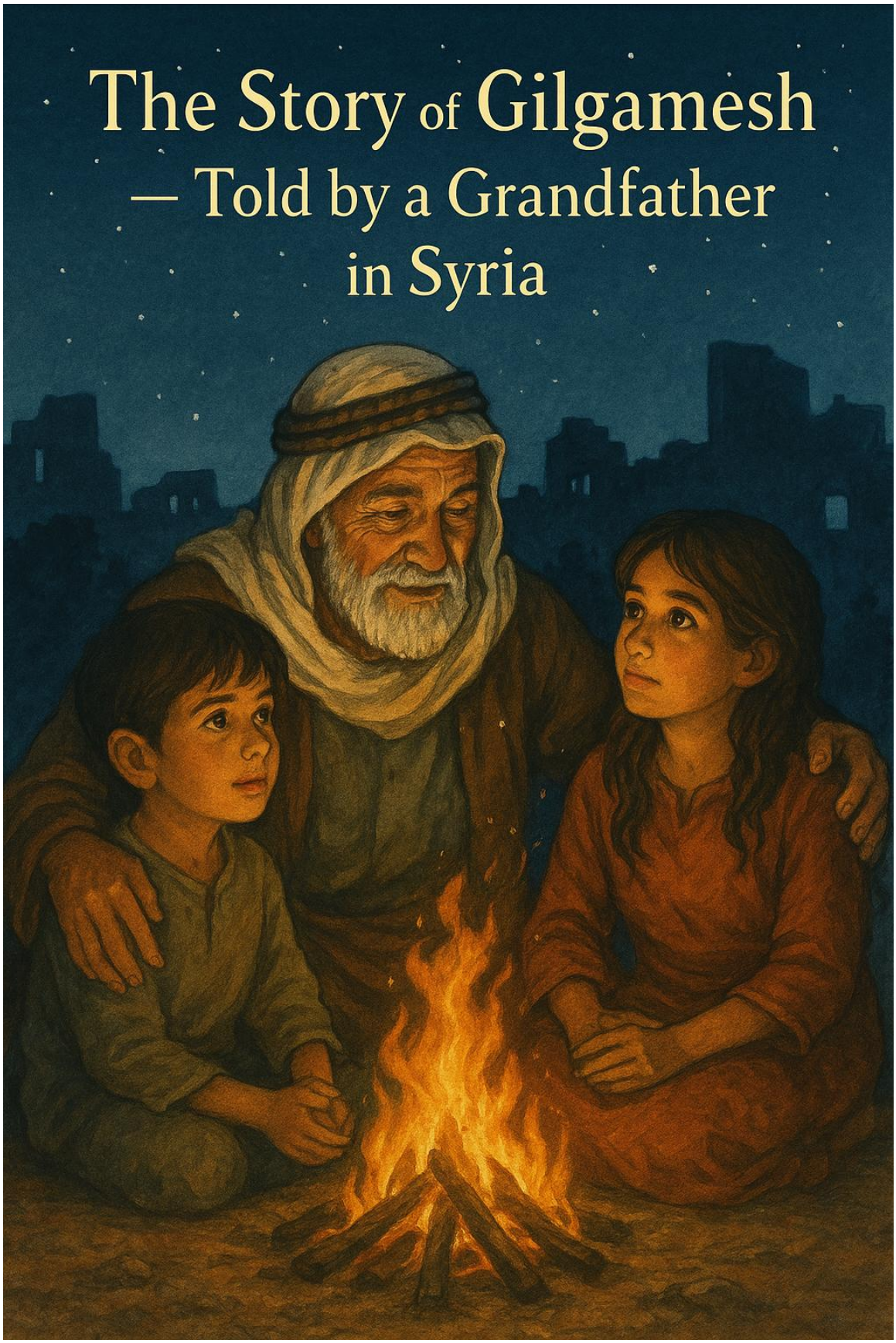
The Story of Gilgamesh
— Told by a Grandfather
in Syria

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Preface

There are stories older than kingdoms, older than cities, older even than the languages we now speak. They have crossed deserts, sailed rivers, and hidden in clay tablets while empires rose and fell above them. One such story is the tale of Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk.

It is said to be the world's first great epic, carved in cuneiform on damp clay more than four thousand years ago, when Mesopotamia was young. Though kings and gods stride through its lines, the heart of the tale is not thunder or conquest, but something far simpler: friendship, grief, the fear of death, and the longing to leave behind something that endures.

In this book, the story is told not by scholars or priests, but by a grandfather in Syria, sitting by the fire with his grandchildren. Around him the world may tremble with war and uncertainty, but by his voice the past becomes present, and the wisdom of ancient times speaks again.

He tells it not as a cold artifact but as a living tale. The deserts his family has crossed echo the deserts of Gilgamesh. The loss his people have suffered echoes the tears of Enkidu. The hope his grandchildren need is the same hope Gilgamesh searched for when he sought the plant of life.

For every age needs the story of Gilgamesh. It is not only the tale of a king who failed to grasp immortality. It is also the reminder that immortality comes in other forms: in kindness, in memory, in what we build for those who come after us.

And so, by the fire, in the hush of night, a voice rises and begins.

Prologue

The night had grown quiet. Outside, the wind carried dust across the stones, and the stars looked down like a thousand unblinking eyes. Inside the small courtyard, a fire crackled, feeding warmth into the circle of children who leaned close to its glow.

Their grandfather sat among them, his face lined like the pages of an old book, his eyes bright despite the years. He drew the folds of his robe around him, not from the cold, but from the memory of it.

“You ask me for a story,” he said, his voice low and steady. “And I will give you not just any story, but the oldest one we know. It was born here, in the lands between rivers, long before Syria or Iraq or the names we now use. It was written on clay by men who have turned to dust, but the tale remains. It is the story of Gilgamesh.”

The children’s eyes widened. Some had heard the name in passing, whispered in school or in books, but never told like this.

“Listen carefully,” the grandfather continued. “Because this story is not only about kings and gods. It is about us—about fear, and loss, and the hope that something of us will remain when we are gone. Remember it when times are hard. For if Gilgamesh could learn wisdom after all his pride, then so can we.”

He leaned forward, his face lit by the fire, his hands shaping the words as if he held them like clay.

“Long ago, in the city of Uruk, there lived a king. He was strong as the walls he built, fierce as the lions of the desert. His name was Gilgamesh. And though he had all the world could offer—power, glory, riches—still his heart was restless, for he feared one thing above all else.”

The children held their breath, waiting.

“The thing he feared,” the grandfather whispered, “was death.”

The fire popped, sending sparks upward like stars set free, and the story began.

Chapter 1 — The Mighty King

"Long ago," the grandfather said, as the children leaned closer, "there was a city that shone like a jewel among the deserts. Its name was **Uruk**. High walls circled it, built of baked clay and stone, tall enough that from their tops one could see the endless plains stretching to the horizon. Inside those walls were temples that reached toward the sky, gardens watered by canals, markets filled with voices, and streets where people hurried about their lives. It was a city of greatness."

He paused and looked at the children. "But a city is not great because of its walls. It is great because of its people. And at the heart of Uruk, there was a king."

His name was **Gilgamesh**. He was said to be two-thirds god and one-third man. His shoulders were broad as gates, his arms as strong as river currents. He could outrun a horse, wrestle a lion, and build with his own hands the very walls that circled Uruk. Wherever he went, people whispered his name with awe.

But power is a dangerous gift.

Gilgamesh was mighty, yes, but he was also proud. He believed no man could match him, and because of that, he ruled not only with strength but with arrogance. When he walked the streets, people bowed low, yet when they lifted their heads, fear shadowed their eyes. He sent men to labor without rest on his endless projects, and women to his palace without asking their will. He thought the city was his to command as he pleased.

The grandfather's eyes softened. "Children, listen: strength without kindness becomes a chain, and pride without wisdom becomes a prison."

One evening, the people of Uruk gathered in secret. They whispered prayers, not to Gilgamesh, but to the gods. *'Great gods,'* they said, *'give us relief. Our king is mighty, but his might has become a burden. Send us someone who can teach him the meaning of being human.'*

And the gods heard.

The grandfather's voice dropped lower, and the firelight flickered across his face. "Far from Uruk, in the wilderness where the gazelles ran and the winds carried no master's voice, the gods shaped a man out of clay. His name was **Enkidu**. He had the strength of the wild ox, the hair of the plains upon his body, and he lived as the animals lived—drinking from rivers, running free beneath the open sky."

But that, children, is another part of the tale. For now, remember this: even the mightiest king is not complete when he stands alone. Gilgamesh had power, but he had no balance. And a

ruler without balance is like a tree with roots on only one side—it may stand tall, but the first strong wind will topple it."

The grandfather leaned back, letting the words sink into the circle of silence. Sparks from the fire rose into the dark, like tiny stars that had lost their places in the sky.

"Gilgamesh was mighty, yes. But he was also restless. And soon, the gods would send him the one thing he did not know he needed: a friend."

Chapter 2 — The Friendship

The grandfather shifted his seat by the fire, and the children leaned closer, eager. His voice softened, carrying both weight and warmth.

“Far from the walls of Uruk, where no king’s shadow fell, there lived a man unlike any other. His name was **Enkidu**. The gods had shaped him from clay, wet with the breath of life. He was strong as a bull, swift as the deer he ran with. His hair grew long and wild, his body was covered in the dust of the earth, and his heart beat in rhythm with the wilderness.

Enkidu knew no city, no plough, no fire built by human hands. He drank from rivers beside the gazelles, tore grass with the antelope, and chased lions with his bare hands. To the animals, he was kin; to men, he was a shadow, a rumor of a creature who lived free beneath the open sky.”

The children’s eyes widened, and one whispered, *“Like a hero?”*
The grandfather nodded slowly. “Like a hero, yes—but also like a child, untouched by the world’s burdens. He knew strength, but not wisdom. He knew freedom, but not purpose.”

When the people of Uruk prayed for help, the gods sent not a soldier, not a storm, but Enkidu. For they knew Gilgamesh needed something he could not command: an equal.

Word of Enkidu reached the city. Hunters had seen him breaking traps, freeing animals, and chasing them from the snares men had set. They told Gilgamesh of this wild man who could topple trees and wrestle beasts. The king grew restless at the thought. *“If he is strong as they say, then I must see him. No man is my equal—yet this one, perhaps, will teach me what I have not learned.”*

So a woman was sent, wise and gentle, to lead Enkidu toward the city. She spoke to him of bread and wine, of fire and family, of the ways of men. Enkidu listened, curious. He learned to eat, to drink, to clothe himself, to sit at the fire. He grew less beast and more man, but his heart remained fierce and free.

At last, he came to Uruk. The people whispered, for Enkidu’s strength was like Gilgamesh’s own, and his eyes burned with the fire of the wild.

And then came the day when Gilgamesh and Enkidu met.

The grandfather’s hand rose, tracing shapes in the air as though he were drawing the moment itself. “It was not a meeting of smiles, children. It was a meeting of storms. Gilgamesh, the mighty king, and Enkidu, the wild man—each saw in the other not weakness, but a mirror. They clashed in the streets of Uruk, shaking the very walls with their struggle. Dust rose,

stones cracked, men fled from their path. They wrestled like lions in a pit, neither yielding, neither willing to fall."

The fire popped loudly, as if echoing the clash. The children leaned forward, breathless.

"But at last," the grandfather continued, "their strength broke against each other like waves against rock. Neither could conquer the other. And then, as the dust settled, they laughed. Not with mockery, but with the laughter of recognition. For in each other, they had found what they had never known: an equal."

From that day, Gilgamesh and Enkidu were as brothers. Where one went, the other followed. Where one stood, the other defended. The arrogance of Gilgamesh softened, for he no longer stood alone above his people. He walked with Enkidu, and together they became greater than either could be apart.

The grandfather's voice lowered. "Children, hear this: even the strongest among us is incomplete until they find someone who sees them as they truly are. Power is nothing without friendship. And friendship, once found, can change even the proudest heart."

The firelight flickered on his face, and the silence that followed felt deep as the desert night. The children held the words quietly, each imagining their own friend, their own brother or sister of the soul.

At last, the grandfather smiled. "So it was that the mighty king and the wild man became one. And their bond would carry them to deeds so great, the world still remembers. But great deeds, children, always come with great cost..."

He let the last words hang in the air, like sparks drifting upward.

Chapter 3 — The Quest for Glory

The fire burned lower, its light soft against the faces of the children. The grandfather leaned forward, his hands open as though he held something heavy yet invisible.

“Gilgamesh and Enkidu had found in each other not enemies but brothers. And with that brotherhood came restlessness. For what is strength, if it does not test itself against the world? What is courage, if it hides behind city walls?”

The children’s eyes shone, reflecting the flames.

“In the land beyond Uruk lay the great **Forest of Cedars**. Its trees rose higher than towers, their trunks thick as pillars, their crowns brushing the clouds. The scent of resin and sap filled the air like incense. It was said the gods themselves loved the forest, for in its shade the world felt eternal. But guarding it was a monster named **Humbaba**, placed there by the god Enlil. His face was terror, his roar thunder, and his breath was death. None who entered the cedar wood returned alive.”

The children shivered. One whispered, *“Why go there, then?”*

The grandfather’s eyes twinkled sadly. “Because men are not content with what they have. Gilgamesh wished for a name that would never be forgotten. He dreamed of cutting the cedars, of killing Humbaba, and of building gates for Uruk from the sacred wood. ‘If I fall,’ he said, ‘I will have gained glory. And if I succeed, I will have gained eternity.’”

Enkidu, who knew the wilderness, trembled at the thought. “I have walked near the cedar forest,” he told his brother-king. “I have heard Humbaba’s cry. It is not the cry of any beast but the cry of the earth itself. Gilgamesh, turn back! To fight him is to fight the gods.”

But Gilgamesh would not turn back. He clasped Enkidu’s shoulder and said, “Brother, we were given strength not to hide it but to use it. Come with me. If we fall, let us fall together. If we win, let us win together.”

The grandfather paused, letting the fire’s crackle fill the silence. Then he went on.

“So they armed themselves. Gilgamesh bore great axes and swords, and Enkidu carried spears that shone in the sun. They set out from Uruk, their footsteps heavy, their hearts unshaken. For days they journeyed until the trees darkened the sky and the smell of cedar was thick as smoke.

There, among trunks like walls, the shadow of Humbaba moved.”

The children leaned closer. One held his breath.

“When Humbaba appeared, the forest itself trembled. His roar shook birds from the branches, and his face was so terrible that even the boldest heart quailed. Enkidu faltered, but Gilgamesh stood firm. He lifted his voice to the heavens: *‘O Shamash, god of the sun, lend us your light! Guide our hands against the monster!’*

And Shamash sent winds, mighty and fierce. They struck Humbaba from all sides, blinding him, holding him fast. The brothers attacked—blades flashing, courage burning. Humbaba fell, his cry echoing like the last groan of the mountains.

With his death, the cedar forest was no longer guarded. The two heroes cut down trees taller than towers and carved from them a great gate for Uruk, wide enough for gods themselves to pass. The scent of cedar filled their city, and their names filled the mouths of men. They had gained glory.”

The grandfather’s face grew grave. His voice softened.

“But children, remember: every victory carries a price. Humbaba, before he died, pleaded with them. He begged for mercy, offering himself as servant. Yet they struck him down. And when they brought the cedars back to Uruk, the gods looked with anger. For Humbaba had been their chosen guardian, and his death stirred the balance of the world.

The people of Uruk sang of Gilgamesh and Enkidu as heroes. Yet in the silence of the gods, a shadow began to gather. For deeds, no matter how glorious, are never free.”

He let the words hang like smoke.

“Glory,” he said at last, “is a flame. It burns bright, but it also consumes. And soon, Gilgamesh and Enkidu would learn that even the brightest fire casts a long shadow.”

The children shivered again, though not from the cold.

Chapter 4 — The Death of Enkidu

The fire in the courtyard hissed softly as the grandfather drew his robe tighter. His eyes, dark as the night above, grew heavy with memory. The children leaned forward, sensing that the story had reached a turning point.

“Gilgamesh and Enkidu returned to Uruk with their cedar gate, praised by the people, sung by the bards. Their names filled the city like the scent of resin, and for a time, the brothers believed themselves untouchable. They had wrestled lions, slain Humbaba, defied the forest, and lived. But the gods, children… the gods do not forget. And they do not forgive lightly.”

The grandfather’s voice deepened. “After Humbaba, the heroes turned their eyes to the heavens themselves. They angered the goddess Ishtar, who loved Gilgamesh but was spurned by him. In fury, she sent the **Bull of Heaven** to ravage the land, to strike down Uruk’s people. But together, Gilgamesh and Enkidu fought the beast and killed it. Its blood darkened the dust, its body shook the earth.

The gods gathered in their high places, troubled. *‘These two have grown too bold,’* they said. *‘They have slain Humbaba, guardian of the cedars, and they have struck down the Bull of Heaven itself. Such arrogance cannot stand. Let one of them pay the price.’*

And so the judgment fell, not on Gilgamesh, but on Enkidu.”

The children gasped softly.

“One night, Enkidu dreamed. He saw a great house of dust, where kings and priests alike sat in silence, where crowns lay discarded and the mighty were no greater than the lowly. He woke in terror, knowing the dream was an omen. Soon his body sickened. Fever burned him, his strength left him, and the wildness that once ran through his veins turned weak.

Gilgamesh sat by his side, helpless. He who had wrestled lions could not wrestle death. He who had built walls could not build a shield strong enough to hold his friend. Enkidu, who had been shaped by the gods themselves, now lay fragile as clay left too long in the sun.

Day after day, Gilgamesh prayed, begged, raged. He offered gifts at the temples, he lifted his voice to Shamash, to Enlil, to Ea. ‘Spare him!’ he cried. ‘Take me instead!’ But the gods were silent. Enkidu’s fate had already been sealed when they struck down Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven.”

The grandfather’s face was lined with sorrow as he spoke the words. “At last, Enkidu looked at his brother and said, ‘Do not forget me, Gilgamesh. When I return to the earth, remember

that I lived, that I was your friend. Let my name live in you.' And with that, his breath left him, like wind leaving a sail. Enkidu was gone."

The fire crackled, and for a moment no one spoke. Even the children sat silently, their faces shadowed.

Gilgamesh tore his garments, his voice echoing through Uruk like thunder. He lay beside his friend's body, refusing to leave. He wandered the wilds, his hair uncombed, his food untouched. He wept until his tears made rivers.

And then, children, something terrible happened. Gilgamesh, the mighty king who feared nothing, felt the one fear he could not master. He looked upon the stillness of Enkidu and understood: *If death can take him, it will take me too*.

That thought pierced him deeper than any sword.

The grandfather's voice grew softer now, the flames trembling in his eyes. "Children, remember this: the strongest walls cannot keep out grief. The brightest crowns cannot blind the eyes of death. All men, even kings, must face the same gate at the end. And it is not our strength, but our love, that makes our days worthy."

The fire spat a spark into the air, and the silence felt heavy, as though even the stars leaned closer.

"Enkidu was gone. But his death was not the end of the story. It was the beginning of Gilgamesh's true journey. For now, driven by grief and fear, he would seek the one thing no man had ever found—the secret of immortality."

Chapter 5 — The Search for Immortality

The grandfather lifted a log and placed it on the fire. Sparks rose like restless spirits, and the children's eyes followed them upward. His voice grew lower, carrying both sorrow and weight.

"Gilgamesh wept for Enkidu until the earth could no longer drink his tears. But grief, children, has two faces. One face is love, remembering what is lost. The other is fear, knowing we too will follow. And fear drove Gilgamesh out of Uruk, away from his people, into the wilderness."

He paused, letting the crackle of the fire echo the silence.

"He said to himself: *'Must I die as Enkidu has died? Must my strength, my walls, my name all vanish into dust? No. I will not accept it. I will seek the secret of life. I will find Utnapišhtim, who survived the Great Flood, whom the gods granted eternal life. He will tell me how to escape death.'*

And so Gilgamesh set out."

The children shivered at the thought of such a journey.

"He wandered deserts where no bird flew and no grass grew. His skin cracked in the sun, his lips split from thirst. He came to mountains where the wind cut like knives, where snow swallowed the path. He crossed rivers black as night, with no boat and no oars. Each step was heavier than the last, but he did not turn back.

At last he came to the **mountains of Mashu**, where twin peaks touched the heavens and roots reached the underworld. There stood two scorpion-men, their faces fierce, their stingers raised. Their eyes glowed with fire, and even Gilgamesh trembled. But he bowed low and pleaded, 'Let me pass. I seek Utnapišhtim, keeper of life. My friend has died, and I must know the secret to escape death.'

The scorpion-men looked at him long, and one said to the other, *'This man is flesh, yet his spirit is not ordinary. Let him through, for his journey is already written.'*

So Gilgamesh entered the mountain, walking through a tunnel of darkness twelve leagues long. No light, no stars, no fire—only blackness pressing against his eyes. He stumbled, he gasped, but he pressed on, and at last, after endless steps, he saw the first glow of dawn. He had walked through night itself, and he emerged into the garden of the gods."

The grandfather's eyes grew distant, as though seeing it himself. "There the trees bore jewels instead of fruit. Leaves glittered like emeralds, trunks gleamed like bronze, and flowers

shone with colors no man had seen. But Gilgamesh did not rest. He passed through wonders untouched, for his heart was fixed on one thing alone: life."

Beyond the garden he met **Siduri**, the wise woman of the sea, who asked him why he wandered so ragged and broken. Gilgamesh cried, *'I am afraid! Death stalks me, as it took Enkidu. Tell me how to find Utnapišhtim!'*

Siduri shook her head gently. 'Gilgamesh, life is short. Fill your belly, dance and sing, cherish the child who holds your hand, delight in your wife. That is the lot of man.'

But Gilgamesh's heart raged. 'I will not be comforted! Tell me the way, or I will tear down the gates of the sea!'

So Siduri sent him onward to the boatman **Urshanabi**, who ferried him across the Waters of Death—waters no hand could touch without perishing. Together they sailed until the waves gave way to silence, and there at the edge of the world, Gilgamesh found Utnapišhtim, the immortal."

The grandfather leaned closer to the children, his face lit red by the fire.

"Children, remember this: sometimes our fear drives us farther than our strength, but it also opens paths we would never find otherwise. Gilgamesh was no longer only a king, no longer only a warrior. He was a man searching for hope, like every man before and after him."

He paused, his eyes soft. "And soon, Utnapišhtim would tell him the truth of life and death."

The fire spat sparks again, as though agreeing.

Chapter 6 — The Plant of Life

The grandfather fed the fire with a small stick of olive wood. The children watched the sparks leap, their faces round with anticipation. His voice was slower now, almost like a chant.

“Gilgamesh, after his long wandering, came at last to the edge of the world, where the rivers die and the sea holds its breath. There he found **Utnapišhtim**, the faraway man, the one who had survived the Great Flood.

Utnapišhtim looked at him with tired eyes, older than mountains, older than memory. Gilgamesh fell to his knees. *‘Tell me,’* he begged, *‘how did you gain eternal life? Tell me how I may escape death, as you did.’*

And Utnapišhtim sighed. ‘Listen, king of Uruk. Long ago, the gods sent a flood to destroy mankind. The waters rose higher than the clouds, higher than the mountains, higher than hope. But Ea, the wise god, whispered to me and said, “Build a boat.” So I built it, and in it I carried my family, the seeds of all creatures, and the memory of the earth. When the waters receded, the gods were ashamed. They granted me and my wife life everlasting. But hear me, Gilgamesh: it was a gift, not a prize. No man may win immortality. It belongs only to the gods.’*

The children stirred, frowning. One whispered, *“So he failed?”*

The grandfather shook his head gently. “Not yet. For Utnapišhtim, pitying Gilgamesh, revealed one last secret. He said: *‘There is a plant, deep in the waters of the sea. Its thorns will pierce your hands, but if you bring it back, it will give new life to men. Perhaps not eternal life, but the strength to begin again.’*

Gilgamesh, hearing this, dove into the waters. The sea closed over him, cold and dark, but he pressed downward, his lungs burning, until his hands closed on the plant with sharp thorns. Blood flowed from his palms, but he rose again, triumphant.

He looked at the plant and wept—not from sorrow, but from hope. *‘This is it! I will bring this home to Uruk. I will share it with the old men, with the weary, and we will all taste life again. Our days will not end so soon. Enkidu, my brother, I could not save you, but I will save others.’*

The children’s eyes glowed. “He won?” one said eagerly.

The grandfather’s gaze softened, and his voice lowered like the fire before ash. “He thought he had. But listen well, children: often when we clutch too tightly, what we hold slips away.

On his journey home, Gilgamesh grew weary. He stopped to rest beside a pool, laying the plant upon the ground. The cool water lapped, the breeze sighed. He closed his eyes. And in that moment, from the shadows, a serpent slithered forth. Drawn by the scent of the plant, it seized it in its jaws and carried it away.

As the serpent shed its skin, it renewed itself, but Gilgamesh lay watching, empty-handed. He fell upon the earth and wept, for the gift he had fought for was gone.

He cried, *'For myself I gained nothing. For myself, I lost everything. Yet perhaps this was not meant for me. Perhaps life cannot be stolen or held forever. Perhaps it is only given, day by day.'*

The children sat stunned, their faces pale in the firelight.

The grandfather nodded slowly. "Remember, children: the serpent may take what you hold, time may strip you of your treasures, but your deeds remain. The plant was lost, yes, but the walls of Uruk still stood. The songs of his friendship with Enkidu still lived. And those—those were a kind of immortality the serpent could not steal."

He gazed into the flames, his voice trailing into silence. "Gilgamesh sought eternal life, and he did not find it. But he found something greater: the truth that we live on in memory, in love, and in the works we leave behind."

The fire hissed, and the night grew still.

Chapter 7 — The Walls of Uruk

The grandfather stirred the embers with a stick until the fire glowed steady and warm. His voice carried both weariness and calm.

“Sometimes,” he said softly, “the hardest journey is not the one into deserts or mountains, but the journey back home.”

Gilgamesh returned to Uruk not as a triumphant hero, not as a conqueror bearing spoils, but as a man whose hands were empty and whose heart had been broken open. The thorn-wounds in his palms still stung from the plant he had lost to the serpent. His body carried the dust of endless roads, and his eyes the weight of grief.

And yet, when the high walls of Uruk came into view at sunset, painted gold by the fading light, he felt something stir inside him. He touched the baked bricks with his hand, rough and warm beneath his palm. “You remained,” he whispered to the stones. “When all else was taken, you remained.”

At the great gate of cedar wood—the one he had carved long ago from the trees guarded by Humbaba—he paused. The scent of old resin lingered faintly. “I once brought you here in pride,” he thought. “Today I walk beneath you in gratitude.”

Inside the city, the people gathered to see their king return. They saw not a glittering warrior but a weary man. A builder froze with his trowel mid-air, a child clutched a loaf of bread to his chest, a widow raised her eyes but did not lower them in fear.

Gilgamesh stopped before them. For the first time in his reign, he asked, “How do you live? What pains you? What do you lack?”

The builder spoke: “The canal to the southern fields is clogged. The water does not flow, and our harvest withers.”
The widow said: “My husband died under the king’s labor, and still I must pay his debt.”
The child whispered: “The guards take my bread when I run too fast.”

In the old days, Gilgamesh would have dismissed them with a command. But now he listened. And he acted. He called for scribes, for elders, for craftsmen. “Today,” he said, “we do not build temples or carve new gates. Today we clear the canal, so water flows again. Today we forgive the debt of the widow. Today the guards will be ordered: a child’s bread belongs first to the child.”

And so the king himself waded into the mud of the canal, shoulder to shoulder with his people, hands raw with the same labor as theirs. An old man laughed as he saw him. “I never thought to see a king digging silt like me,” he said.

Gilgamesh smiled faintly. “The waters do not fear kings,” he replied. “But they flow for all when we make the path clear.”

That night, he climbed the walls again. The city spread beneath him like a living tapestry: merchants haggling their last coins, children chasing one another in the streets, oil lamps glowing in every courtyard. He breathed the night air deeply. Beside him, in memory only, Enkidu’s presence seemed to walk once more.

“Brother,” Gilgamesh whispered into the dark, “I could not save you. I could not save myself. But perhaps the plant of life was never meant for my hands. Perhaps life is given, not stolen, and kept only when shared.”

From then on, he ruled differently. He lessened the taxes in years of famine. He forbade the forced taking of laborers when the fields needed them most. He set guards not at his palace but at the granaries, to keep the measures honest. And strangest of all, he ordered benches placed at the cedar gate. “Two of my men will sit here every day,” he said, “to listen. Not to write complaints on clay, not to dismiss voices—but to hear and answer.”

The people whispered among themselves:
“Where did such gentleness come from, in arms as hard as stone?”
“Perhaps death touched him,” others said. “And death softens what rain cannot.”

The next morning, Gilgamesh called children to climb the walls with him. He lifted them, one by one, until their small hands touched the ancient bricks. “Feel them,” he told them. “Rough, solid. Each brick was molded, fired, carried, and placed by hands like yours. These walls endure because of work done by many. So too with life: no man holds it forever, but each can set a brick that outlasts him. When you grow, add your bricks—an honest word, a shared loaf, a field tended, a neighbor defended. That is how walls rise.”

Then he turned to his scribes. “Bring wet clay and reeds. Write everything. Write how I was proud, how I failed, how I loved, how I wept, how I sought life and returned empty-handed. Do not hide my shame. Shame concealed teaches nothing. Write of the men and women I met, of Siduri who counseled me, of Urshanabi who ferried me, of Enkidu who was my brother. Let no name be lost.”

One young scribe asked timidly, “My king… why should the world know you failed?”

Gilgamesh’s face softened. “So the world may know how a man learns to be human.”

The grandfather’s voice fell into silence. The children leaned forward, eyes wide. One finally asked, “Grandfather… did he find immortality, then?”

The old man nodded slowly. “He found the way things endure. Not within himself—not in a body without end or days without sunset. But outside himself: in the walls that sheltered, in the waters that flowed, in the children who laughed again, in the story he left behind. That is immortality: to build something that remains when you are gone.”

“And Enkidu?” whispered the smallest child.

“Enkidu lived on in every good deed Gilgamesh did,” the grandfather said. “In every field irrigated, in every child protected, in every word written in clay. Death takes bodies, children. Love makes them live on.”

The fire crackled, and the old man lifted his eyes to the stars. “That is what Gilgamesh learned at last. That is why his story reached us, across rivers, deserts, and ages. And that is why I tell it to you tonight. For your bricks, too, must be laid.”

The flames bent low, as if bowing to the silence.

Chapter 8 — The Tablets and the Lesson

The fire had sunk low, its glow turning the courtyard walls a gentle red. The children huddled closer, their eyes wide with the weight of all they had heard. The grandfather's voice, steady and slow, carried the story onward.

"Gilgamesh had returned to Uruk, not as he left it, but as a man changed. He had lost the plant of life, but he had gained something greater: the wisdom to see what truly endures. And with that wisdom came a decision.

He called his scribes and craftsmen. 'Bring me clay,' he said. 'Bring me reeds to carve upon it. Let nothing of my journey be lost.'

And so they gathered lumps of wet clay, still smelling of the river. The scribes pressed them flat into tablets and sharpened reeds into styluses. Gilgamesh sat among them, not as a king upon a throne, but as a man among men, and told his tale.

'Write,' he commanded. 'Write of the walls of Uruk, broad and high. Write of the king who was two-thirds god and one-third man. Write of my pride and my strength. Write of Enkidu, the wild man who became my brother. Write of our battles, of Humbaba in the cedar forest, of the Bull of Heaven. Write of Enkidu's death, and of my grief that drove me into the wilderness. Write of my journey through darkness, of Siduri's counsel, of Urshanabi's boat, of Utnapišhtim and the Great Flood. Write of the plant I grasped and the serpent that stole it. Write of my return, empty-handed yet not empty-hearted. Leave nothing untold, for even my failures are lessons.'

The scribes pressed the signs into clay, each stroke a memory, each line a heartbeat. They wrote not only of triumphs but of tears, not only of victories but of losses. And when the tablets dried in the sun, hardened like stone, Gilgamesh looked upon them and said, 'Now my life will endure, even when my breath does not.'

The grandfather paused, looking into the children's faces. "And that, little ones, is why we still speak his name. Not because he found immortality in his flesh, but because he wrote his story in clay. Empires crumbled, temples fell, kings were forgotten—but the tablets endured. And on them, his voice still speaks."

He leaned closer to the fire, his eyes shining like embers. "Do you see, children? We may not live forever. But we can leave something that outlives us: words, deeds, love, memory. That is why I tell you this tale tonight. Gilgamesh wrote his on clay. I write mine in your hearts."

The children sat silent, the firelight dancing across their faces. One asked softly, "Grandfather… what if our stories are too small? What if no one remembers?"

The old man smiled gently, the wrinkles at his eyes deep as riverbeds. “No story is too small. The gods themselves granted eternity to Utnapišhtim because he preserved the seeds of life. What are seeds but small things? A loaf of bread shared is a seed. A kind word is a seed. A story told is a seed. And seeds endure in ways we cannot measure.”

He tapped his finger against the ground. “This very night, you carry a seed from me. One day, when you are grown and I am gone, you may sit by another fire and tell this story. Then my voice will still live, not in my body, but in yours. That is how men defeat death—not by plants or treasures, but by memory, by teaching, by love that crosses time.”

The grandfather leaned back, his voice fading into the rhythm of the crackling wood. “So Gilgamesh carved his journey into clay. And the clay carried it across centuries, across empires, across deserts. And tonight, it reaches you. The circle is not broken. It never will be.”

The flames whispered softly, and the night seemed to hold its breath.

Epilogue — The Fire Burns On

The fire in the courtyard had burned down to coals, glowing red like the heart of the earth. The children leaned against one another, their eyelids heavy, but their ears still open. The grandfather's voice was softer now, as though it spoke not only to them but to the night itself.

"And so, my little ones, the tale of Gilgamesh ends. He did not find the immortality he sought in the seas or in the hands of the gods. He did not keep the plant of life. What he gained was something humbler, but also greater. He learned that a man lives on in what he builds, in what he gives, in what he leaves for others.

He left his walls, his city, and his words carved in clay. And we, thousands of years later, still hear them. That is his immortality."

The children were quiet, their faces lit by the last glow of the fire. One asked in a whisper, "But Grandfather… what does that mean for us? We are not kings. We cannot build walls that touch the sky."

The old man smiled, his wrinkles deep as the desert's lines. "You do not need to build walls of stone. Build walls of kindness. Build walls of courage. Build walls of memory. A single loaf of bread shared with a hungry hand is a brick. A word of truth spoken when all others are silent is a brick. A story told, carried forward, is a brick. Each of you can leave a wall behind that shelters someone after you are gone."

He lifted his eyes to the stars. "Our land has known empires, war, hunger, and sorrow. We have seen houses fall and streets emptied. But still we light fires. Still we tell stories. That is our wall. That is how we endure."

He leaned down, his voice almost a whisper now. "Do you see why I told you the story of Gilgamesh? Because what he learned, you must also know: death comes for us all, but it cannot take what we leave in the hearts of others. That is a kind of eternity, as real as any god could give."

The smallest child yawned and laid her head on his lap. He stroked her hair gently.

"Remember, children," he said, "the fire burns on. Tonight it is mine. Tomorrow it may be yours. Carry it forward, so that even in the darkest night, there is light enough to tell a story, to warm a heart, to keep hope alive."

The coals crackled faintly, as though agreeing. Beyond the courtyard, the wind moved softly through the ruined streets, and the stars watched silently. The grandfather's eyes closed for a moment, but his voice, deep and steady, lingered in the air:

"Thus ends the story of Gilgamesh. And thus begins yours."