

THE DECISION

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EXT. MESOPOTAMIAN FLOODPLAINS, AFTERNOON, CIRCA 4000 BCE

Over a dozen people are seen gathering berries from a lush region of natural foliage. The group is primarily made up of women (of all ages), as well as some men (mostly young). Their clothing is varied, but mostly made of leather and other animal skins -- all tones of brown and grey. As these people pick berries, they place them into wicker baskets.

We zoom in on a GIRL, about 10 years old, who is gathering berries slightly further apart from the rest of the group. The camera comes up behind her, and we see arms move as she performs her gathering work.

Then, a hand comes into frame, and taps on her shoulder. As she turns around, the camera turns and lands on a BUREAUCRAT. He is a middle-aged man, bearded, and wears intricate, bright-colored robes. A few paces behind him are two GUARDS, carrying shining bronze spears. The GIRL is stunned. The BUREAUCRAT speaks.

BUREAUCRAT

Hello, young one. Can you direct me
to your tribe's leader?

For several moments, the GIRL remains too stunned to respond. The BUREAUCRAT waits, smiling -- a well-rehearsed smile. Eventually,

GIRL

He -- he's out on a hunt.

BUREAUCRAT

Ah, then we will simply have to
wait.

The BUREAUCRAT returns to where his guards are standing and begins to converse with them. The camera zooms out, and we again see the dozen tribespeople at work; some focused on the task, and others turning to look at the man in colorful robes. The camera pans up to the sky.

EXT. MESOPOTAMIAN FLOODPLAINS, EVENING

We watch the sky turn dark. As we pan back to the ground, we see that most of the tribespeople have gathered around a fire in the middle of their mobile settlement -- more people than before, this time nearly two dozen, of varying ages. They are surrounded by simple leather tents -- easy to disassemble and move when necessary. The BUREAUCRAT and his two GUARDS are seated on the ground apart from the group.

Then, there is some commotion as the villagers notice the hunters returning. The hunters are a group of seven -- five men, two women, ranging in age from 15 to 35. One man and one woman together carry a dead gazelle, and two men behind them carry a second one. The tribespeople rejoice upon seeing them, and break into a number of different conversations with the hunters who have just returned.

After a few moments, the BUREAUCRAT approaches the group, with his guards close behind. The conversation dies down as most of the tribespeople turn to face him.

One woman, ERISH, around 25, breaks away from the group and approaches the BUREAUCRAT. She is followed by a man, SIDU, around 30. We recognize them as the two who had been carrying a gazelle together moments before. The BUREAUCRAT turns to face the man.

BUREAUCRAT

I presume you are the tribal leader?

SIDU

I am.

ERISH takes another step closer to the BUREAUCRAT. His guards take a more alert stance.

ERISH

And who are you? Why have you come?

The BUREAUCRAT smiles.

BUREAUCRAT

I come here with a wonderful offer from his Royal Highness Alulim, King of Sumer. The King, in his infinite grace, has decided to welcome more people into our ever-expanding civilization. Your people! Rather than continue your uncertain, transient lifestyle, the King would like to welcome you to join us.

SIDU looks at the BUREAUCRAT without much visible expression. ERISH eyes him with active disdain. The rest of the tribespeople have formed a semi-circle behind SIDU and ERISH and listen silently to what the BUREAUCRAT has to say. The BUREAUCRAT looks at their expressions, and decides that they need more convincing. He then eyes their leather tents.

BUREAUCRAT (CONT'D)

If you join us, you will never have to trek across another field in your life. Your children will be born, live, and die in the same city, in comfort. Together with our expert craftspeople, we can build a hut for each one of your families. You will finally each have a place to call your own. Additionally, our grain stockpiles grow each day. With your help, they'll grow even larger. Our mathematicians estimate that, at our current rate of growth, food insecurity will be a thing of the past by the time your children are grown.

The BUREAUCRAT smiles at the GIRL whom he met in the field earlier; she is now among the crowd, clinging nervously to her mother's leg.

There are a few moments of silence, interrupted by some murmurs among the tribespeople. A few moments pass.

SIDU

This-

ERISH

Your words sound charming, but sweet words will not convince our people to march directly into the lion's den. We are perfectly happy carrying on the lifestyle of our mothers and grandmothers. Begone from here.

Numerous shouts of assent come from the gathered crowd. Many nod in agreement. Yet some remain silent -- obviously intrigued, yet cautious, of the BUREAUCRAT's words.

The BUREAUCRAT looks at ERISH with a smile. He chuckles. He turns to SIDU.

BUREAUCRAT

And what do you think?

SIDU shoots a glance at ERISH. She glares at him.

SIDU

From your words alone, I do not know what to think.

The BUREAUCRAT nods.

BUREAUCRAT

Of course. You're right. Word of mouth is not enough to truly convey the glories of civilization.

A pause.

BUREAUCRAT (CONT'D)

Thus, I would like to propose that you-

The BUREAUCRAT glances at ERISH.

BUREAUCRAT (CONT'D)

-and your partner, travel with me to the great Sumerian city of Eridu. Eridu is my home, and soon -- I hope -- it will be yours as well. Once you see it in person, I'm sure you will want to join us.

SIDU glances at ERISH. She motions for him to step aside with her. We do not hear their words, but we see that their discussion is heated. The BUREAUCRAT, his GUARDS, and the tribespeople all watch the two as they discuss. Eventually, SIDU steps forward. ERISH looks defeated.

SIDU

Erish and I will join you on a visit to this city of yours.

The BUREAUCRAT clasps his hands together in joy.

SIDU (CONT'D)

We will trek there with you tomorrow morning. In the meantime, we will construct an additional tent so that you and your men can stay here with us overnight.

BUREAUCRAT

That is most generous of you. And I can assure you, you will not regret this decision.

The BUREAUCRAT bows in SIDU's direction. SIDU does not recognize the gesture, but he bows in return. ERISH scoffs.

EXT. SIDU/ERISH'S SETTLEMENT, THE FOLLOWING MORNING

SIDU and ERISH stand silently outside the tent of the BUREAUCRAT. It is clear that the tension between SIDU and ERISH has still not been resolved.

SIDU turns his gaze from ERISH back the BUREAUCRAT. He nods.

CUT TO:

MONTAGE

Short cuts of SIDU, ERISH, the BUREAUCRAT, and his GUARDS as they trek to Eridu. The BUREAUCRAT gets noticeably more tired and sweaty in each cut. He often has the group pause to sit and rest for a while. The rest of the group -- SIDU and ERISH in particular -- do not even appear winded. Eventually, they reach the outskirts of Eridu.

EXT. OUTSIDE ERIDU (FAR EAST SIDE), AFTERNOON

The group arrives outside of Eridu's massive stone walls. SIDU and ERISH look awestruck; they have never seen a structure this large.

The BUREAUCRAT laughs.

BUREAUCRAT

If you think the walls are
impressive, just wait until you see
what's inside.

The BUREAUCRAT leads the group to the wall's front gate. The gate's guards, upon seeing the BUREAUCRAT, bow and open the gate. The group steps through; the BUREAUCRAT's GUARDS nod silently to the gate guards as they pass.

EXT. INSIDE ERIDU (FAR EAST SIDE), AFTERNOON

When they emerge on the other side, ERISH and SIDU are utterly amazed by what they see: a civilization. Hundreds of clay, wood, and stone huts lay along dirt paths. And not just houses, but also shops staffed by craftspeople: stoneworkers, potters, clothing manufacturers, and more. The buildings grow taller and taller towards the center of the city; at its distant center, but visible from where they stand, is a massive stone palace-temple.

BUREAUCRAT

Come. Let me show you around.

Next, we transition between several quick scenes as the BUREAUCRAT leads SIDU and ERISH on a tour of Eridu.

CUT TO:

EXT. ERIDU HOUSING DISTRICT, AFTERNOON

The BUREAUCRAT leads the group along a row of nearly-identical looking huts made of a combination of stone and clay.

BUREAUCRAT

These are where your people would live. Well, not these huts exactly -- yours haven't been built yet. But they would look just like these.

CUT TO:

EXT. ERIDU FOOD DISTRICT, LATE AFTERNOON

The BUREAUCRAT now leads the group along a row of shops. Some sell raw grain, while others sell grain products like unleavened bread and oatmeal.

BUREAUCRAT

And this is where you would come to purchase your food -- either readymade, or raw ingredients for you to cook at home.

SIDU

Wait. Didn't you say that we would be harvesting our own food? Why would we need to purchase it here?

BUREAUCRAT

Ah, well you will have some, but 80% of the grain you harvest will be taken by the state -- in order to grow our civilization, that is. You will get to keep that 20% of grain, of course, and you'll all be paid a wage for your labor. You can spend that wage here or in any of the other shops that we've passed.

ERISH looks around skeptically.

ERISH

Don't you have anything to eat besides grain? Like meat?

BUREAUCRAT

Well, we do have meat during special holiday ceremonies -- and other luxury goods as well. Have you two ever had wine?

SIDU shakes his head.

BUREAUCRAT (CONT'D)
 Oh, believe me, you'll love it. (A
 pause.) But yes, for the most part,
 we do eat a lot of grain. You get
 used to it, though.

CUT TO:

EXT. ERIDU EDUCATION/CULTURAL DISTRICT, LATE AFTERNOON

The tour continues.

BUREAUCRAT
 Here's a very important part of
 Eridu. Do you two have children?

ERISH
 Not yet.

BUREAUCRAT
 Well, when you do, this is where
 they'd come to be educated.

SIDU
 Educated? In what? How to hunt?

The BUREAUCRAT smiles.

BUREAUCRAT
 As I've mentioned, no, we don't do
 much hunting around here. That
 said, they will be taught some
 practical skills, like how to plant
 and harvest crops. But, in addition
 to that, they'll learn a number of
 useful theoretical skills. They'll
 learn the history of Sumer, for
 example, and be immersed in its
 culture. They'll learn the
 identities of each one of our 6
 times 60 gods, and how to worship
 them -- and his Royal Highness --
 in the proper way.

SIDU and ERISH share a glance.

ERISH
 We're not familiar with these
 "gods."

The BUREAUCRAT's smile fades for a moment, then returns.

BUREAUCRAT

Yes, of course, I had completely forgotten. Don't worry -- you'll all receive thorough training in the customs and beliefs of the Sumerian empire, not just your children.

CUT TO:

EXT. CENTER OF ERIDU, LATE AFTERNOON

The BUREAUCRAT leads the group to the foot of a massive stone structure at the heart of the city of Eridu. It has numerous levels and zigzagging walls, all interconnected by a number of stone staircases. At the top is a large domicile surrounded by a dozen guards with glistening spears.

BUREAUCRAT

Finally, we come to the crown jewel of Eridu. This is the dwelling place of his Royal Highness King Alulim. It is the holiest building in all of Eridu -- and the whole Sumerian empire, for that matter. During festivals, the entire population of the city gathers around this temple-palace to sing our praises to the gods.

The group comes to a halt at the foot of the building. The BUREAUCRAT turns and faces SIDU and ERISH.

BUREAUCRAT (CONT'D)

As you can see, we all in Eridu are like one massive family -- not unlike your own tribe. While our houses may not all look the same, we all -- you, me, and the King -- dwell within these same walls. We all succeed when the empire succeeds, and we all fail when the empire fails. Look around you.

SIDU and ERISH comply. The camera pans around and we again see the hustle and bustle of the city.

BUREAUCRAT (CONT'D)

Doesn't it feel exhilarating to be a part of something so much bigger than yourself?

SIDU slowly nods. ERISH does not react.

CUT TO:

EXT. INSIDE ERIDU (FAR WEST SIDE), EARLY EVENING

The BUREAUCRAT's tour group is again on foot, but the tour is coming to a close. The group has reached the opposite end of Eridu from where they started.

BUREAUCRAT

Now, we'll see the backbone of
Eridu -- they place that your
people would work, if you join us.

Together, the group exits the city through a gate on the exact opposite side of the city from which they entered.

Upon exiting, we see massive fields of golden-colored wheat; there seems to be no end in sight. Working these fields are dozens and dozens of men, women, and children of all ages. Their clothes are similarly to those of SIDU and ERISH -- slightly dirtier, but made of slightly nicer fabrics.

The BUREAUCRAT finally leads the group to a stop. The walls of Eridu loom behind them, and the wheat fields stretch out in front of them.

BUREAUCRAT (CONT'D)

As I mentioned, everyone in Eridu
lives together inside those walls.
If you join us, you would too. But
during the day, you would work out
here in the wheat fields, helping
the Empire of Sumer to amass a
nearly unlimited stockpile of
grain.

SIDU and ERISH look out over the fields.

BUREAUCRAT (CONT'D)

Oh, and don't worry if you don't
know how to farm; we'll make sure
to teach you everything you need to
know.

ERISH squints, trying to get a closer look at the people working the fields; from where they stand, the closest workers are 100 yards away.

ERISH

Can we go talk to them?

BUREAUCRAT

Who? Oh, the harvesters? No, we shouldn't bother them while they work. They're the backbone of our society after all -- we depend upon their successful labor.

ERISH continues staring out into the fields.

ERISH

I know, it's just... I'd like to know more about the work our families would be doing from the people who are doing that work.

The BUREAUCRAT turns and faces ERISH.

BUREAUCRAT

I completely understand, young woman. But it goes against our customs to interrupt the harvesters while they work. I'm perfectly happy to tell you anything you'd like to know about agricultural labor.

ERISH now turns to face the BUREAUCRAT. Her expression turns more agitated.

ERISH

Yes, I'm perfectly happy to hear you talk all day. But you don't *do* agricultural labor, do you? I want to hear from the people who actually--

SIDU

(sternly)
Erish, that's enough. The man has told us no, so just drop it, okay?

ERISH shoots a stern glance back at SIDU, who immediately turns his attention back to the BUREAUCRAT. The BUREAUCRAT continues talking, and we see SIDU nodding along.

BUREAUCRAT

So, as I was saying, this is where your people would work, at first. And it's crucial work. That said, if you do a great job, you may even be promoted to a position in the interior...

But soon we stop hearing the BUREAUCRAT (despite him continuing to talk) as the camera focuses on ERISH. ERISH takes one step away from the group, and covers her eyes with her hand to keep out the rays of the setting sun. She stares out at the field at the closest worker. The sounds of the conversation behind her are replaced with the sounds of agricultural labor (hoeing, pulling weeds, etc). The camera is angled from over ERISH's shoulder, and following her gaze, we see a harvester woman -- a similar age to ERISH -- about 100 yards away. At this distance, she is not much more than an outline. But we can see that the woman has ceased working, and she is staring back at ERISH.

Then, we see ERISH from over the shoulder of the woman in the field. At 100 yards away, this time it's hard to make out ERISH's expression. But, from this position, we can see the back of the woman in the field. On her back, we see a cloth satchel holding an infant. The infant is crying; it is covered in pockmarks and rash.

We cut back to the view from over ERISH's shoulder. A hand appears and taps that shoulder. She turns around; it's SIDU.

SIDU

Come. They're going to take us to a hut so we can spend the night.

CUT TO:

EXT. OUTSIDE A HUT IN ERIDU, EARLY MORNING

The BUREAUCRAT stands outside a hut constructed of red clay and stone; he strokes his beard aimlessly. His GUARDS stand behind him. After a few moments, ERISH emerges from the hut, followed closely by SIDU.

BUREAUCRAT

Well, what did you think of sleeping on a hay mattress for the first time? Pretty leisurely, right?

ERISH brushes some hay out of her hair.

SIDU

It took an hour or so to get used to, but then, I must admit, I slept like a lion.

The BUREAUCRAT smiles, even bigger than usual.

ERISH

We must be heading back to our people now.

BUREAUCRAT

Of course, of course. But before you do, I must know: Are you going to bring your people to join us here in Eridu?

SIDU and ERISH shoot each other a worried glance. It's clear that they had spent a while discussing that very question overnight, and still had not reached a satisfying answer.

SIDU

Well, we plan to return back to our settlement and discuss it with the rest of our people.

The BUREAUCRAT's smile decreases in magnitude by a few degrees, but remains on his face.

BUREAUCRAT

Of course... But, before you leave, there's one last thing I should show you.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE WALLS OF ERIDU (SOUTH SIDE), MORNING

We see the same group as yesterday (the BUREAUCRAT, his GUARDS, SIDU, and ERISH) travel together for a final time. This time, they pass through yet another gate in the walls of Eridu. When they emerge out the other side, we see a field full of soldiers -- about 200 of them. They are practicing battle tactics with one another; half hold wooden replica spears and axes, while the other half hold shields. They attack one another. While just practice, the fighting looks gruesome. Some blood is spilled.

The BUREAUCRAT stares out at the field. He is no longer smiling. SIDU and ERISH stand next to him.

BUREAUCRAT

As far as we know, the Sumerian army is the best-trained and best-equipped in the world. At least, we haven't been able to meet any foe who could best us. And this isn't all of our soldiers, by the way. These are just the new recruits.

The BUREAUCRAT turns to ERISH and SIDU.

BUREAUCRAT (CONT'D)
 If you join us, these soldiers will exist to protect you and your clan from anyone who would seek to harm you. You would be bringing them to the safest city on Earth.

The BUREAUCRAT turns back to facing the field.

BUREAUCRAT (CONT'D)
 But if you don't join us... Well, it's hard to say. But I know the King doesn't like having his offers turned down.

The BUREAUCRAT still faces the field. His tone suggests more urgency than we have heard from him before. In fact, he sounds more genuine than he has in the past.

BUREAUCRAT (CONT'D)
 I truly hope you'll make the right decision.

ERISH and SIDU face each other with anxious expressions.

CUT TO:

INT. TENT, SIDU/ERISH'S SETTLEMENT, EARLY NIGHT

ERISH and SIDU still face each other, but now are seated on opposite ends of their tent back home. Their anxious expressions are unchanged, despite the many hours that have passed. Outside the tent, we can hear the laughter and shouts of children as they chase each other around the settlement.

After a long pause, ERISH is the first to speak.

ERISH
 That man was a liar and a swindler.

SIDU
 Yes.

ERISH
 I mean, eating nothing but grain? Having our children learn about imaginary gods? They would have us abandon the customs that we've been following for generations!

SIDU

Yes.

Another long pause.

SIDU (CONT'D)

But it would be nice to never have to worry if we'd have enough to eat the next day.

ERISH

Sidu, you can't mean --

SIDU

I'm simply stating my thoughts.

Another pause.

SIDU (CONT'D)

Plus, maybe it would be good for our children to receive an education. So they could feel that there's more to life than just gathering and hunting.

ERISH

And I suppose I could see the appeal of living our lives in one spot rather than constantly traveling. It would certainly make life easier for our elders.

SIDU

That's true.

A long pause.

ERISH

I just worry that we don't really know what we're getting ourselves into. That, despite that man's shining words, they might still treat us like the dirt they trod upon.

SIDU

I worry about that too.

A final long pause.

SIDU (CONT'D)

(sadly)
But, in the end, I guess none of that really matters, does it?

ERISH.
(with a deep sigh)
No, I guess it doesn't.

SIDU and ERISH look at one another dejectedly. We hear the sounds of children continuing to play outside. The camera pans up, zooms through the top of the tent, and we see the starry night sky. And then-

CUT TO:

EXT. GRAIN FIELDS OUTSIDE ERIDU, 3 YEARS LATER

The sky fades to day. As it pans back down to the ground, we see two dozen people working in the wheat fields outside the western wall of Eridu. As we get closer, we recognize them as the tribespeople, but all roughly 3 years older.

We pan down to eye level, and the camera travels down one row of the wheat field. We see that the tribespeople are sweaty, tired, and many of them have blisters on their hands. Some of them are actively bleeding. We quickly pan past the GIRL from the first scene, now a teenager, as she pulls up some wheat.

Eventually, we land on ERISH. She isn't very different from before, though her hair has been cut shorter. Her hands, like the others', are blistered. She tugs on a weed to uproot it, and cuts herself on a thorn.

As she raises her hand to her mouth to suck away the blood, the camera slowly pans around to her back. There, we see that she is carrying an infant. The infant is crying; it is covered in pockmarks and rash.