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World Mythology

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### Forest of the Gods

It always surprised Gilgamesh just how massive asteroids were up close. This particular one, Ishtar-12a was so large that even at a few hundred kilometers away, he could only see all of it by looking at the scanners. He gripped the back of Enkidu's jumpseat and leaned forward, steadying himself against the nauseating artificial gravity.

"Alright, E, bring it in slow. We don't want to burn too bright, just in case," he said, grinning. Nothing happened. Gil turned to Enki. He was calm, breathing like someone deep in sleep, but he didn't move. "Babe," Gil said. "It's the one labeled 'thrust.'"

"We shouldn't be here, Gil."

"All the more reason to get this over with."

"Let's just go back to the *Uruk*."

Gil raised his brow. "That's, uh, in the wrong direction, though."

"I'm serious," Enki turned. "We don't know what we're up against. There's only two of us."

"It's a little late for that, E, don't you think?"

"I mentioned it *before* we left, but you didn't listen."

"I thought you were just being—"

“I’m sorry, being what?” Enki snapped.

“Nothing, just... Look, I have to do this.”

“No, Gil, you don’t.”

“So, what, just go back empty handed?”

Enki pulled Gil’s face down to his and kissed him. “Yes.”

Gil gritted his teeth and pulled away. “If we get down there and you want to leave me to my own devices, I guess that’s your choice. But I would never do that to you.”

It was quiet for a long time as Gil refused to meet Enki’s gaze. Finally, he reached over to the thrusters and sat down in his jumpseat to buckle in for the slow approach to Ishtar-12a.

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The facility inside Ishtar-12a was in such a state of disrepair that Gil couldn’t initially distinguish between the floor and ceiling. It had been patched and repurposed with so many different scraps of starship and drone that any surface could have served as any other. Detritus hung suspended in the mist as the two men pushed off the walls to drift down the corridor like smoke.

Gil fingered the trigger of his shock harpoon and swiveled his head in a vain attempt to loosen the collar of his EVA suit. Enki had pulled it tight when he’d been assisting Gil with his suit. He channeled the knotting in his stomach into irritation and shone his lamp down the hall. He turned back to Enki. “Any update on the fog?”

Enki studied the datapad on his suit’s forearm. “Dioxyzine vapor. We’ll need to decontaminate when we get back to the pod.”

“Dioxyzine... Gravity generator?”

“Once upon a time. Though clearly it isn’t functioning at the moment. Probably a meltdown if the vapor is anything to go by.”

“Will it fuck with the Shamash if we have to use it?”

“It shouldn’t.”

“Silverling, I guess,” Gil said. “You brought it, right?”

“Gil,” Enki snapped.

“What?” Gil turned, ready for a fight. Enki shone his lamp on a section of the wall and pried up a loose piece of sheet metal. Gil drifted over to Enki to study the lettering he’d revealed.

CEDAR FOREST GROUP: R&D DEPT.

Gil grinned wide and looked up to see Enki doing the same despite himself. “Well, that’s 20 creds, babe.”

“Fifteen, *babe*,” Enki said with a chuckle. “But this doesn’t prove anything.”

“It proves I was right,” Gil said, pushing off down the hall again.

“About one part,” Enki buzzed over the comms.

“A very large part.”

“A very small part,” Enki chuckled. “Talk to me once you find the core—”

A screeching static blared over the comms, strobing Enki’s voice and drilling deep into Gil’s head. He stupidly tried to cover his ears but only succeeded in slapping his gloved hands against the sides of his helmet. He fumbled at the switch on his wrist and managed to shut off his comms. The sudden silence of the interior of the helmet reflected back a high pitched whining and Gil flexed his jaw a few times to pop his ears. Turning, Gil saw blood trickling from his nose

in the reflection of Enki's light in his visor. He sniffed, and found glanced at Enki, whose nose was bleeding profusely.

Enki drifted over to him and pressed his visor to Gil's. When he spoke, his voice sounded like it was coming from another room. "What the hell was that?"

"Some kind of interference?"

"No shit, but that was a direct channel."

"Radiation?"

Enki pulled away to check his datapad before pressing his helmet back to Gil's. "Normal levels."

Gil pushed off and shone his light down the salvage hallway again, his mind conjuring images of rushing things intent on doing violence. He tested his comms with a quick push. The screeching had stopped and Gil motioned for Enki to turn his back on. "It's probably nothing, come on. Let's get that fucking core and get out of here."

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Not ten minutes passed before the screech returned. This time they both clicked off their comms in a heartbeat—no longer startled into stupidity by the sound. They left them off as the continued.

The facility began to change as they pressed deeper into the belly of Ishtar-12a. The haphazard plating of scrap metal gradually faded away to reveal sections of wall that had been ripped away to reveal the bare rock underneath. Gil and Enki glanced at each other.

A stunted, measured voice like broken glass and static and smoke sent a bolt of terror down Gil's spine as the comms popped to life. "YOU... SHOULD NOT... HAVE COME HERE..."

Neither Gil nor Enki said a word.

"WE KNOW... YOU CAN HEAR... US..."

"Who," Gil began. Enki shook his head, but he cleared his throat and continued as nonchalantly as he could manage. "Who do I have the pleasure of speaking with?"

"YOU... MUST LEAVE... NOW..."

"Thank you for the input," Gil said. Enki held his finger up to try and shush Gil, but it was no use. "But we don't take orders from synthetics." Gil's heart felt like it was going to beat out of his chest.

"WE... ARE NOT... SYNTHETIC... GILGAMESH... WE ARE... THE PROTECTOR... OF THE CEDAR FOREST..."

"Gilgamesh? Never heard of him."

"GILGAMESH AND... ENKIDU... IF YOU DO NOT LEAVE... YOU WILL BE... ASSIMILATED..."

Enki pulled the Shamash device out of his thich pocket and passed it to Gil, who fumbled with it for a moment. "Well, whatever you are," Gil said. "Don't get your panties analogue in a bunch. We'll be in and out in no time."

The line was silent.

"Gil," Enki snapped. "We need to fucking *leave*."

Gil bit his lip, but nonetheless turned back down the hall. Reflective eyes darted away around the far corner as the light of his lamp passed over them. Whatever they'd belonged to, it moved with the deliberate intention of a creature with bulk. The speed, though, was too fast. Freakish.

Gil tightened his grip on the harpoon. It had gotten so close. He shivered.

“Is that you, protector whatever-the-shit?” Not even Gil was convinced by his bluster. He was overcome with the feeling that he had made a grave error in coming here.

“Gil,” Enki snapped. “For fuck’s sake, let’s *go*.”

“Y-you afraid of the light there, friend?”

The eyes peaked around the corner but were too far away to gather much from them. “DO YOU KNOW... WHAT THIS... PLACE IS...?”

“No, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me—” Gil lurched to the side as Enki tugged at his arm.

“DO YOU KNOW... WHAT THEY DID... TO US...?”

“Gil, please—”

The thing flowed around the corner like water from a broken dam. It was too quick to gauge much of anything about it, but Gil was struck by an impression of human features set atop something vaguely insectoid and oceanic. It moved with a speed unnatural to something of its size and Gil fired the harpoon reflexively, sinking the impotent bolt into the wall. He fumbled for another from the stock of the rifle and managed to get the end loaded before the porcelain skin of the childish face stretched—*widened*.

A mouth like a ridged tube sock engulfed his vision as the creature latched onto Gil’s helmet. The vibraglass visor spiderwebbed immediately as he stared down the thing’s undulating gullet.

“Gil, the Shama—” Gil felt the creature shift and Enki screamed over the comms. He pressed the primer on the Shamash device and slapped it into the soft flesh of the thing trying to

eat him. It began to flail, whipping him around by his head as electricity coursed through it. His neck strained too far and the world winked out.

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Gil awoke as his body bounced off the wall. The mouth was still latched onto his visor, but where once there was only the wet inner flesh of the thing's throat, he could see the hallway through the hole in its neck. He pulled the remains of the head from his helmet and quickly used the metallic utility tape on his belt to patch the crack in the vibraglass. His stomach turned as he shone his lamp around the corridor. Gore and viscera covered nearly every surface, and much of the larger pieces rebounded off the walls like ping pong balls.

Enki drifted down the hall, both legs and an arm bent in unnatural angles that made Gil's skin crawl. He rushed over, trying the comms. No response. Enki's eyes were closed and Gil gingerly lifted his wrist to inspect the vitals on his datapad. Blood pressure was low, but stable. He was alive. The sheer amount of relief he felt squeezed tears out of Gil's eyes. "Jesus Christ, Enki... Jesus, I'm so sorry... You were right..."

Something covered in the steaming remains of the creature caught his eye as it passed and he watched as it bounced off the wall and came back. He reached out and grabbed it—a lightly glowing metal box. It was hot to the touch even through the insulated glove, and it was only a matter of seconds before the gore had all burned away. Gil reoriented it and read the embossed lettering.

HUMBABA-5 REACTOR CORE.

“Enki!” Gil yelled. “Enki, wake up! We—” his voice caught and he pressed his visor to Enki’s. “We got it.”

Enki’s eyes fluttered open, morphine glaze dulling them. “We... we got it?”

“It was powering that thing—the protector.” Gil ran his gloved hand along Enki’s helmet, wanting nothing more than to stroke his dark curls.

“Well, shit,” Enki slurred. “I guess that’s fifteen credits.”

Gil chuckled. “Given the circumstances, I think we’re square.”