

MYTH
a story from the
ancient world

Drama



THE DOOMED QUEST

A famous king wants to live forever . . . and it might just kill him.

BY SPENCER KAYDEN
BASED ON THE MYTH OF GILGAMESH
ART BY ALLAN DAVEY

Characters

Circle the character you will play.

*Starred characters are major roles.

*Narrators 1 and 2 (N1, N2)

*Gilgamesh, a powerful king

Elders 1 and 2

Anisa, a 14-year-old girl

Amar, Anisa's younger brother

Servant

Enkidu, the king's best friend

Scorpion 1 and Scorpion 2, giant scorpions

Boatman

Distant One, a man who became immortal

Citizens 1 and 2

Go to Scope Online to hear how to pronounce these names.

As You Read

Think about why Gilgamesh wants to live forever.

SCENE 1

The City of Uruk

N1: Our tale begins in Uruk, a magnificent city famous for its lush gardens, ornate temples, and bustling marketplace. The city is protected by a massive wall.

N2: An immense stone staircase leads to a grand palace. Inside, King Gilgamesh sits on his throne, his chest as broad and solid as a tree trunk.

N1: Two Elders kneel at his feet.

Gilgamesh: Enkidu is deathly ill and you can do nothing? Unacceptable!

Elder 1: We have tried every remedy.

Gilgamesh: Try harder!

Elder 2: His illness is a mystery.

Gilgamesh: Enkidu is like a brother to me. We built this city together. Heal him or incur my wrath!

Elder 1: Yes, sire.

N2: The Elders scurry off past a line of citizens waiting to see the king.

N1: Two siblings nervously approach the king and kneel.

Anisa: I am Anisa. This is my brother Amar.

Gilgamesh: Why have you come?

Anisa: Our father went on a hunt when the moon was full. Now the moon is a crescent, and he has not returned.

Amar: We are running out of food.

Gilgamesh: Where is your mother?

Anisa: After a long sickness, she was taken by the gods.

Gilgamesh: And now you are alone?

Amar: Our neighbors have been kind, but they don't have much to share.

N2: The king holds out a handful of silver coins.

Gilgamesh: Take these.

Anisa: Thank you, benevolent king!

N1: A servant rushes in.

Servant: Sire, Enkidu is calling for you.

N2: Gilgamesh hurries down a long corridor to Enkidu's chamber.

N1: Enkidu reclines on a pile of pillows, his cheeks hollow and his eyes sunken.

Gilgamesh: What is it, dearest friend?

Enkidu: I fear this is the end of me.

Gilgamesh: No. Enkidu, no!

Enkidu: The gods call me home.

N2: Enkidu takes one last breath and dies.

N1: The king collapses over his friend's body.

SCENE 2

A forest

N2: The scene changes to a dense forest.

N1: Thud!

N2: Crash!

N1: Gilgamesh is swinging his ax at everything in sight—trees, bushes, rocks.

Gilgamesh: Aaaaaaah! Take that! And that!

N2: Leaves crunch as the Elders approach cautiously.

N1: The king stops.

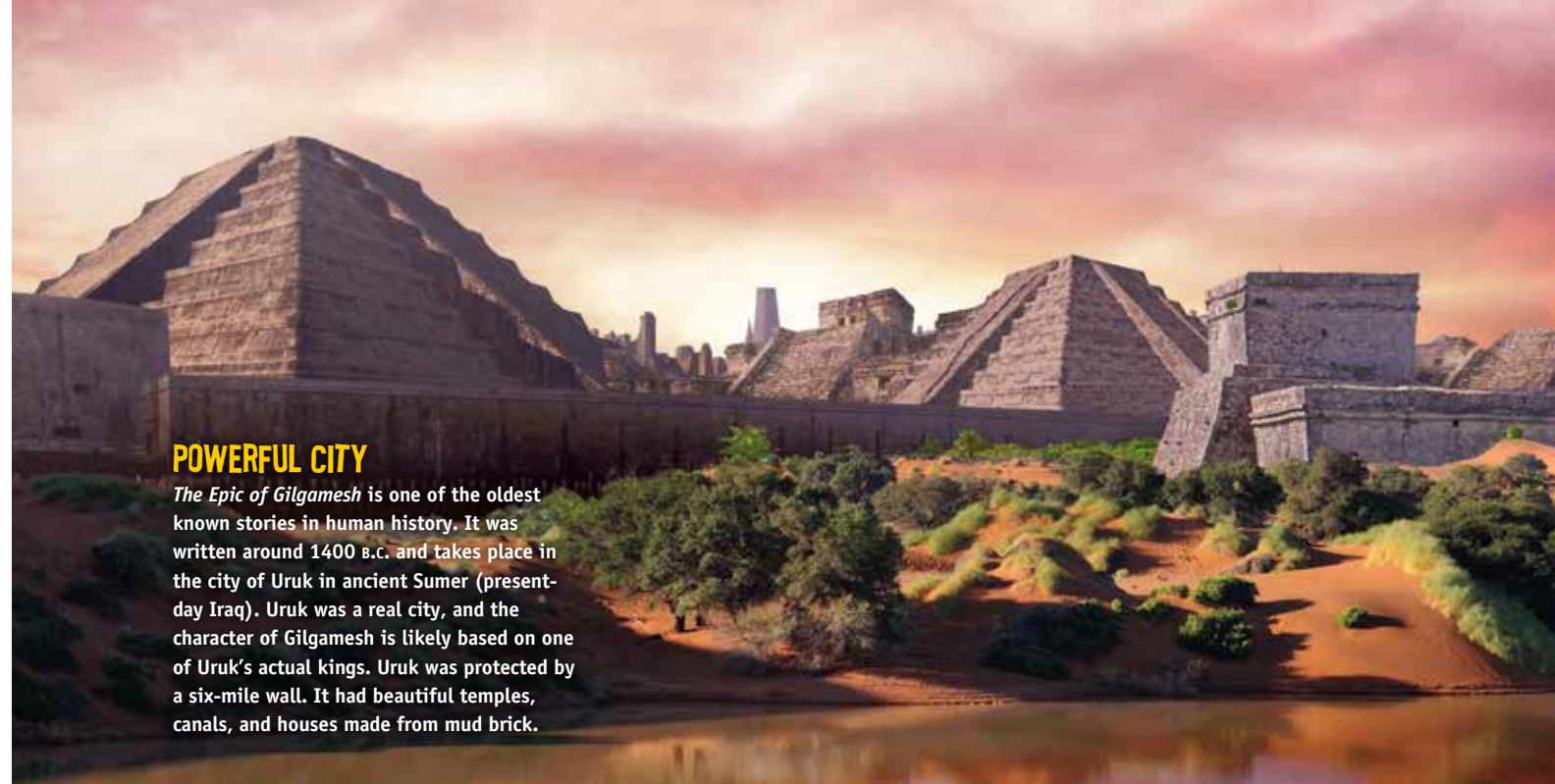
Gilgamesh (out of breath): I have tried howling with rage. I have tried silence and contemplation. Nothing eases my sorrow.

Elder 2: In time, the pain of Enkidu's death will lessen.

Gilgamesh: Everywhere I turn, I see death. How can I go on living knowing that at any moment, I too could die?

Elder 1: Death is something we all must accept.

Gilgamesh: I don't want to accept death. I want to overcome it!



POWERFUL CITY

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the oldest known stories in human history. It was written around 1400 B.C. and takes place in the city of Uruk in ancient Sumer (present-day Iraq). Uruk was a real city, and the character of Gilgamesh is likely based on one of Uruk's actual kings. Uruk was protected by a six-mile wall. It had beautiful temples, canals, and houses made from mud brick.

Elder 2: It is not possible.

Gilgamesh: No? There is a man called the Distant One who became immortal. I will find him and ask him to share his secret.

Elder 1: My king, the Distant One lives on the Farthest Shore, beyond the edge of the ocean.

Elder 2: No human has ever traveled there.

Gilgamesh: Then I will be the first.

Elder 1: But do you not have a responsibility here in Uruk—to your people?

Gilgamesh: If I am immortal, I will be able to serve them far better.

SCENE 3

The Great Mountains

N2: Gilgamesh journeys thousands of miles until he arrives at the Great Mountains.

N1: The king's eyes travel up and up and up.

Gilgamesh: The peaks of these mountains touch the sky. No man could climb them.

N2: He notices a dark tunnel cut through the mountains.

N1: Suddenly, two monstrous scorpions appear.

N2: Each is 10 feet tall with eight spindly legs, a pair of jagged pincers, and a curved tail full of venom.

Scorpion 1: Who dares come here?

Gilgamesh: I am Gilgamesh, king of Uruk. I am on a quest to find the Distant One.

Scorpion 2: You may not pass through the tunnel.

Gilgamesh: Why not?

Scorpion 1: At the end of every day, the sun passes through this tunnel. Anything inside the tunnel gets burned to a crisp.

Gilgamesh: So I will run.

Scorpion 2: The tunnel is hundreds of miles long. You will have only 12 hours to make it to the other side.

Gilgamesh: Nothing you say can stop me.

N1: The scorpions watch as Gilgamesh steps into the tunnel.

Scorpion 1: Foolish king.

Scorpion 2: He will never make it.

N2: In the pitch-black tunnel, the only sounds are the king's footfalls and ragged breath.

N1: Hours pass. Gilgamesh presses on.

N2: Sweat drips down his face.

N1: Suddenly, a bright red light appears in the distance.

Gilgamesh (panting): The sun is coming!

N2: He runs faster, his muscles straining.

N1: The king stumbles from the tunnel and



collapses just as the sun shoots in.

Gilgamesh: Thank you, gods, for giving me such strength.

N2: Suddenly, Gilgamesh hears a familiar voice.

Enkidu: My brother.

Gilgamesh: Enkidu?

Enkidu: Yes, it is I.

Gilgamesh: Why is your spirit appearing to me?

Enkidu: To ask you a question. My friend, why are you on this quest?

Gilgamesh: Because I never understood how short life is. We are given so few years.

Enkidu: Perhaps years are not the correct measure of a life.

Gilgamesh: I do not understand.

Enkidu: Gilgamesh, you are a king. Go home. Take pride in your beautiful city. Dance to the lively music that plays at your command. Revel in the sweet taste of honey. Enjoy your life.

Gilgamesh: I enjoy nothing since you died.

SCENE 4

The Edge of the Ocean

N1: Gilgamesh continues his journey until he finds himself at the edge of the ocean.

N2: He sees a boatman standing at the shore.

Boatman: What business do you have here?

Gilgamesh: I seek immortality.

Boatman: Only the gods can grant that.

Gilgamesh: The Distant One can tell me how to become worthy.

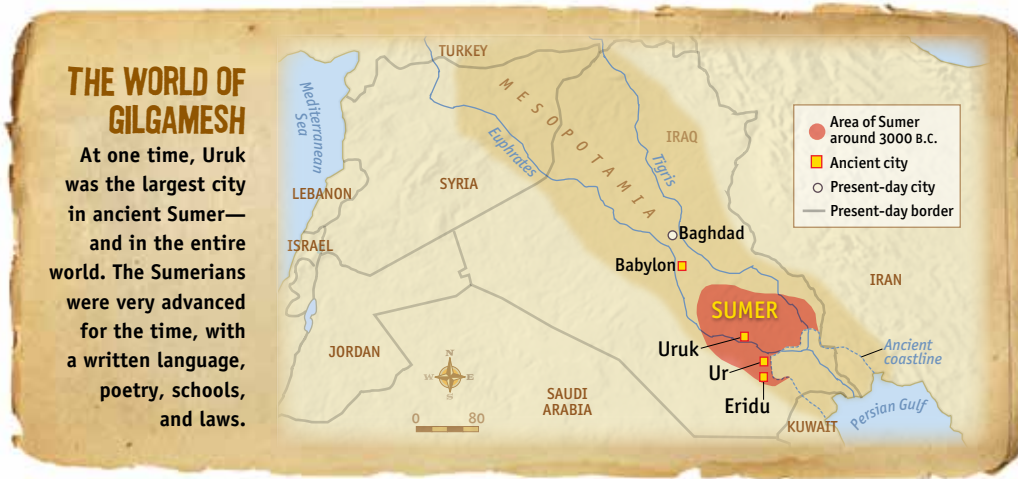
Boatman: There is nothing to tell. You are either worthy or you are not.

Gilgamesh: Just row me across the waters.

Boatman: I cannot. Taking you to the Farthest Shore means crossing the Waters of Death. If even one drop of that water touches your skin, you will die instantly.

N1: The king thinks for a moment.

Gilgamesh: I have an idea.



N2: Gilgamesh goes off to the forest with his ax.

N1: The sound of chopping trees echoes to the shore.

N2: He returns with an enormous stack of poles, each 100 feet long, and places them in the boat.

Gilgamesh: I am ready.

N1: The two men get into the boat.

N2: After a while, a thick fog rolls in.

JIM McMAHON/MAPMAN® (MAP)
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Boatman: We are approaching the Waters of Death. Remember, do not touch the water.

Gilgamesh: Hand me the first pole.

N1: Careful not to make even the slightest splash, Gilgamesh lowers the long pole into the water.

N2: He lodges the pole in the riverbed and uses it to propel the boat forward. Then he lets go.

Gilgamesh: Hand me the next pole.

N1: Three hundred times they do this, until they reach the Farthest Shore.

Gilgamesh: Thank you, gods, for giving me such resourcefulness.

SCENE 5

The Farthest Shore

N2: The boat glides up to the Farthest Shore. The Distant One stands waiting.

N1: His hands are **gnarled**.

N2: His white beard trails past his knees.

ACROSS THE WATERS OF DEATH

Gilgamesh is willing to risk his life for the chance to live forever—even daring to cross the Waters of Death. The tale of Gilgamesh is one of the earliest known stories about the search for immortality. *Does the story present the idea of living forever in a positive or a negative way?*



Distant One: What stranger is this?

Boatman: This is King Gilgamesh. He is on a quest to conquer death.

Distant One: Death comes for all. This is what it means to be human.

Gilgamesh: What would it take for the gods to grant me immortality?

Distant One: The gods gave you a throne. Is that not enough?

Gilgamesh: What good is a throne if I am to die? I want a life like yours.

Distant One: My life is relentless. Everyone I care about eventually dies, and yet I remain.

N1: Coldness settles into the Distant One's eyes.

Distant One: You have abandoned your kingdom for this foolish quest?

Gilgamesh: What of it? Surely my people can manage without me for a while.

SCENE 6

The City of Uruk

N2: Amar and Anisa wander the city looking for food.

N1: Evidence of a recent battle can be seen everywhere.

N2: Buildings have crumbled and small fires smolder.

Amar: Father is not coming back, is he?

Anisa: No, little brother. Any hope I had has faded.

N1: Amar points to a statue that has been knocked over.

Amar: Will we end up broken like that?

N2: Just then, Anisa and Amar hear shouting in the marketplace.

N1: They see a crowd of citizens clamoring for the Elders' attention.

Citizen 1: Without our king, the attacks on Uruk will continue.

Citizen 2: The neighboring kingdoms know we are vulnerable. We cannot fight them off forever.

Citizen 1: Even now, an army marches toward our city.
Elder 2: We are asking the gods for the king's return.
Citizen 2: The gods have abandoned us—just like our king!

SCENE 7

The Farthest Shore

Gilgamesh: I will not leave until you tell me how to overcome death.
Distant One (*sighing*): Here is what I can offer you . . .
N2: The Distant One plunges his staff into the sand.
N1: A pit appears, filled with water. The Distant One reaches into the water. After a few moments, he pulls out a small, spiny plant.
Distant One: Return to your kingdom, eat this plant, and you will never age.
Gilgamesh: Thank you.
Distant One: I hope you find peace, King Gilgamesh.
N2: The king begins his journey home. One afternoon, he stops in a forest to rest near a stream.
N1: He sets the plant on the ground and bends to take a drink.
N2: When he looks up, he sees a snake slithering away—
N1: —with the plant in its mouth!
Gilgamesh: No! Stop!
N2: Gilgamesh lunges for the snake as it slides under the dead leaves of the forest floor and disappears.
Gilgamesh: No! No! NO!
N1: Gilgamesh claws frantically at the leaves.
N2: The spirit of Enkidu appears.
Enkidu: My dear friend, why are you upset?
Gilgamesh: I have lost my chance for immortality. It . . . it was stolen from me.
Enkidu: You can crumble under the weight of your disappointment. Or you can release yourself from wanting something you can never have. Which will you choose?

SCENE 8

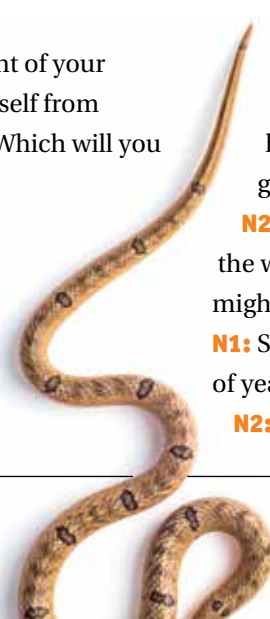
The City of Uruk

N1: It is a cold morning in Uruk. Citizens race around frantically.
N2: No one recognizes the **bedraggled**

man walking slowly through the streets. He appears strangely calm amid the **chaos**.
Gilgamesh (*looking up*): How beautiful this temple is, gleaming in the morning sun. I remember well the day I built it, how the children threw flowers on the steps and the sound of singing echoed through the city.
N1: He continues on, pausing to admire the gardens, the homes, the marketplace. It is as though he is seeing Uruk for the first time.
N2: In the town square, he finds a group of citizens preparing for battle.
Citizen 1: Can you hear the battle drums?
Elder 1: The army must be getting close.
Elder 2: We must get to the wall.
Amar: I am afraid.
Anisa: I am afraid too.
Gilgamesh: Do not be afraid, Amar and Anisa.
N1: All heads turn toward the king.
Amar: King . . . Gilgamesh?
Gilgamesh: I have come back to you.
Elder 1: Did you find what you were looking for?
Gilgamesh: I left Uruk seeking immortality. I found it, but not in the way I expected. I belong to this beautiful city—to her gardens and her temples and her people.
Elder 2: But you have been gone so long. Even now our enemies are preparing to destroy us.
Gilgamesh: Then let them know this: Uruk's king has returned, and I will stop at nothing to protect you. I will happily fight—and die—beside you, for this great city will live on long after I am gone.
All: All hail King Gilgamesh! All hail the king!

EPILOGUE

N2: King Gilgamesh saved the city of Uruk.
N1: In the coming years, Uruk flourished under his rule. He built many temples, planted many gardens, and started many schools.
N2: By the time he died, Uruk was the largest city in the world. Gilgamesh had become famous for his mighty deeds.
N1: Stories about him have been told for thousands of years.
N2: The name Gilgamesh has never been forgotten. ●



Informational Text

This Jellyfish Lives Forever

What if people did too? BY ELIZABETH OREN

In the play you just read, Gilgamesh is obsessed with living forever. And he isn't the only one: The search for immortality turns up in legend, folklore, and literature—from ancient mythology to Harry Potter. Today, the search for immortality isn't just happening in your favorite stories. In laboratories around the world, scientists are trying to find the secret to living forever (or at least, living for a *really* long time).

The Immortal Jellyfish

Many scientists are exploring how to prolong human life. They are researching ways to stop or “cure” aging, such as through new drugs or growing replacement body parts. They are also turning to nature, hoping to unlock the secret of the “immortal jellyfish.” This incredible creature doesn't seem to die. It ages, then grows young, then ages, then grows young again—on and on and on.

What if it were possible for humans to do the same thing? Just imagine it! Everyone could keep exploring and

learning and creating—forever. Want to be an astronaut? Then a doctor? Then a singer? No problem!

The Future

But wait. If no one died, the number of people on the planet would skyrocket. Providing food, water, shelter, and education to everyone would be a big challenge.

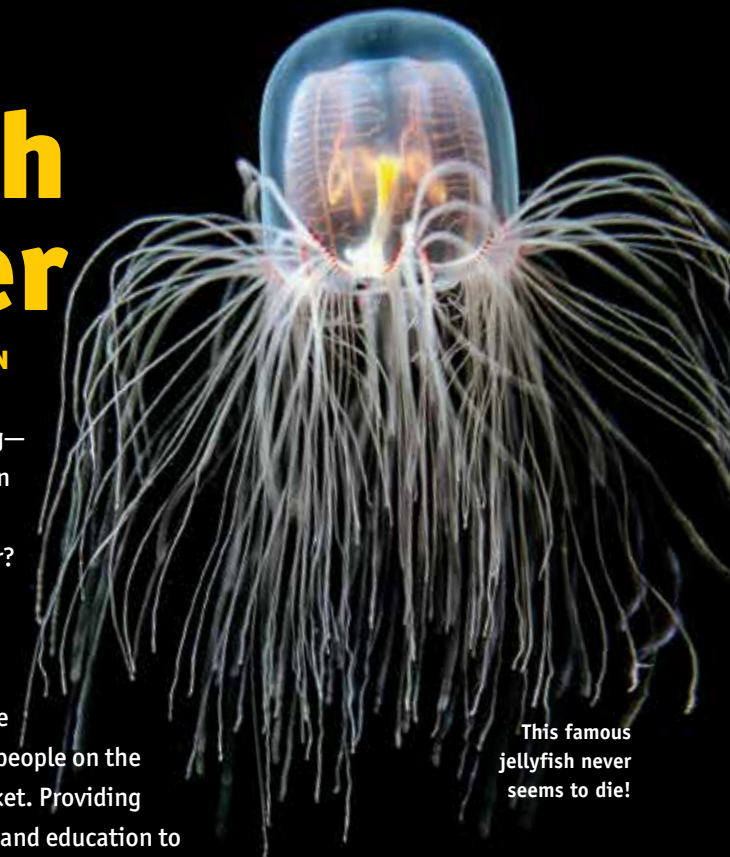
Then again, the immortals of the future may not even need food, water, or shelter. According to Ian Pearson, a futurologist (someone who researches what the future world could look like), humans might one day live on through technology.

How? By leaving our bodies behind and having our **consciousness**—that is, our thoughts, memories, and minds—uploaded into androids.

That's right. We could live on **indefinitely** as robots.

Life Is a Gift

Of course, eventually we'd live long enough to travel the world, taste



This famous jellyfish never seems to die!

every food, read every book—basically have every experience. We might get bored.

Besides, for many, the fact that life must end someday is what makes life a gift—something to be cherished. As Gilgamesh came to understand, life doesn't have to go on forever to have meaning.

Still, immortality would have its perks. You'd get to watch all of history unfold.

Will humans make it to Mars? Meet aliens? Solve the problems of poverty and pollution?

If you lived forever, learning the answers to these questions would be only a matter of time. ●

WRITING CONTEST

Should humans live forever? Answer this question in a well-organized essay. Use details from the play and the informational text to support your ideas. Send your essay to **IMMORTAL CONTEST**. Five winners will get *The Fourteenth Goldfish* by Jennifer L. Holm.

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