aratta far to the east, and in that direction also lay the Land of Cedars, where the fire-breathing demon Huwawa roared and bellowed, and in the eastern mountains lay the kingdom of the barbaric Elamites. To the north was the land called Uri, and in the deserts of the west the wild Martu people dwelled, and in the south was the blessed isle Dilmun, which

was like a paradise. Was there anything more to the world than that? Why, there was Meluhha far away beyond Elam, where the people had black skins and fine features, and there was Punt in the south, where they were black also, with flat noses and thick lips. And there was another land even beyond Meluhha, with folk of yellow skins who mined a precious green stone. And that was the world. Where could all these other latter-day places be—this Africa and this Asia and Europe and the rest, Rome, Greece, England? Perhaps some of them were mere new names for old places. The Land itself had had a host of names since his own time—Babylonia, Mesopotamia, Iraq, and more. Why had it needed all those names? He had no idea. New men made up new names: that seemed to be the way of the world. This Africa, this Asia—America, China, Russia. A little man named Herodotos, a Greek, had tried to explain it all to him once—the shape of the world and the names of the places in it, sketching a map for him on an old bit of parchment—and much later a stolid fellow named Mercator had done the same, and once after that he had spoken of such matters with an Englishman called Cook; but the things they told him all conflicted with one another and he could make no sense out of any of it. It was too much to ask, making sense of these things. Those myriad nations that had arisen after his time, those empires that had arisen and fallen and been forgotten, all those lost dynasties, the captains and the kings—he had tried from time to time to master the sequence of them, but it was no use. Once in his former life he had sought to make himself the master of all knowledge, yes. His appetites had been boundless: for knowledge, for wealth, for power, for women, for life itself. Now all that seemed only the merest folly to him. That jumble of confused and confusing places, all those great realms and far-off kingdoms, were in another world: what could they matter to him now?

“Asia?” he said. “Africa?” Gilgamesh shrugged. “Prester John?” He prowled the turbulent cluttered recesses of his memory. “Ah. There's a Prester John, I think, lives in New Hell. A dark-skinned man, a friend of that gaudy old liar Sir John Mandeville.” It was coming back now. “Yes, I've seen them together many times, in that dirty squalid tavern where Mandeville's always to be found. The two of them telling outlandish stories back and forth, each a bigger fraud than the other.”

“A different Prester John,” said Lovecraft.

“That one is Susenyos the Ethiop, I think,” Howard said. “A former African tyrant, and lover of the Jesuits, now far gone in whiskey. He's one of many. There are seven, nine, a dozen Prester Johns in Hell, to my certain knowledge. And maybe more.”

Gilgamesh contemplated that notion blankly. Fire was running up and down his injured arm now.

Lovecraft was saying, “—not a true name, but merely a title, and a corrupt one at that. There never was *areal* Prester John, only various rulers in various distant places, whom it pleased the tale-spinners of Europe to speak of as Prester John, the Christian emperor, the great mysterious unknown monarch of a fabulous realm. And here in Hell there are many who choose to wear the name. There's power in it, do you see?”

“Power and majesty!” Howard cried. “And poetry, by God!”

“So this Prester John whom we are to visit,” said Gilgamesh, “he is not in fact Prester John?”

“Yeh-lu Ta-shih's his name,” said Howard. “Chinese. Manchurian, actually, twelfth century A.D. First emperor of the realm of Kara-Khitai, with his capital at Samarkand. Ruled over a bunch of Mongols and Turks, mainly, and they called him Gur Khan, which means ‘supreme ruler,’ and somehow that turned into ‘John’ by the time it got to Europe. And they said he was a Christian priest, too, *Presbyter Joannes*, ‘Prester John.” Howard laughed. “Damned silly bastards. He was no more a Christian than you were. A Buddhist, he was, a bloody shamanistic Buddhist.”

“Then why—”

“Myth and confusion!” Howard said. “The great human nonsense factory at work! And wouldn't you know it, but when he got to Hell this Yeh-lu Ta-shih founded himself another empire right away in the same sort of territory he'd lived in back there, and when Richard Burton came out this way and told him about Prester John and how Europeans long ago had spoken of him by that name and ascribed all sorts of fabulous accomplishments to him he said, ‘Yes, yes, I am Prester John indeed.’ And so he styles himself that way now, he and nine or ten others, most of them Ethiopians like that friend of your friend Mandeville.”

“They are no friends of mine,” said Gilgamesh stiffly. He leaned back and massaged his aching arm. Outside the Land Rover the landscape was changing now: more hilly, with ill-favored fat-trunked little trees jutting at peculiar angles from the purple soil. Here and there in the distance his keen eyes made out scattered groups of black tents on the hillsides, and herds of the little Hell-horses grazing near them. Gilgamesh wished now that he hadn't let himself be inveigled into this expedition. What need had he of Prester John? One of these upstart New Dead potentates, one of the innumerable little princelings who had set up minor dominions for themselves out here in the vast measureless wastelands of the Outback—and reigning under a false name, at that—one more shoddy scoundrel, one more puffed-up little nobody swollen with unearned pride—

Well, and what difference did it make? He would sojourn a while in the land of this Prester John, and then he would move on, alone, apart from others, mourning as always his lost Enkidu. There seemed no escaping that doom that lay upon him, that bitter solitude, whether he reigned in splendor in Uruk or wandered in the wastes of Hell.

* * * *

“Their Excellencies P.E. Lovecraft and Howard E. Robert,” cried the major-domo grandly though inaccurately, striking three times on the black marble floor of Prester John's throne-chamber with his gold-tipped staff of pale green jade. “Envoys Plenipotentiary of His Britannic Majesty King Henry VIII of the Kingdom of New Holy Diabolic England.”

Lovecraft and Howard took a couple of steps forward. Yeh-lu Ta-shih nodded curtly and waved one elegant hand, resplendent with inch-long fingernails, in casual acknowledgment. The envoys plenipotentiary did not seem to hold much interest for him, nor, apparently, did whatever it was that had caused His Britannic Majesty King Henry to send them here.

The emperor's cool imperious glance turned toward Gilgamesh, who was struggling to hold himself erect. He was beginning to feel feverish and dizzy and he wondered when anyone would notice that there was an oozing hole in his arm. Even he had limits to his endurance, after all, though he usually tried to conceal that fact. He didn't know how much longer he could hold out. There were times when behaving like a hero was a heroic pain in the ass, and this was one of them.

“—and his Late Highness Gilgamesh of Uruk, son of Lugalbanda, great king, king of Uruk, king of kings, lord of the Land of the Two Rivers by merit of Enlil and An,” boomed the major-domo in the same splendid way, looking down only once at the card he held in his hand.

“Great king?” said Yeh-lu Ta-shih, fixing Gilgamesh with one of the most intensely penetrating stares the Sumerian could remember ever having received. “King of kings? Those are very lofty titles, Gilgamesh of Uruk.”

“A mere formula,” Gilgamesh replied, “which I thought appropriate when being presented at your court. In fact I am king of nothing at all now.”

“Ah,” said Yeh-lu Ta-shih “King of Nothing-at-all.”

And so are you, my lord Prester John. Gilgamesh did not let himself say it, though the words bubbled toward the roof of his mouth and begged to be uttered. *And so are all the self-appointed lords and masters of the many realms of Hell.*

The slender amber-hued man on the throne leaned forward. “And where then, I pray, is Nothing-at-all?”

Some of the courtiers began to snicker. But Prester John looked to be altogether in earnest, though it was impossible to be completely certain of that. He was plainly a formidable man, Gilgamesh had quickly come to see: sly, shrewd, self-contained, with a tough and sinewy intelligence. Not at all the vain little cock-of-the-walk Gilgamesh had expected to find in this bleak and remote corner of Hell. However small and obscure his principality might be, Prester John ruled it, obviously, with a firm grasp. The grandeur of the glittering palace that his scruffy subjects had built for him here on the edge of nowhere, and the solidity of the small but substantial city surrounding it, testified to that. Gilgamesh knew something about the building of cities and palaces. Prester John's capital bore the mark of the steady toil of centuries.

The long stare was unrelenting. Gilgamesh, fighting back the blazing pain in his arm, met the emperor's gaze with an equally earnest one of his own and said:

“Nothing-at-all? It is a land that never was, and will always be, my lord. Its boundaries are nowhere and its capital city is everywhere, nor do any of us ever leave it.”

“Ah. Ah. Indeed. Nicely put. You are Old Dead, are you?”

“Very old, my lord.”

“Older than Ch'in Shih Huang Ti? Older than the Lords of Shang and Hsia?”

Gilgamesh turned in puzzlement toward Lovecraft, who told him in a half-whisper, "Ancient kings of China. Your time was even earlier."

Shrugging, Gilgamesh replied, "They are not known to me, my lord, but you hear what the Britannic ambassador says. He is a man of learning: it must be so. I will tell you that I am older than Caesar by far, older than Agamemnon and the Supreme Commander Rameses, older even than Sargon. By a great deal."

Yeh-lu Ta-shih considered that a moment. Then he made another of his little gestures of dismissal, as though brushing aside the whole concept of relative ages in Hell. With a dry laugh he said, "So you are very old, King Gilgamesh. I congratulate you. And yet the Ice-Hunter folk would tell us that you and I and Rameses and Sargon all arrived here only yesterday; and to the Hairy Men, the Ice-Hunters themselves are mere newcomers. And so on and so on. There's no beginning to it, is there? Any more than there's an end."

Without waiting for an answer he asked Gilgamesh, "How did you come by that gory wound, great king of Nothing-at-all?"

At least he's noticed it, Gilgamesh thought.

"A misunderstanding, my lord. It may be that your border patrol is a little overzealous at times."

One of the courtiers leaned toward the emperor and murmured something. Prester John's serene brow grew furrowed. He lifted a flawlessly contoured eyebrow ever so slightly.

"Killed nine of them, did you?"

"They attacked us before we had the opportunity of showing our diplomatic credentials," Lovecraft put in quickly. "It was entirely a matter of self-defense, my lord Prester John."

"I wouldn't doubt it." The emperor seemed to contemplate for a moment, but only for a moment, the skirmish that had cost the lives of nine of his horsemen; and then quite visibly he dismissed that matter too from the center of his attention. "Well, now, my lords ambassador—"

Abruptly Gilgamesh swayed, tottered, started to fall. He checked himself just barely in time, seizing a massive porphyry column and clinging to it until he felt more steady. Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead into his eyes. He began to shiver. The huge stone column seemed to be expanding and contracting. Waves of vertigo were rippling through him and he was seeing double, suddenly. Everything was blurring and multiplying. He drew his breath in deeply, again, again, forcing himself to hold on. He wondered if Prester John was playing some kind of game with him, trying to see how long his strength could last. Well, if he had to, Gilgamesh swore, he would stand here forever in front of Prester John without showing a hint of weakness.

But now Yeh-lu Ta-shih was at last willing to extend compassion. With a glance

toward one of his pages the emperor said, "Summon my physician, and tell him to bring his tools and his potions. That wound should have been dressed an hour ago."

"Thank you, my lord," Gilgamesh muttered, trying to keep the irony from his tone.

The doctor appeared almost at once, as though he had been waiting in an antechamber. Another of Prester John's little games, perhaps? He was a burly, broad-shouldered, bushy-haired man of more than middle years, with a manner about him that was brisk and bustling but nevertheless warm, concerned, reassuring. Drawing Gilgamesh down beside him on a low divan covered with the gray-green hide of some scaly Hell-dragon, he peered into the wound, muttered something unintelligible to himself in a guttural language unknown to the Sumerian, and pressed his thick fingers around the edges of the torn flesh until fresh blood flowed. Gilgamesh hissed sharply but did not flinch.

"*Ach, mein lieber freund*, I must hurt you again, but it is for your own good. *Verstehen sie ?*"

The doctor's fingers dug in more deeply. He was spreading the wound, swabbing it, cleansing it with some clear fluid that stung like a hot iron. The pain was so intense that there was almost a kind of pleasure in it: it was a purifying kind of pain, a purging of the soul.

Prester John said, "How bad is it, Dr. Schweitzer?"

"*Gott sei dank*, it is deep but clean. He will heal without damage."

He continued to probe and cleanse, murmuring softly to Gilgamesh as he worked: "*Bitte. Bitte. Einen augenblick, mein freund.*" To Prester John he said, "This man is made of steel. No nerves at all, immense resistance to pain. We have one of the great heroes here, *nicht wahr ?* You are Roland, are you? Achilles, perhaps?"

"Gilgamesh is his name," said Yeh-lu Ta-shih.

The doctor's eyes grew bright. "Gilgamesh! Gilgamesh of Sumer? *Wunderbar! Wunderbar!* The very man. The seeker after life. *Ach*, we must talk, my friend, you and I, when you are feeling better." From his medical kit he now produced a frightful-looking hypodermic syringe. Gilgamesh watched as though from a vast distance, as though that throbbing swollen arm belonged to someone else. "*Ja, Ja*, certainly we must talk, of life, of death, of philosophy, *mein freund*, of *philosophy*! There is so very much for us to discuss!" He slipped the needle beneath Gilgamesh's skin. "There. *Genug*. Sit. Rest. The healing now begins."

* * * *

Robert Howard had never seen anything like it. It could have been something straight from the pages of one of his Conan stories. The big ox had taken an arrow right through the fat part of his arm, and he had simply yanked it out and gone right on fighting. Then, afterward, he had behaved as if the wound were nothing more than a scratch, all that time while they were driving hour after hour toward Prester John's city and then undergoing lengthy interrogation by the court officials and then standing through this whole endless ceremony at court—God almighty, what a display of

endurance! True, Gilgamesh had finally gone a little wobbly and had actually seemed on the verge of passing out. But any ordinary mortal would have conked out long ago. Heroes really *were* different. They were another breed altogether. Look at him now, sitting there casually while that old German medic swabs him out and stitches him up in that slapdash cavalier way, and not a whimper out of him. Not a whimper!

Suddenly Howard found himself wanting to go over there to Gilgamesh, to comfort him, to let him lean his head back against him while the doctor worked him over, to wipe the sweat from his brow—

Yes, to comfort him in an open, rugged, manly way—

No. No. No. No.

There it was again, the horror, the unspeakable thing, the hideous crawling Hell-borne impulse rising out of the cesspools of his soul—

Howard fought it back. Blotted it out, hid it from view. Denied that it had ever entered his mind.

To Lovecraft he said, “That's some doctor! Took his medical degree at the Chicago slaughterhouses, I reckon!”

“Don't you know who he is, Bob?”

“Some old Dutchman who wandered in here during a sandstorm and never bothered to leave.”

“Does the name of Dr. Schweitzer mean nothing to you?”

Howard gave Lovecraft a blank look. “Guess I never heard it much in Texas.”

“Oh, Bob, Bob, why must you always pretend to be such a cowboy? Can you tell me you've never heard of Schweitzer? *Albert Schweitzer*? The great philosopher, theologian, musician—there never was a greater interpreter of Bach, and don't tell me you don't know Bach either—”

“She-it, H.P., you talking about that old country doctor there?”

“Who founded the leprosy clinic in Africa, at Lambarene, yes. Who devoted his life to helping the sick, under the most primitive conditions, in the most remote forests of—”

“Hold on, H.P. That can't be so.”

“That one man could achieve so much? I assure you, Bob, he was quite well known in our time—perhaps not in Texas, I suppose, but nevertheless—”

“No. Not that he could do all that. But that he's here. In Hell. If that old geezer's everything you say, then he's a goddamned *saint*. Unless he beat his wife when no one was looking, or something like that. What's a saint doing in Hell, H.P.?”

“What are *we* doing in Hell?” Lovecraft asked.

Howard reddened and looked away. “Well, I suppose, there were things in our lives—things that might be considered sins, in the strictest sense—”

“No one understands the rules of Hell, Bob,” said Lovecraft gently. “Sin may have nothing to do with it. Gandhi is here, do you realize that? Confucius. Were *they* sinners? Was Moses? Abraham? We’ve tried to impose our own pitiful shallow beliefs, our pathetic grade-school notions of punishment for bad behavior, on this incredibly bizarre place where we find ourselves. By what right? We don’t begin to comprehend what Hell really is. All we know is that it’s full of heroic villains and villainous heroes—and people like you and me—and it seems that Albert Schweitzer is here, too. A great mystery. But perhaps someday—”

“Shh,” Howard said. “Prester John’s talking to us.”

“My lords ambassador—”

Hastily they turned toward him. “Your majesty?” Howard said.

“This mission that has brought you here: your king wants an alliance, I suppose? What for? Against whom? Quarreling with some pope again, is he?”

“With his daughter, I’m afraid,” said Howard.

Prester John looked bored. He toyed with his emerald scepter. “Mary, you mean?”

“Elizabeth, your majesty,” Lovecraft said.

“Your king’s a most quarrelsome man. I’d have thought there were enough popes in Hell to keep him busy, though, and no need to contend with his daughters.”

“They are the most contentious women in Hell,” Lovecraft said. “Blood of his blood, after all, and each of them a queen with a noisy, brawling kingdom of her own. Elizabeth, my lord, is sending a pack of her explorers to the Outback, and King Henry doesn’t like the idea.”

“Indeed,” said Yeh-lu Ta-shih, suddenly interested again. “And neither do I. She has no business in the Outback. It’s not her territory. The rest of Hell should be big enough for Elizabeth. What is she looking for here?”

“The sorcerer John Dee has told her that the way out of Hell is to be found in these parts.”

“There is no way out of Hell.”

Lovecraft smiled. “I’m not any judge of that, your majesty. Queen Elizabeth, in any event, has given credence to the notion. Her Walter Raleigh directs the expedition, and the geographer Hakluyt is with him, and a force of five hundred soldiers. They move diagonally across the Outback just to the south of your domain, following some

chart that Dr. Dee has obtained for them. He had it from Cagliostro, they say, who bought it from Hadrian when Hadrian was still supreme commander of Hell's legions. It is allegedly an official Satanic document.”

Prester John did not appear to be impressed. “Let us say, for argument's sake, that there is an exit from Hell. Why would Queen Elizabeth desire to leave? Hell's not so bad. It has its minor discomforts, yes, but one learns to cope with them. Does she think she'd be able to reign in Heaven as she does here—assuming there's a Heaven at all, which is distinctly not proven?”

“Elizabeth has no real interest in leaving Hell herself, majesty,” Howard said. “What King Henry fears is that if she does find the way out, she'll claim it for her own and set up a colony around it, and charge a fee for passing through the gate. No matter where it takes you, the king reckons there'll be millions of people willing to risk it, and Elizabeth will wind up cornering all the money in Hell. He can't abide that notion, d'ye see? He thinks she's already too smart and aggressive by half, and he hates the idea that she might get even more powerful. There's something mixed into it having to do with Queen Elizabeth's mother, too—that was Anne Boleyn, Henry's second wife. She was a wild and wanton one, and he cut her head off for adultery, and now he thinks that Anne's behind Elizabeth's maneuvers, trying to get even with him by—”

“Spare me these details,” said Yeh-lu Ta-shih with some irritation. “What does Henry expect me to do?”

“Send troops to turn the Raleigh expedition back before it can find anything useful to Elizabeth.”

“And in what way do I gain from this?”

“If the exit from Hell's on your frontier, your majesty, do you really want a bunch of Elizabethan Englishmen setting up a colony next door to you?”

“There is no exit from Hell,” Prester John said complacently once again.

“But if they set up a colony anyway?”

Prester John was silent a moment. “I see,” he said finally.

“In return for your aid,” Howard said, “we're empowered to offer you a trade treaty on highly favorable terms.”

“Ah.”

“And a guarantee of military protection in the event of the invasion of your realm by a hostile power.”

“If King Henry's armies are so mighty, why does he not deal with the Raleigh expedition himself?”

“There was no time to outfit and dispatch an army across such a great distance,” said Lovecraft. “Elizabeth's people had already set out before anything was known of the

scheme.”

“Ah,” said Yeh-lu Ta-shih.

“Of course,” Lovecraft went on, “there were other princes of the Outback that King Henry might have approached. Moammar Khadafy's name came up, and one of the Assyrians—Assurnasirpal, I think—and someone mentioned Mao Tse-tung. No, King Henry said, let us ask the aid of Prester John, for he is a monarch of great puissance and grandeur, whose writ is supreme throughout the far reaches of Hell. Prester John, indeed, that is the one whose aid we must seek!”

A strange new sparkle had come into Yeh-lu Ta-shih's eyes. “You were considering an alliance with Mao Tse-tung?”

“It was merely a suggestion, your majesty.”

“Ah. I see.” The emperor rose from his throne. “Well, we must consider these matters more carefully, eh? We must not come hastily to a decision.” He looked across the great vaulted throne room to the divan where Dr. Schweitzer still labored over Gilgamesh's wound. “Your patient, doctor—what's the report?”

“A man of steel, majesty, a man of steel!*Gott sei dank*, he heals before my eyes!”

“Indeed. Come, then. You will all want to rest, I think; and then you shall know the full hospitality of Prester John.”

* * * *

The full hospitality of Prester John, Gilgamesh soon discovered, was no trifling affair.

He was led off to a private chamber with walls lined with black felt—a kind of indoor tent—where three serving-girls who stood barely hip-high to him surrounded him, giggling, and took his clothing from him. Gently they pushed him into a huge marble cistern full of warm milk, where they bathed him lovingly and massaged his aching body in the most intimate manner. Afterward they robed him in intricate vestments of yellow silk.

Then they conveyed him to the emperor's great hall, where the whole court was gathered, a glittering and resplendent multitude. Some sort of concert was under way, seven solemn musicians playing harsh screeching twanging music. Gongs crashed, a trumpet blared, pipes uttered eerie piercing sounds. Servants showed Gilgamesh to a place of honor atop a pile of furry blankets heaped high with velvet cushions.

Lovecraft and Howard were already there, garbed like Gilgamesh in magnificent silks. Both of them looked somewhat unsettled—unhinged, even. Howard, flushed and boisterous, could barely sit still: he laughed and waved his arms around and kicked his heels against the furs, like a small boy who has done something very naughty and is trying to conceal it by being over-exuberant. Lovecraft, on the other hand, seemed dazed and dislocated, with the glassy-eyed look of someone who has recently been clubbed.

These are two very odd men indeed, Gilgamesh thought.

One works hard at being loud and lusty, and now and then gives you a glimpse of a soul boiling with wild fantasies of swinging swords and rivers of blood. But in reality he seems terrified of everything. The other, though he is weirdly remote and austere, is apparently not quite as crazy, but he too gives the impression of being at war with himself, in terror of allowing any sort of real human feeling to break through the elaborate facade of his mannerisms. The poor fools must have been scared silly when the serving-girls started stripping them and pouring warm milk over them and stroking their bodies. No doubt they haven't recovered yet from all that nasty pleasure, Gilgamesh thought. He could imagine their cries of horror as the little Mongol girls started going to work on them. *What are you doing? Leave my trousers alone! Don't touch me there! Please—no—ooh—ah—ooh! Oooh!*

Yeh-lu Ta-shih, seated upon a high throne of ivory and onyx, waved grandly to him, one great king to another. Gilgamesh gave him an almost imperceptible nod by way of acknowledgment. All this pomp and formality bored him hideously. He had endured so much of it in his former life, after all. And then *he* had been the one on the high throne, but even then it had been nothing but a bore. And now—

But this was no more boring than anything else. Gilgamesh had long ago decided that that was the true curse of Hell: all striving was meaningless here, mere thunder without the lightning. And there was no end to it. You might die again now and then if you were careless or unlucky, but back you came for another turn, sooner or later, at the Undertaker's whim. There was no release from the everlastingness of it all. Once he had yearned desperately for eternal life, and he had learned that he could not have such a thing, at least not in the world of mortal men. But now indeed he had come to a place where he would live forever, so it seemed, and yet there was no joy in it. His fondest dream now was simply to serve his time in Hell and be allowed to sleep in peace forever. He saw no way of attaining that. Life here just went on and on—very much like this concert, this endless skein of twangs and plinks and screeches.

Someone with the soft face of a eunuch came by and offered him a morsel of grilled meat. Gilgamesh knew he would pay for it later—you always did, when you ate something in Hell—but he was hungry now, and he gobbled it. And another, and another, and a flagon of fermented mare's milk besides.

A corps of dancers appeared, men and women in flaring filmy robes. They were doing things with swords and flaming torches. A second eunuch brought Gilgamesh a tray of mysterious sugary delicacies, and he helped himself with both hands, heedless of the consequences. He was ravenous. His body, as it healed, was calling furiously for fuel. Beside him, the man Howard was swilling down the mare's milk as if it were water and getting tipsier and tipsier, and the other, the one called Lovecraft, sat morosely staring at the dancers without touching a thing. He seemed to be shivering as though in the midst of a snowstorm.

Gilgamesh beckoned for a second flagon. Just then the doctor arrived and settled down cheerfully on the heap of blankets next to him. Schweitzer grinned his approval as Gilgamesh took a hearty drink. "*Fuhlen Sie sich besser, mein Held, eh?*" The arm, it no longer gives you pain? Already the wound is closing. So quickly you repair yourself! Such strength, such power and healing! You are God's own miracle, dear

Gilgamesh. The blessing of the Almighty is upon you.” He seized a flagon of his own from a passing servant, quaffed it, made a face. “*Ach*, this milk-wine of theirs! *Andach, ach*, this *verfluchte* music! What I would give for the taste of decent Moselle on my tongue now, eh, and the sound of the D minor toccata and fugue in my ears! Bach—do you know him?”

“Who?”

“Bach! Bach, Johann Sebastian Bach. The greatest of musicians, God's own poet in sound. I saw him once, just once, years ago.” Schweitzer's eyes were glowing. “I was new here. Not two weeks had I been here. It was at the villa of King Friedrich—Frederick the Great, you know him? No? The king of Prussia? *Der alte Fritz*? No matter. No matter. *Es macht nichts*. A man entered, ordinary, you would never notice him in a crowd, yes? And began to play the harpsichord, and he had not played three measures when I said, ‘This is Bach, this must be the actual Bach,’ and I would have dropped down on my knees before him but that I was ashamed. And it was he. I said to myself, ‘Why is it that Bach is in Hell?’ But then I said, as perhaps you have said, as I think everyone here must say at one time or another, ‘Why is it that *Schweitzer* is in Hell?’ And I knew that it is that God is mysterious. Perhaps I was sent here to minister to the damned. Perhaps it is that Bach was also. Or perhaps we are damned also; or perhaps no one here is damned. *Es macht nichts aus*, all this speculation. It is a mistake, or even *vielleicht* a sin, to imagine that we can comprehend the workings of the mind of God. We are here. We have our tasks. That is enough for us to know.”

“I felt that way once,” said Gilgamesh. “When I was king in Uruk, and finally came to understand that I must die, that there was no hiding from that. What is the purpose, then, I asked myself? And I told myself: The gods have put us here to perform our tasks, and that is the purpose. And so I lived thereafter and so I died.” Gilgamesh's face darkened. “But here—here—”

“Here, too, we have our tasks,” Schweitzer said.

“You do, perhaps. For me there is only the task of passing the time. I had a friend to bear the burden with me, once—”

“Enkidu.”

Gilgamesh seized the doctor's sturdy wrist with sudden fierce intensity. “You know of Enkidu?”

“From the poem, yes. The poem is very famous.”

“Ah. Ah. The poem. But the actual man—”

“I know nothing of him, *nein* .”

“He is of my stature, very large. His beard is thick, his hair is shaggy, his shoulders are wider even than mine. We journeyed everywhere together. But then we quarreled, and he went from me in anger, saying, ‘Never cross my path again.’ Saying, ‘I have no love for you, Gilgamesh.’ Saying, ‘If we meet again I will have your life.’ And I have heard nothing of him since.”

Schweitzer turned and stared closely at Gilgamesh. “How is this possible? All the world knows the love of Enkidu for Gilgamesh!”

Gilgamesh called for yet another flagon. This conversation was awakening an ache within his breast, an ache that made the pain that his wound had caused seem like nothing more than an itch. Nor would the drink soothe it; but he would drink all the same.

He took a deep draught and said somberly, “We quarreled. There were hot words between us. He said he had no love for me any longer.”

“This cannot be true.”

Gilgamesh shrugged and made no reply.

“You wish to find him again?” Schweitzer asked.

“I desire nothing else.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“Hell is larger even than the world. He could be anywhere.”

“You will find him.”

“If you knew how I have searched for him—”

“You will find him. That I know.”

Gilgamesh shook his head. “If Hell is a place of torment, then this is mine, that I will never find him again. Or if I do, that he will spurn me. Or raise his hand against me.”

“This is not so,” said Schweitzer. “I think he longs for you even as you do for him.”

“Then why does he keep himself from me?”

“This is Hell,” said Schweitzer gently. “You are being tested, my friend, but no test lasts forever. Not even in Hell. Not even in Hell. Even though you are in Hell, have faith in the Lord: You will have your Enkidu soon enough, *um Himmels Willen*.” Smiling, Schweitzer said, “The emperor is calling you. Go to him. I think he has something to tell you that you will want to hear.”

* * * *

Prester John said, “You are a warrior, are you not?”

“I was,” replied Gilgamesh indifferently.

“A general? A leader of men?”

“All that is far behind me,” Gilgamesh said. “This is the life after life. Now I go my

own way and I take on no tasks for others. Hell has plenty of generals.”

“I am told that you were a leader among leaders. I am told that you fought like the god of war. When you took the field, whole nations laid down their arms and knelt before you.”

Gilgamesh waited, saying nothing.

“You miss the glory of the battlefield, don't you, Gilgamesh?”

“Do I?”

“What if I were to offer you the command of my army?”

“Why would you do that? What am I to you? What is your nation to me?”

“In Hell we take whatever citizenship we wish. What would you say, if I offered you the command?”

“I would tell you that you are making a great mistake.”

“It isn't a trivial army. Ten thousand men. Adequate air support. Tactical nukes. The strongest firepower in the Outback.”

“You misunderstand,” said Gilgamesh. “Warfare doesn't interest me. I know nothing of modern weapons and don't care to learn. You have the wrong man, Prester John. If you need a general, send for Wellington. Send for Marlborough. Rommel. Tiglath-Pileser.”

“Or for Enkidu?”

The unexpected name hit Gilgamesh like a battering ram. At the sound of it his face grew hot and his entire body trembled convulsively.

“What do you know about Enkidu?”

Prester John held up one superbly manicured hand. “Allow me the privilege of asking the questions, great king.”

“You spoke the name of Enkidu. What do you know about Enkidu?”

“First let us discuss other matters which are of—”

“Enkidu,” said Gilgamesh implacably. “Why did you mention his name?”

“I know that he was your friend—”

“*Is.*”

“Very well,*is* your friend. And a man of great valor and strength. Who happens to be a guest at this very moment at the court of the great enemy of my realm. And who, so

I understand it, is preparing just now to make war against me.”

“*What?*” Gilgamesh stared. “Enkidu is in the service of Queen Elizabeth?”

“I don't recall having said that.”

“Is it not Queen Elizabeth who even now has sent an army to encroach on your domain?”

Yeh-lu Ta-shih laughed. “Raleigh and his five hundred fools? That expedition's an absurdity. I'll take care of them in an afternoon. I mean another enemy altogether. Tell me this: do you know of Mao Tse-tung?”

“These princes of the New Dead—there are so many names—”

“A Chinese, a man of Han. Emperor of the Marxist Dynasty, long after my time. Crafty, stubborn, tough. More than a little crazy. He runs something called the Celestial People's Republic, just north of here. What he tells his subjects is that we can turn Hell into Heaven by collectivizing it.”

“Collectivizing?” said Gilgamesh uncomprehendingly.

“To make all the peasants into kings, and the kings into peasants. As I say: more than a little crazy. But he has his hordes of loyal followers, and they do whatever he says. He means to conquer all the Outback, beginning right here. And after that, all of Hell will be subjected to his lunatic ideas. I fear that Elizabeth's in league with him—that this nonsense of looking for a way out of Hell is only a ruse, that in fact her Raleigh is spying out my weaknesses for her so that she can sell the information to Mao.”

“But if this Mao is the enemy of all kings, why would Elizabeth ally herself with—”

“Obviously they mean to use each other. Elizabeth aiding Mao to overthrow me, Mao aiding Elizabeth to push her father from his throne. And then afterward, who knows? But I mean to strike before either of them can harm me.”

“What about Enkidu?” Gilgamesh said. “Tell me about Enkidu.”

Prester John opened a scroll of computer printout. Skimming through it, he read, “The Old Dead warrior Enkidu of Sumer—Sumer, that's your nation, isn't it?—arrived at court of Mao Tse-tung on such-and-such a date—ostensible purpose of visit, Outback hunting expedition—accompanied by American spy posing as journalist and hunter, one E. Hemingway—secret meeting with Kublai Khan, Minister of War for the Celestial People's Republic—now training Communist troops in preparation for invasion of New Kara-Khitai—” The emperor looked up. “Is this of interest to you, Gilgamesh?”

“What is it you want from me?”

“This man is your famous friend. You know his mind as you do your own. Defend us from him and I'll give you anything you desire.”

“What I desire,” said Gilgamesh, “is nothing more than the friendship of Enkidu.”

“Then I'll give you Enkidu on a silver platter. Take the field for me against Mao's troops. Help me anticipate whatever strategies your Enkidu has been teaching them. We'll wipe the Marxist bastards out and capture their generals, and then Enkidu will be yours. I can't guarantee that he'll want to be your friend again, but he'll be yours. What do you say, Gilgamesh? What do you say?”

* * * *

Across the gray plains of Hell from horizon to horizon sprawled the legions of Prester John. Scarlet-and-yellow banners fluttered against the somber sky. At the center of the formation stood a wedge of horseborne archers in leather armor; on each flank was a detachment of heavy infantry; the emperor's fleet of tanks was in the vanguard, rolling unhurriedly forward over the rough, broken terrain. A phalanx of transatmospheric weapons platforms provided air cover far overhead.

A cloud of dust in the distance gave evidence of the oncoming army of the Celestial People's Republic.

“By all the demons of Stygia, did you ever see such a cockeyed sight?” Robert Howard cried. He and Lovecraft had a choice view of the action from their place in the imperial command post, a splendid pagoda protected by a glowing force-shield. Gilgamesh was there, too, just across the way with Prester John and the officers of the Kara-Khitai high command. The emperor was peering into a bank of television monitors and one of his aides was feverishly tapping out orders on a computer terminal. “Makes no goddamned sense,” said Howard. “Horsemen, tanks, weapons platforms, all mixing it up at the same time—is that how these wild sons of bitches fight a war?”

Lovecraft touched his forefinger to his lips. “Don't shout so, Bob. Do you want Prester John to hear you? We're his guests, remember. And King Henry's ambassadors.”

“Well, if he hears me, he hears me. Look at that crazy mess! Doesn't Prester John realize that he's got a twentieth-century Bolshevik Chinaman coming to attack him with twentieth-century weapons? What good are mounted horsemen, for God's sake? A cavalry charge into the face of heavy artillery? Bows and arrows against howitzers?” Howard guffawed. “Nuclear-tipped arrows, is that the trick?”

Softly Lovecraft said, “For all we know, that's what they are.”

“You know that can't be, H.P. I'm surprised at you, a man with your scientific background. I know all this nuke stuff is after our time, but surely you've kept up with the theory. Critical mass at the tip of an arrow? No, H.P., you know as well as I do that it just can't work. And even if it could—”

In exasperation Lovecraft waved to him to be silent. He pointed across the room to the main monitor in front of Prester John. The florid face of a heavysset man with a thick white beard had appeared on the screen.

“Isn't that Hemingway?” Lovecraft asked.

“Who?”

“Ernest Hemingway. The writer. *A Farewell to Arms. The Sun Also Rises* .”

“Never could stand his stuff,” said Howard. “Sick crap about a bunch of drunken weaklings. You sure that's him?”

“Weaklings, Bob?” said Lovecraft in astonishment.

“I read only the one book, about those Americans in Europe who go to the bullfights and get drunk and fool around with each other's women, and that was all of Mr. Hemingway that I cared to experience. I tell you, H.P., it disgusted me. And the way it was written! All those short little sentences—no magic, no poetry, H.P.—”

“Let's talk about it some other time, Bob.”

“No vision of heroism—no awareness of the higher passions that ennoble and—”

“Bob—please—”

“A fixation on the sordid, the slimy, the depraved—”

“You're being absurd, Bob. You're completely misinterpreting his philosophy of life. If you had simply taken the trouble to read *A Farewell to Arms* —” Lovecraft shook his head angrily. “This is no time for a literary discussion. Look—look there.” He nodded toward the far side of the room. “One of the emperor's aides is calling over. Something's going on.”

Indeed there had been a development of some sort. Yeh-lu Ta-shih seemed to be conferring with four or five aides at once. Gilgamesh, red-faced, agitated, was striding swiftly back and forth in front of the computer bank. Hemingway's face was still on the screen and he too looked agitated.

Hastily Howard and Lovecraft crossed the room. The emperor turned to them. “There's been a request for a parley in the field,” Prester John said. “Kublai Khan is on his way over. Dr. Schweitzer will serve as my negotiator. The man Hemingway's going to be an impartial observer—*their* impartial observer. I need an impartial observer, too. Will you two go down there too, as diplomats from a neutral power, to keep an eye on things?”

“An honor to serve,” said Howard grandly.

“And for what purpose, my lord, has the parley been called?” Lovecraft asked.

Yeh-lu Ta-shih gestured toward the screen. “Hemingway has had the notion that we can settle this thing by single combat—Gilgamesh versus Enkidu. Save on ammunition, spare the Undertaker a devil of a lot of toil. But there's a disagreement over the details.” Delicately he smothered a yawn. “Perhaps it can all be worked out by lunchtime.”

* * * *

It was an oddly assorted group. Mao Tse-tung's chief negotiator was the plump, magnificently dressed Kublai Khan, whose dark sly eyes gave evidence of much cunning and force. He had been an emperor in his own right in his former life, but evidently had preferred less taxing responsibilities here. Next to him was Hemingway, big and heavy, with a deep voice and an easy, almost arrogant manner. Mao had also sent four small men in identical blue uniforms with red stars on their breasts—"Party types," someone murmured—and, strangely, a Hairy Man, big-browed and chinless, one of those creatures out of deepest antiquity. He too wore the Communist emblem on his uniform.

And there was one more to the group—the massive, deep-chested man of dark brow and fierce and smouldering eyes, who stood off by himself at the far side—

Gilgamesh could barely bring himself to look at him. He too stood apart from the group a little way, savoring the keen edge of the wind that blew across the field of battle. He longed to rush toward Enkidu, to throw his arms around him, to sweep away in one jubilant embrace all the bitterness that had separated them—

If only it could be as simple as that!

The voices of Mao's negotiators and the five that Prester John had sent—Schweitzer, Lovecraft, Howard, and a pair of Kara-Khitai officers—drifted to Gilgamesh above the howling of the wind.

Hemingway seemed to be doing most of the talking. "Writers, are you? Mr. Howard, Mr. Lovecraft? I regret I haven't had the pleasure of encountering your work."

"Fantasy, it was," said Lovecraft. "Fables. Visions."

"That so? You publish in *Argosy* ? *The Post* ?"

"Five to *Argosy* , but they were westerns," Howard said. "Mainly we wrote for *Weird Tales* . And H.P., a few in *Astounding Stories* ."

"*Weird Tales*," Hemingway said. "*Astounding Stories*." A shadow of distaste flickered across his face. "Mmm. Don't think I knew those magazines. But you wrote well, did you, gentlemen? You set down what you truly felt, the real thing, and you stated it purely? Of course you did. I know you did. You were honest writers or you'd never have gone to Hell. That goes almost without saying." He laughed, rubbed his hands in glee, effusively threw his arms around the shoulders of Howard and Lovecraft. Howard seemed alarmed by that and Lovecraft looked as though he wanted to sink into the ground. "Well, gentlemen," Hemingway boomed, "what shall we do here? We have a little problem. The one hero wishes to fight with bare hands, the other with—what did he call it?—a disruptor pistol? You would know more about that than I do: something out of *Astounding Stories* , is how it sounds to me. But we can't have this, can we? Bare hands against fantastic future science? There is a good way to fight and that is equal to equal, and all other ways are the bad ways."

"Let him come to me with his fists," Gilgamesh called from the distance. "As we fought the first time, in the Market-of-the-Land, when my path crossed his in Uruk."

“He is afraid to use the new weapons,” Enkidu replied.

“*Afraid?*”

“I brought a shotgun to him, a fine 12-gauge weapon, a gift to my brother Gilgamesh. He shrank from it as though I had given him a venomous serpent.”

“Lies!” roared Gilgamesh. “I had no fear of it! I despised it because it was cowardly!”

“He fears anything which is new,” said Enkidu. “I never thought Gilgamesh of Uruk would know fear, but he fears the unfamiliar. He called me a coward, because I would hunt with a shotgun. But I think he was the coward. And now he fears to fight me with the unfamiliar. He knows that I’ll slay him. He fears death even here, do you know that? Death has always been his great terror. Why is that? Because it is an insult to his pride? I think that is it. Too proud to die—too proud to accept the decree of the gods—”

“I will break you with my hands alone!” Gilgamesh bellowed.

“Give us disruptors,” said Enkidu. “Let us see if he dares to touch such a weapon.”

“A coward’s weapon!”

“Again you call me a coward? You, Gilgamesh, you are the one who quivers in fear—”

“Gentlemen! Gentlemen!”

“You fear my strength, Enkidu!”

“You fear my skill. You with your pathetic old sword, your pitiful bow—”

“Is this the Enkidu I loved, mocking me so?”

“You were the first to mock, when you threw back the shotgun into my hands, spurning my gift, calling me a coward—”

“The weapon, I said, was cowardly. Not you, Enkidu.”

“It was the same thing.”

“*Bitte, bitte,*” said Schweitzer. “This is not the way!”

And again from Hemingway: “Gentlemen, please!”

They took no notice.

“I meant—”

“You said—”

“Shame—”

“Fear—”

“Three times over a coward!”

“Five times five a traitor!”

“False friend!”

“Vain braggart!”

“Gentlemen, I have to ask you—”

But Hemingway's voice, loud and firm though it was, was altogether drowned out by the roar of rage that came from the throat of Gilgamesh. Dizzying throbs of anger pounded in his breast, his throat, his temples. He could take no more. This was how it had begun the first time, when Enkidu had come to him with that shotgun and he had given it back and they had fallen into dispute. At first merely a disagreement, and then a hot debate, and then a quarrel, and then the hurling of bitter accusations. And then such words of anger as had never passed between them before, they who had been closer than brothers.

That time they hadn't come to blows. Enkidu had simply stalked away, declaring that their friendship was at an end. But now—hearing all the same words again, stymied by this quarrel even over the very method by which they were to fight—Gilgamesh could no longer restrain himself. Overmastered by fury and frustration, he rushed forward.

Enkidu, eyes gleaming, was ready for him.

Hemingway attempted to come between them. Big as he was, he was like a child next to Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and they swatted him to one side without effort. With a jolt that made the ground itself reverberate, Gilgamesh went crashing into Enkidu and laid hold of him with both hands.

Enkidu laughed. “So you have your way after all, King Gilgamesh! Bare hands it is!”

“It is the only way,” said Gilgamesh.

At last. At last. There was no wrestler in this world or the other who could contend with Gilgamesh of Uruk. I will break him, Gilgamesh thought, as he broke our friendship. I will snap his spine. I will crush his chest.

As once they had done long ago, they fought like maddened bulls. They stared eye to eye as they contended. They grunted; they bellowed, they roared. Gilgamesh shouted out defiance in the language of Uruk and in any other language he could think of; and Enkidu muttered and stormed at Gilgamesh in the language of the beasts that once he had spoken when he was a wild man, the harsh growling of the lion of the plains.

Gilgamesh yearned to have Enkidu's life. He loved this man more dearly than life itself, and yet he prayed that it would be given him to break Enkidu's back, to hear the sharp snapping sound of his spine, to toss him aside like a worn-out cloak. So strong was his love that it had turned to the brightest of hatreds. I will send him to the Undertaker once again, Gilgamesh thought. I will hurl him from Hell.

But though he struggled as he had never struggled in combat before, Gilgamesh was unable to budge Enkidu. Veins bulged in his forehead; the sutures that held his wound burst and blood flowed down his arm; and still he strained to throw Enkidu to the ground, and still Enkidu held his place. And matched him, strength for strength, and kept him at bay. They stood locked that way a long moment, staring into each other's eyes, locked in unbreakable stalemate.

Then after a long while Enkidu said, as once he had said long ago, "Ah, Gilgamesh! There is not another one like you in all the world! Glory to the mother who bore you!"

It was like the breaking of a dam, and a rush of life-giving waters tumbling out over the summer-parched fields of the Land.

And from Gilgamesh in that moment of release and relief came twice-spoken words also:

"There is one other who is like me. But only one."

"No, for Enlil has given you the kingship."

"But you are my brother," said Gilgamesh, and they laughed and let go of each other and stepped back, as if seeing each other for the first time, and laughed again.

"This is great foolishness, this fighting between us," Enkidu cried.

"Very great foolishness indeed, brother."

"What need have you of shotguns and disruptors?"

"And what do I care if you choose to play with such toys?"

"Indeed, brother."

"Indeed!"

Gilgamesh looked away. They were all staring—the four party men, Lovecraft, Howard, the Hairy Man, Kublai Khan, Hemingway—all astonished, mouths drooping open. Only Schweitzer was beaming. The doctor came up to them and said quietly, "You have not injured each other? No. *Gut. Gut.* Then leave here, the two of you, together. Now. What do you care for Prester John and his wars, or for Mao and his? This is no business of yours. Go. Now."

Enkidu grinned. "What do you say, brother? Shall we go off hunting together?"

“To the end of the Outback, and back again. You and I, and no one else.”

“And we will hunt only with our bows and spears?”

Gilgamesh shrugged. “With disruptors, if that is how you would have it. With cannons. With nuke grenades. Ah, Enkidu, Enkidu—!”

“Gilgamesh!”

“Go,” Schweitzer whispered. “Now. Leave this place and never look back. *Auf Wiedersehen! Gluckliche Reise! Gottes Name*, go now!”

* * * *

Watching them take their leave, seeing them trudge off together into the swirling winds of the Outback, Robert Howard felt a sudden sharp pang of regret and loss. How beautiful they had been, those two heroes, those two giants, as they strained and struggled! And then that sudden magic moment when the folly of their quarrel came home to them, when they were enemies no longer and brothers once more—

And now they were gone, and here he stood amidst these others, these strangers—

He had wanted to be Gilgamesh's brother, or perhaps—he barely comprehended it—something more than a brother. But that could never have been. And, knowing that it could never have been, knowing that that man who seemed so much like his Conan was lost to him forever, Howard felt tears beginning to surge within him.

“Bob?” Lovecraft said. “Bob, are you all right?”

She-it, Howard thought. *A man don't cry. Especially in front of other men.*

He turned away, into the wind, so Lovecraft could not see his face.

“Bob? Bob?”

She-it, Howard thought again. And he let the tears come.