



Babylonia, 1760 B.C.

HARSH JUSTICE



CAST OF CHARACTERS

GUBARRU, a house-builder

SHESHBAZZAR, Gubarru's brother-in-law

LADIES 1-4

BALASHI, Gubarru's foreman

INANNA, a tavern keeper and Gubarru's wife

AMURRU, a neighbor

TIAMAT, Amurru's wife

BEL-IBNI, a neighbor • **KUDDA**, a scribe

NARRATOR



SCENE ONE

NARRATOR: The year is 1760 B.C. in Babylon, during the reign of King Hammurabi. In a wealthy neighborhood, workers are busy building a three-story mud-brick house.

GUBARRU: Sheshbazzar!

(Ladies 1-3 walk by.)

SHESHBAZZAR: Hello, ladies. What a refreshing sight you are on a broiling hot day. Your loveliness is like a drink of cool water from the freshest spring.

LADY 1: What a creep! Ignore him.

LADY 2: We don't need trash talk from strangers.

LADY 3: His talk is like the sewage flowing into the Euphrates River.

(They laugh and walk off.)

GUBARRU: Sheshbazzar! Did you make sure to pack the mud tightly enough around that wooden roof beam? These cedar beams from the land of the Phoenicians cost a king's ransom. The family we're building this house for wants only the finest. We must make sure that our workmanship is also the highest quality.

(Lady 4 walks by.)

SHESHBAZZAR: Hello there, radiant one!

LADY 4: Mind your own business!

GUBARRU: Sheshbazzar! Please pay attention to your work. Did you do everything I asked? Did you mix the mud until it was smooth?

SHESHBAZZAR: Just because I'm your wife's little brother, you don't think I can do anything right.

GUBARRU *(sighing):* Okay, okay!

SHESHBAZZAR: I feel very insulted. You should trust me.

(Gubarru walks away, shaking his head. He joins Balashi.)

BALASHI: How's it going, boss?

GUBARRU: Why must I have my lazy brother-in-law working for me? He does everything as slowly as possible.

BALASHI: He seems a little girl-crazy.

GUBARRU: If I give Sheshbazzar a simple task, like making mud bricks, he complains he's bored. He *can* do jobs that need skill, like working on the roof, but it's hard to get him to pay attention—





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BALASHI: Especially if a female walks by. Isn't there anything you can do to get rid of him?

GUBARRU: You know my wife, Inanna. As far as she's concerned, her little brother can do no wrong.

BALASHI: Why don't you just tell her you're going to fire him and be done with it?

GUBARRU: I couldn't stand to upset her. Except for babying her brother, she's the most perfect woman who ever lived. I only hope Sheshbazzar did his work properly. It's impossible to check now that the mud's already dried.

SCENE TWO

NARRATOR: A few weeks later, Inanna is busy working at her outdoor beer stall in the neighborhood.

INANNA: Beer! Freshly brewed beer! Don't drink dirty water from the river! Drink my clean, refreshing beer and save yourself from disease!

(Balashi runs in.)

BALASHI: I have bad news, Inanna!

INANNA: Oh no! Is some evil woman chasing my precious brother? They think Sheshbazzar's irresistible.

BALASHI: Your husband has been arrested!

INANNA: Gubarru? Arrested? Why?

BALASHI: The house he was building fell down!

INANNA: Was anyone hurt?

BALASHI: The owner. If he dies they'll put your husband to death!

INANNA *(wailing)*: Oh, no! What should I do?

(Amurru, Tiamat, and Bel-ibni run in.)

AMURRU: What is it, neighbor?

INANNA: My husband has been arrested. The house he was building fell down and injured the owner.

TIAMAT: That sounds bad.

INANNA: Oh, why is this misfortune happening? I try to do my best. I wear lucky beads in my hair and amulets around my neck and arms. I went to the ziggurat to make a sacrifice to the Virgin Mother Ishtar. I pray to the all-powerful Lord God Marduk. And still, this misfortune plagues us! Oh, my poor Gubarru!



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BEL-IBNI: Did you leave out some sacred ritual perhaps? Is that why the evil eye has come to your door?

INANNA: No, I—alas, I did! I should have made a clay image of the demon that is tormenting Gubarru.

BEL-IBNI: And then put it in a little boat, set it on the Tigris River, and said prayers until the boat capsized.

INANNA: Or sprinkled myself with holy water from the Euphrates. Or—

AMURRU: Maybe you should have given money to the priests of Marduk so they would pray for you.

BEL-IBNI: Do you think this could have anything to do with your brother?

INANNA: Why do you ask?

BEL-IBNI: The question just popped out.

INANNA: I know you think Sheshbazzar's difficult. Nobody understands him. He has a romantic soul, yet he's forced to work for a living.

TIAMAT: There's no use making Inanna feel bad. The demons that bring misery to our lives are powerful and sneaky. The only thing we can do is to go down to the king's stela at the temple of Marduk and see what the law says.

INANNA: None of us can read.

TIAMAT: We'll find someone who can. Come on!

AMURRU: My wife is right! Come on, everyone.

SCENE THREE

NARRATOR: Inanna and her neighbors travel to the temple of Marduk. Outside the gates, scribes sit in the shade, waiting for customers who want someone to write a letter or a legal document for them. Inside, rising eight feet into the air, is a shiny black stone stela covered with writing.

AMURRU: Look at the picture at the top. It shows our king, Hammurabi, standing before the sun god, Shamash. See, Shamash is giving Hammurabi the great laws.

TIAMAT: Thank you so much for sharing that, husband. Since you know everything, why don't you tell us what the laws are?

AMURRU: I don't know how to read. Why don't *you* read it?

BEL-IBNI: Look, here's Kudda, the scribe. Scribes can read!

KUDDA: Does someone need a scribe?



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TIAMAT: Inanna here is in trouble. Her husband got arrested, and we want to know what's going to happen to him. Can you read the stela for us?

KUDDA: That'll cost you. There are more than four thousand lines with two hundred eighty-one laws on it.

TIAMAT: Just read what's going to happen to her husband. A house he built fell down and hurt the owner.

KUDDA: Hmmm. Let me see what I can find.

INANNA: What does it say, Kudda?

KUDDA: I'll be happy to tell you—for a small fee.

TIAMAT: Have pity on the poor woman.

KUDDA: Did I not spend my whole childhood in the Tablet House using my sharpened reed to mark wet clay tablets? Was I not always getting caned by the teachers while you all were running and playing? Do I not now sit by the gates every day in the sizzling sun, where it's hot enough to fry a frog, waiting for work? Okay, maybe I wasn't the most diligent student and I didn't get a good government job, but time is money.

INANNA: Please, help me!

KUDDA: It will cost you one shekel. And, say, don't you own a beer shop?

AMURRU: This is an emergency! Just read the stela.

KUDDA: My throat—too dry—

INANNA: All right! Tiamat, dear neighbor, will you bring the man some beer while I pay him?

(Tiamat leaves and then returns with a cup.)

KUDDA: Ahh! As we say, beer is "joy to the heart" and "happiness to the liver."

BEL-IBNI: Maybe if your liver wasn't so happy you'd be more successful.

KUDDA: Do you want me to read or don't you?

EVERYONE: Yes!

KUDDA: Ahem. "I am King Hammurabi . . . who conquered the four quarters of the world, who made great the name of Babylon, who made the heart of the god Marduk rejoice, who worships Marduk every day, who—"

BEL-IBNI: Are you reading the whole thing?

KUDDA: Isn't that what you want?



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INANNA: Please tell me that my poor Gubarru won't be put to death. It would break my heart to think of him sent off to Aralu, the dark and shadowy afterworld, to live under the cruel rule of the god Nergal!

KUDDA: Here's something: "If anyone breaks a hole into a house to steal things, he shall be killed and buried in front of that hole."

INANNA: Gubarru is not a thief!

KUDDU: How about this one: "If a man wishes to separate from his wife, he shall give that wife her dowry. When she has brought up her children, she may then marry the man of her heart."

INANNA: I love my husband!

AMURRU: Keep reading, Kudda.

KUDDA: Okay, let's see. "If a son strikes his father, his hands shall be cut off." Nope, that's not it. "If a man puts out the eye of another man, his eye shall be put out."

AMURRU: A friend of mine is a doctor. He operated on this guy's eye, the operation didn't work, and the government cut off both his hands!

BEL-IBNI: What would have happened if he *had* succeeded?

KUDDA: Wait, I saw it here a minute ago—"If a doctor . . . saves an eye, he shall receive ten shekels in money."

TIAMAT: I had a friend whose slave ran away. It turned out that his neighbor hated him and was hiding the slave in his house!

BEL-IBNI: What did they do to the neighbor?

TIAMAT: They put him to death, of course! As the old saying goes, "In a city that has no watchdogs, the fox is the overseer."

INANNA: But what can *I* do to help Gubarru?

KUDDA: Inanna, if you have an extra shekel, *I might* be able to give you some advice.

INANNA: Here—anything to save my poor Gubarru!

KUDDU: First, make sacrifices to the gods so that the man who was hurt survives. But if he doesn't, this might help. Before your husband speaks in court, tell him this—

(Kuddu whispers into Inanna's ear.)



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SCENE FOUR

NARRATOR: A few days later, Inanna visits her husband in jail.

INANNA: It's so sad to see you in this dark, dank prison.

GUBARRU: My darling, you're like sunlight itself. How I've missed you. When I see your face, I think of our wedding day. Remember when I poured oil on your head during the ceremony?

INANNA: I remember it well. I also remember how handsome you looked in your eye makeup with your freshly curled hair.

GUBARRU: What a sweet moment it was when I put the veil on your head and said, "I am your husband, and you are my wife, and like the fruit of a garden I will give you children." Inanna, we hardly knew each other then, but I knew I would love you forever!

(They look at each other and sigh.)

INANNA: What happened to make the house fall?

GUBARRU: My darling, I'm so ashamed of myself. I should have checked your—the workers—more closely. Your—a worker—didn't pack the mud tightly enough around a roof beam and it fell.

INANNA: It was my brother's fault, wasn't it?

GUBARRU: No, darling. It was my fault. I should have watched more carefully while the work was being done. I shall carry the shame of hurting the poor owner for the rest of my life. If he dies—

INANNA: Don't despair, husband. I've been praying to the gods. I've also been talking to some people, and this is what I learned. A person accused of a crime is allowed to throw himself into the Euphrates River. If the current brings him back to shore alive, then the gods have found him innocent.

GUBARRU: What if he drowns?

INANNA: You're a strong swimmer.

GUBARRU: Yes I am, thank Marduk!

INANNA: Then we must have faith. But, oh, Gubarru, I feel so awful about my brother! This is all his fault!



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GUBARRU: No, Inanna. It's my fault. I should always double check—no, triple check—everything.

INANNA: I know Sheshbazzar can be a little difficult.

GUBARRU: Don't even mention it. I'm a very strong swimmer.

INANNA: I'd hate for you to take that risk. But I know Sheshbazzar would drown in two seconds.

SCENE FIVE

NARRATOR: A few weeks later, Inanna sweeps the front of her tavern. She sees a man walking up the street. Inanna runs to hug her husband.

INANNA: Gubarru! You're free!

GUBARRU: I missed you so much.

(Amurru, Tiamat, and Bel-ibni enter.)

TIAMAT: Gubarru's back!

AMURRU: What happened?

GUBARRU: The owner of the house recovered completely! We'll be paying for years to rebuild his house, but—

INANNA: —but we'll to do it together.

BEL-IBNI: Marduk be thanked! Welcome back, neighbor.

GUBARRU: Where's Sheshbazzar?

INANNA: Oh—he got another job. He's working for a merchant, traveling around the empire, selling pots. Of course, now even more women will bother him, but what can I do? I hope you're not too insulted that he left, husband.

TIAMAT: Too much family in business together is not always a good thing.

GUBARRU: I'll manage without Sheshbazzar somehow. Don't worry yourself.