

The gods of the land between the rivers, whose homes were the temples at the heart of every city, were present in nearly every aspect of daily life. The gods were in the sun and the moon; they lived among people, in the cities, and in the high heavens; they caused the Tigris and Euphrates to swell with their wrath. People were at the mercy of the gods' whims and powers, but they were not defenceless. Great kings learned to harness the waters, so that the gods of the soil and seeds could flourish, and the priests and worshippers placated them with copious sacrifices of meat, beer, and grain. There was a god behind every natural phenomenon and every human emotion and action, from love to war. There were gods in the rivers, the clay, and the sand. The sun, moon, and stars had their own gods. Spirits and demons, good and evil, lurked around every corner, in every garden, in every home. Some gods were benign or indifferent; others were malicious or mischievous. None were entirely caring or compassionate, for their personalities matched the harsh realities of life on earth. Such was the world in which Abilulu lived. Like most practices in the Fertile Crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates—from social customs and language to lore and technology—religion in Abilulu's time was drawn from a complex mosaic of cultures: created, adapted, and recreated over thousands of years by continuous migrations and invasions from every corner of the known earth. In all, there were hundreds upon hundreds of different gods across the whole of Mesopotamia. Many of these were simply different manifestations or incarnations of the same god. The basic creation stories and characteristics of the gods had remained essentially unchanged since the ancient Akkadian and Sumerian dynasties, which were followed by a brief incursion by the savage Gutians, who lived in the Zagros Mountains. In Abilulu's time, during the reign of Hammurabi, the Amorite people had been cultivating a foothold in Central Mesopotamia for over two hundred years, ever since Hammurabi's forefathers had caused the downfall of the venerable Empire of Ur. Rather than imposing their language and customs, the Amorites, like every group before them, saw their own way of life absorbed into the very rhythms and disruptions of the sacred rivers. Accordingly, with each new dynasty, there came a new story. With each of the great kings of old, like Gilgamesh, Sargon, Gudea, and Ishme-Dagan, civilization at the heart of the Fertile Crescent was reborn. Much of Babylon's rise in recent years was due to a mutual oath between Shamsi-Adad of Assyria and Hammurabi. Reviving the old friendship between Babylon and Assyria proved to be auspicious for both empires. Shamsi-Adad's increased might served as a distraction and deterrent to other ambitious rulers like Ibbi-Sin; this in turn gave Hammurabi time to shore up his inheritance by building or repairing city walls, irrigation and drainage systems, roads, and temples. He also expanded his borders and proved his military capabilities by capturing Isin and smaller cities within the immediate vicinity of Babylon. Hammurabi used diplomacy and shrewd subterfuge to delay an inevitable clash with his other neighbors, namely the powerful Rim-Sin of Larsa. The treaty with Shamsli-Adad was short-lived, however, because the Assyrian king was killed in battle soon after. The resulting void allowed a young king named Zimri-Lin to return to Mari, from which he had fled after the murder of his father. Zimri-Lin easily reclaimed the kingdom of Mari after Shamsli-Adad's death, but the bulk of the Assyrian Empire, with its focal point at Shubat-Enlil, remained in disarray. Early success and masterful diplomacy enabled Zimri-Lin to consolidate his power and assert authority east across old Assyria. It was at Shubat-Enlil that Zimri-Lin proved he was a patient, capable leader when he aligned with Babylon and

Elam to drive Ibal-pi-EI out of Assyria. Alas, it seemed that Shubat-Enlil was not ready to be anyone's vassal, and rebellion soon erupted along the upper Tigris. The kingdoms of Eshnunna and Elam both decided that renewed chaos in old Assyria meant that all of upper Mesopotamia was theirs for the taking. They quickly sent their most trusted viziers, spies, and assassins in order to secure the loyalty or impotence of the lesser kings, thus sowing the first seeds of disorder. Even as Hannad and Abilulu were setting up their shop that morning, the allied armies of Eshnunna and Elam were secretly preparing to march up the Tigris to retake Nineveh and rebellious Shubat-Enlil, from which they planned to assault the heart of Zimri-Lin's kingdom and work their way downriver to Babylon. This was late in the twenty-eighth year of Hammurabi's reign, and the king of Babylon continued to bide his time, even as the gods of war exchanged blows on his northern borders. There was no need to rush to arms as long as his enemies were willing to batter one another. This was harvest time: the days were long, and at night, the moon shone full and clear. Soon the temple and palace granaries would overflow, and the canals and caravan roads leading to and from Babylon would be clogged with the riches of the world. Hannad, the stone trader, had noticed this trend towards Babylon, and he wanted to get a share of the profits.

Several months had passed since the trip to Jalula, and it was almost time for Hannad and Abilulu to make their second trip of the year. Lately, however, Hannad had expressed great frustration at the fact that they still had not been able to sell much of the fine lapis they had purchased in the spring. "Prices are just too low," Hannad complained one day as he and Abilulu opened their shop in Eshnunna's marketplace. "People come to Eshnunna expecting to pay less than I do after walking all the way to Jalula! When I was just starting out, I could take a batch of stones, sell them directly to the king's seal-cutter or jewelers, and triple my money. Back then, I could name my own price! Now, I do not know if we will have enough to justify another trip to Jalula." Hannad spat out an olive stone and sneered. "Now this city is crawling with stone traders trying to say that they all have 'the best lapis, better than Hannad.' Look, our streets are empty. Our king is sending his army and priests off to war, and who will buy from us now?" Hannad nodded toward a couple of merchants, a well-clad man and woman, who were haggling with the owner of the shop next door. "You see those two? You know who they are?" Hannad continued, "You know what they are doing?" Abilulu was only half-listening as he went about the task of sorting the sacks of lapis, separating the pieces by size and quality. "What are they doing, Father?" "They are forcing him to sell to them at a lower price, and they will do the same to me. Then they will take these stones to the boats that are waiting on the canal and take them first to the Tigris, and then to Babylon. There, they will be able to name their price." "Yes." "Have you ever been to Babylon?" "Once or twice, but not for many years...when I was your age, Babylon was just another city somewhere downriver from mighty Eshnunna. Now the situation has changed." "I do not understand," Abilulu said, interrupting Hannad's stream of thought. A month earlier, Hannad would have scolded or even smacked his adoptive son, but since their last trip to Jalula, and especially since Hannad had shared his knowledge of the evildoings at the local Shalassal temple, their relationship had changed somewhat. Abilulu still worked like a slave; at least he felt that way when he lay down to sleep at night. However, a few days before, Hannad had spontaneously tossed him a quarter-shekel of silver and said, "This is your share of the profits so far this year." Abilulu knew that it was a token share, but it was a lot of

money to him; that piece of silver signaled a new beginning. "Do you not understand," Hannad grumbled, then chuckled, "let me rephrase that: what do you understand?" "In Jalula, you told your friend Mazin that Eshnunna would soon have a rebellion, and that Ibal-pi-El would rise above Haitlinurabi and all other kings." "Ha! Mazin is my friend, but he is also an Elamite, and he travels back and forth across Elam with whatever rumors I give to him," Hannad said, nodding his head. "I tell him that Eshnunna is strong because that is all he or any Elamite needs to hear. Indeed, Eshnunna is strong, and I pray that Tishpak will assert his will and end this war." "Isn't our king allied with the Elamites?" "Right and wrong," Hannad raised his finger, a sign to Abilulu that some great morsel of wisdom was coming. "Treaties between kings are only as strong as the next opportunity that comes floating down the river.

One day, two kings sign a treaty; the next day, they break it and sign treaties with one another's enemies, and soon there are nothing but enemies." With this, Hannad retrieved his stylus and began making marks on his ledger. "See how you have distracted me?" he griped and spat an olive pit at Abilulu. Just then, the two merchants whose presence had spawned this whole conversation were standing in the doorway. The woman wore a robe the color of bright turquoise and a red band of soft leather around her head. The man also wore colorful, heavy robes and a turban. "Your neighbor tells me that you are the man to see about lapis," the woman greeted Hannad. "I am Tibah from Kish, and this is my brother, Agga." "Kish? Right next to Babylon?" "Of course." Hannad clapped his hands together, a signal for Abilulu to fetch the beer and reed straws. Beer had been the beverage of choice in Mesopotamia since before the days of the Sumerian Empire. In a land of such abundant grain, it was only natural that the people would experiment (and quickly master) the sciences of fermentation and brewing. Hannad allowed Abilulu just one-half si'a of beer per day, whereas Hannad often allowed himself a daily ration of three si'a. Hannad's wife made beer for her husband to drink and to use as barter with neighbors and merchants; Abilulu's mother had done the same, according to ancient methods and recipes. Abilulu brought forth a large jug of beer and three drinking reeds. One had to learn not to lower the reed too far into the jug in order to avoid the bitter residue that had collected in the cloudy, unfiltered brew. Tibah took only a small taste of the beer but watched as her brother helped himself.

After a few sips, the trader Agga belched and shook his head. "Forgive me if I am rude, but I am accustomed to the more full-bodied barley beers available in Babylon." "Oh," Hannad sighed. "Well, we have fine barley beer here in Eshnunna. Abilulu!" "Yes, Father." "Fetch the barley brew!" "No, really, this beer is fine," said Tibah. "Are you sure?" Hannad asked. "Perhaps you would like some wine or some cool water?" Tibah declined Hannad's offer once more and then looked around the shop. "So, what about this fine lapis lazuli?" "Oh yes, yes...very high quality, very nice. Please, have a look." "Very nice indeed," Tibah said. She tossed a piece of lapis to her brother, who inspected it briefly but gave no sign of approval or disapproval. "My brother and I will pay you one ma'ani and ten shekels for every half-maru of your best lapis," Tibah proclaimed. "Agreed?" "Excuse me?" Hannad inquired, raising his eyebrows. Abilulu eyed the woman with suspicion. "My friends, why are we so eager to talk numbers?" Hannad continued. "You might as well relax if you are going to be purchasing my entire stock." "Is everything alright?" Tibah asked, noticing a few beads of sweat forming on Hannad's brow. "Are you unaccustomed to doing business with a woman?" With this question, Hannad seemed to regain his

composure. He smiled, "Unaccustomed? Perhaps, but by no means unversed." "Very well," Tibah continued. "One-and-one-half ma'ani of silver, three fin of good beer, and another two shekels for your assistant. That is our final offer," said Tibah. With that, her brother Agga placed six thin bars of silver on the floor at Hannad's feet. Each bar was engraved with the seal of a lion. Hannad was actually speechless. Abilulu bit his knuckle in order to contain his laughter, for this offer was many times what they had expected to gain on a good day in Eslninna's market. It represented a tenfold return on Hannad's investment. Hannad pretended to think about the offer for a few moments and then nodded to Abilulu, who in short order retrieved three hefty sacks of lapis, each weighing ten mina. "I regret that I do not have more to offer you... at this time." Tibalt was busy writing a record of the transaction on a clay tablet. "Do you have a witness?" she asked Hannad. "A witness to what?" "We must formalize our deal, brother Hannad. Perhaps your customs are not as strict as ours are in Babylonia. I assure you, however, that our patron will require a legitimate, sealed receipt for this purchase." "Of course." Abilulu was dispatched to find someone to serve as a reliable witness. Tibalt produced three copies of the receipt, and Hannad placed his seal on each tablet to verify that he had received payment for the lapis from Tibalt and Agga. When all of the records were sealed, Abilulu delivered the tablets to a nearby kiln to be baked. The custom of sealing such business records or contracts had been common practice for hundreds of years, but Hannad had seldom gone to such trouble in his day-to-day dealings. For the kinds of profit he was receiving, however, he would have gladly rolled his cylinder seal across a thousand tablets. That evening, as Hannad and Abilulu walked to a local tavern to dine with their new clients, Hannad gave Abilulu a playful nudge in the ribs. "I suppose I do not know everything there is to know about the world, after all." Abilulu laughed heartily, for he knew that Hannad was referring to his earlier, wholly inaccurate speculation that the Babylonians had come to drive down prices. That evening, Agga and Hannad drank beer and played a couple of rousing games of senet, while Tibalt tried, mostly in vain, to describe the wonders of Babylon to Abilulu. Talking to her, Abilulu began to realize just how limited and crude his understanding of the world was. She and her brother were so refined, so well-spoken and learned that at times Abilulu sensed some air of divinity in their actions. "Yes, the lapis is indeed bound directly for the kingdom of Hammurabi," she explained, "where it will be inlaid, alongside countless other precious items, into the décor of a magnificent new temple to Ishtar, in our city of Kish."

"Your investor is contributing all this stone to the temple," Hannad sneered. "He must have really angered the gods." "On the contrary, our mistress is beholden to no one," replied Tibah, "and she graces the house of Hainmurabi, son of Sin-Muballit, who brings the rule of righteousness to the land." Abilulu's heart raced; Hannad's face grew pale and he slumped a little in his seat. "Please, brothers," Hannad whispered. "Remember that you are not in your home city." "I do not fear the retribution of your king or Tishpak, for I am the property of the Ishtar temple," Tibah said calmly, rolling up her sleeve to reveal the seal of a lion, the cult-animal of the Babylonian goddess of love and war, branded into her forearm.

The other patrons in the tavern were only pretending not to listen to this audacious Babylonian, but Tibah was the only one speaking. She addressed the whole tavern as she continued, "I mean no offense to Eslanunnans. We should all embrace knowing that Marduk is Bel, lord of heaven and earth." Agga stood, wiped his beard, and clutched his belly. "Now, my sister Tibah, we must retire for the evening."

This northern beer has really upset my stomach." "We will meet you at the docks tomorrow, where you will receive the rest of your goods. And for you, as promised," Tibah said to Abilulu, dropping two thin silver slickels into his hand. This was the most money that had ever fallen into Abilulu's possession. In the presence of these "well-heeded" slaves, one began to understand the strength and wealth associated with the estate of a deity. A temple was the home of a god, as well as the place where priests and worshippers made offerings and performed ceremonies. Beyond everyday ritual, however, temples were also receptacles of wealth and measure. While the priests and priestesses were not allowed to use the wealth for their own gain, they were responsible for overseeing the upkeep and accounting of the god's estates and possessions. Thus, a temple became a sort of city in and of itself, for it needed a hierarchy with administrators, skilled craftsmen, merchants, and slaves in order to function. Abilulu had had little direct contact with temple life at that time. As an ordinary individual in Eshnunna, he amended certain ceremonies and festivals, but regular rituals were left to priests and priestesses; royalty and other noteworthy persons made offerings to the gods on the people's behalf. The temple was always visible, but seldom did Abilulu have reason or time to set foot on its grounds. His daily life was too busy. However, now at least he could contrast the likes of Zamaranum, that vile, corrupt official, who seemed to operate according to his own laws, with upright, honest priests like Tibah and Agga, who exuded principle and discipline and who honored their god and king with every breath. There was plenty of room for corruption whenever an individual was given responsibility and authority, but that did not mean that all officials and representatives of the temple or palace were necessarily corrupt. The next day, Abilulu and Hannad met the slaves of Ishtar down at the canal, where twenty or more boats were moored along the docks, piled high with all the wares and produce of Eshnunna. "The Ishtar temple seems to have plenty of grain to spare," Hannad said to Abilulu as they watched the boats depart. "Yes, it does, Father, and Tibah told me that it is but one temple of dozens that Hammurabi is constructing as we speak."