

A Hero for the Gods

The First Heroes New Tales of the Bronze Age

by Josepha Sherman, 1946-2012

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The Indo-European-speaking ancestors of the Hittites probably brought their culture into Anatolia during the late third millenium B.C. After several hundred years, their descendants established an empire that rivaled and sometimes destroyed other, older Near Eastern kingdoms until they themselves fell to foreign enemies at the end of the Bronze Age. Despite their ancient (and modern) reputation as warriors, their culture was first and foremost agricultural. They were also literate, and among the Hittite texts is the story of

one Hupasiya summoned to aid the gods. The original text is, like so many others from antiquity, broken, and the ending is lost, but Josepha Sherman, with her expertise in folklore and the ancient world, here attends to that.

Hupasiya stepped out of his farmhouse, then stopped dead, grabbing for his old woolen mantle and hastily wrapping it around himself. Gods, it was cold out here!

He still looked very much like the true Hittite warrior he'd been just a few short years ago: burly and muscular, black of curly hair and beard, with a narrow scar like a white blaze of lightning seaming his face. His bronze sword hung on a wall inside, and he still kept it polished and oiled as befitted a good blade. But the battles he fought these days were only with the fields and the harvests, and no regrets about it.

Almost no regrets, he corrected wryly. Springtime—ha. Not a touch of softness to the biting air, not a hint of greenery poking up out of the frozen fields. And the snow on the towering mountains of Anatolia all about him hadn't even begun its retreat up to merely cap them, but still gleamed blazing white halfway down the slopes.

„Husband?“

Hupasiya turned at the sudden voice. Even now, as always, he felt a smile curve his lips at the sight of Zaliya. Still lovely, so lovely, even after having borne them a daughter and a son. Lovely even with her hair in a simple braid and dressed in a simple gown of undyed wool. Once she'd worn more elegant clothes, and gleamed with gold as befitted an officer's wife...

Then Hupasiya saw the worry in her dark eyes, and the smile faded. „Nothing,“ he told her reluctantly. „Just like the day before, and the day before that. Nothing but this dry, endless cold.“

Zaliya shivered. Hupasiya held open a fold of his mantle, and she gladly huddled against him, letting him wrap the wool about them both. „It's never stayed so chilly this late in the spring,“ she murmured. „If the crops don't sprout soon...“

He shrugged helplessly.

„Hupasiya... you don't suppose...“

„What?“

„The gods—“

„Are angry with us?“ Hupasiya snorted. „Then they are angry with all who live near or in Ziggarratta. We all suffer the same weather.“ He looked sideways at her, suddenly anxious. „Zaliya ... are you regretting this?“ His sweep of an arm took in their farm. „I mean, you had a fine life as an officer's wife—“

„I had a terrible life!“

„What—“

„You'd go off to war against the Akkadians or the Egyptians or the gods only know who else, and me, I'd be left back in Ziggarratta with the other wives, wondering if a living husband would return to me, a husband with arms and legs and—“

„And all the necessary parts. Hey!“

Zaliya had pulled a hand free to smack him on the arm. „You do not show the proper respect.“ But she was smiling.

„Papa?“ a sleepy voice asked from within the sturdy farmhouse. A second voice added quaveringly, „Mamma?“

„Hush, loves,“ Zaliya called back. „Nothing’s wrong. Papa and I are just talking.“

„That’s why I left,“ Hupasiya murmured, gesturing with his head back into the house. „Not just for us. So that they could have a normal, happy life.“ *And if it demeans me to be a farmer instead of a warrior, so be it.*

But Zaliya’s eyes were still worried. „And what’s to happen to them if the crop fails? We don’t have enough from last year’s harvest to tide us over.“

Yes, his mind chided, *and at least in the army you drew steady wages. And a pension for your wife were you slain.*

Oh, and there was cold comfort for Zaliya and the children.

I am a husband and father, not some fool of a hero with his gleaming bronze sword—

„It’s too early to worry,“ Hupasiya said.

I will protect them. Even if I must sell what may be left of honor. I will protect them.

* * * * *

The mountaintop was slick with ice and chill with bitter wind, and not quite in the mortal world. She who paced angrily back and forth, never slipping on the icy footing, never risking a fall, was Inaras, daughter of the Storm-God and Goddess of the Wild Beasts. Beautiful as a wild thing in her long-fringed robes, she was all sleekness and peril, with dark hair glinting with hints of light and eyes the ever-changing colors of her father’s stormy skies. „We cannot let this be!“

The other gods would not meet her angry glare.

„Hebat, wife of my father! You know we cannot suffer this! My father cannot be defeated yet again!“

The Storm-God’s wife, all matronly curves and fullness, suddenly became very busy combing knots out of the mane of the sacred lion that lolled at her feet.

Inaras let out her breath in an angry sigh, and turned sharply to another deity. „You, Telepinus, you know what happens when the proper order is overturned!“

Green-robed and handsome, he was Lord of Agriculture, and Inaras’s brother. And yes, Inaras thought, he certainly did know. Once, when he was angry, he had hidden from the world. The crops had suffered, and the human people with them, until Telepinus had guiltily returned.

„What is there to be done?“ he muttered. „The Dragon has already defeated our father once.“

And that is why Father does not even dare to show his face at his meeting! Inaras thought. „That is because we thought to fight Illuyankas as though he were one of us. He is not!“

Kamrusepas frowned. „What are you proposing?“ Goddess of Healing though she was, there was a hint of warrior anger in her voice. „There are none of us who are not divine.“

Inaras turned sharply to her. „And that was where we made our first mistake. This time the Dragon will be slain—because this time I will bring us the aid of a

mortal. Yes, yes, I know, it has never been done. Mortals are fallible, mortals are unpredictable—that uncertainty is exactly what will make this man so valuable!”

Kamrusepas raised one elegantly curved eyebrow. „What’s this? Have you already chosen your hero?”

Hebat made a soft, disapproving *tsk*. „This does not surprise me. When has Inaras *not* chosen herself a mortal man?”

„A hero!” Inaras corrected angrily. „I chose only heroes!”

„If that’s what you wish to call them.”

„Listen to me, all of you! Do you not see what has happened to the mortal world since the Dragon came to power? There is no spring, no ripening crops, nothing for the beasts of earth to eat! Telepinus—“

„You are right,” he agreed reluctantly. „I say yes, let it be done. Bring us your mortal hero and see what he can do for us.”

Hupasiya bent over the frozen furrow, trying to see if maybe, *maybe*, that tiny speck of green was actually something he’d planted starting to grow. He straightened with a grunt, working a knot out of his back with one hand, and—

Found himself without warning facing a woman who had appeared without a sound. She was tall and eerily beautiful, high and wide of cheekbone, full and lush of figure, the woman of whom any man might dream. No... a chill ran up his spine as he realized that this was never a woman. Never a human one, Hupasiya corrected uneasily.

She was simply too *alive* for any mere mortality, fairly radiating a force that was sheer Life. It crackled in the ringlets of her long, blue-black hair and in her gleaming dark eyes. The curves of her body, clearly outlined under the folds of her lightweight robes, were all that was woman yet more perfect than any human woman could ever boast. In that moment of awareness, in that sudden state of nearly helpless awe and lust, Hupasiya threw up his hands in a ritual gesture of respect. It seemed the safest thing to do.

„Hail, Divine One!” he gasped, since not trying for a name that might be wrong seemed safest, too.

„Yes, indeed, I am divine,” she said impatiently, as though the fact of his worship and blazing desire were hardly important. „I am Inaras, you are my hero, and let us be away from here.”

She gestured, and the world dazed him with a sudden flare of light. Hupasiya blinked—

—blinked again.

And let out his breath in a slow gasp of wonder, all lust dashed from him by the suddenness of change. A moment ago, he had been standing amid his fields, yet now he was... wherever this was. A mountain peak... yes, with sharp rocks and ice all around him, and gusts of wind sending snow whirling up in little spirals, but he wasn’t cold, only...

Only scared out of my senses. Scared as I never was in the heart of battle. This is a god, a goddess, the Goddess Inaras—what does she—

„What do you want of me?” he burst out before he could control himself. And then, heart pounding, waited to be destroyed for his impertinence.

But Inaras said only, „Illuyankas threatens.”

„Your pardon, but I don’t—“

„Have you mortals no wisdom at all? Learn!“

She seized him in her arms. Her lips met his in a savage, sensual, demanding kiss, and in that instant Hupasiya saw, knew—

It was Illuyankas the Dragon. Mighty being, terrible being, all strength, all hunger for power mortal and divine. Illuyankas, who had defeated the Storm-God himself, and with that defeat of the normal order of Nature had caused both the immense insult to the gods and the unnaturally long chill of winter.

Inaras released him, and Hupasiya fell helplessly to his knees, gasping for breath. That kiss had nearly been strong enough to force the life from him. And yet, and yet, he was a man, a mortal man, and there was a thought deep in his mind that would not be denied: What would it be like to know that kiss again, what would it be like to feel those limbs about a man, to know the passion of a goddess . . .

„I’ve been recruited.“ Those were the only reasonably sane words he could find that would come forth. „Your pardon for any rudeness, great one, but—you want me to conquer *that*?“ How could a mortal ever possibly succeed when the gods themselves could not?

To Hupasiya’s immense relief, the goddess didn’t blast him where he stood. „It is precisely because you are mortal that you shall succeed.“

And are you also so sure that the mortal will survive? But sarcasm almost certainly *would* get him turned to ash. At least Inaras didn’t seem able, or at least willing, to read the thoughts in his mind.

„I know how mortals think,“ she said, and disdain was in the words. „Name a reward.“

What reward is worth my life? Hupasiya wanted to say something about his wife and children, anything to ensure their safety, but confronted by all that too-living, too-perfect female splendor, he could not focus his mind on them, or on his love for them. Instead, he heard himself say, „You, gracious lady. The price I name for my aid is a night with you.“

He waited, heart pounding with renewed force. Oh, fool, fool! Surely she, goddess that she was, would refuse him, and he could only pray that she would not strike him down for his impertinence, and not take vengeance on his family, either.

But to Hupasiya’s astonishment, after the briefest of silences, Inaras merely said, as though it meant nothing to her, „Done.“

So fierce and hot a stare did she give him in the next instant that lust beyond all controlling blazed up in Hupasiya. His last clear thought as the goddess opened her arms to him was, *And here I worried about a Dragon? This will probably kill me!*

At least he would die happy.

But ... he hadn’t died. He was himself, waking and standing without any memory of awakening and getting to his feet, yes, and with only the dimmest, most unsure memories of... of... a wife...? Children...? He couldn’t even be sure about what had just happened. And he—

He was standing among others—

The gods! He was surrounded by gods! These so very fierce with Life folk were never, never human men and women! That tall, handsome young deity in the

fringed robes of a hundred different shades of green could only be Telepinus, he who oversaw all that grew. For a mindless instant Hupasiya wanted to ask, „What happened to this year’s harvest?“ But he already knew the answer to that question: Illuyankas.

Besides, Hupasiya really didn’t think this was the time to ask any deity anything, not after... well, the details still weren’t at all clear in his mind, but whatever had happened ... had happened.

Hot breath on the back of his neck made Hupasiya whirl, going almost instinctively into a warrior’s crouch. He nearly let out a shout to find himself nose to nose with a lion, and sprang back a step, just barely keeping from landing on his rump. The lion gave a rumbling purr, almost as though laughing at him.

„And *this* is your hero,“ a woman murmured from behind the beast.

That was Hebat, surely, since who else but she would keep a lion as a pet? Who else but Hebat could look so motherly and dangerous at the same time, she who was the Storm-God’s wife. And, for that matter, she who was Inaras’s mother—gods, had she, did she—did she know what her daughter and he had—

What nonsense! These *were* the gods, and they would hardly be interested in anything so petty as human morality.

„Glorious Lady,“ he said, making a raised-hands gesture of reverence, „I make no claims of being a hero, nor do I make any claim to understand the ways and wishes of the divine. But surely we do share this one thing: We both wish an end to the Dragon to avenge a wrong and return the rightful order to the world.“

„And how, little mortal,“ Telepinus asked, „is that to be accomplished?“

You didn’t snap back at someone who could easily destroy you. But something in Telepinus’s jeering tone struck an odd chord of memory in Hupasiya’s mind. He’d heard the same sort of so-superior backtalk from superior officers in the Hittite army. Then, too, he’d been unable to say what he was thinking. But he’d handled the situation then, and by the—by the gods, he’d handle it now.

Crouching down, he cleared a patch of ground with a stick, then used the same stick to cut symbols in the earth. As he did, Hupasiya spoke in his most non-nonsense military voice, „To destroy a foe, we must first know his strengths and weaknesses.“

When the gods were silent, Hupasiya prodded them, „I am, as you remind me, a mortal. What may seem quite ordinary to you will be new and unknown to me.“

„Shall we then waste our time educating you?“ Telepinus asked.

Calmness. Can’t strike back at a superior officer. „It may seem a waste, Divine One, but the smallest of details so familiar it has been overlooked may provide us with a clue—and a weapon.“

„The mortal shows a good line of reasoning,“ Hebat murmured. „Let us agree with him and begin listing what we may know of the Dragon.“

The gods listed feature after feature: Illuyankas’s strength; Illuyankas’s fury; Illuyankas’s envy of the gods. Obvious features, useless features. Hupasiya kept silent all the while, forcing himself to keep his uneasiness and growing despair from showing. Nothing here, nothing at all. But if he didn’t find some weapon against the Dragon, they were going to throw *him* against the Dragon, and there was a knife’s edge difference between being slain by Illuyankas or by angry gods.

Eh, wait—Hupasiya held up a hand, not caring in that moment of sudden hope that he was interrupting Inaras. „What was that? What did you just say?“

She stared at him, clearly too startled to be angry. „Why, that Illuyankas is large in all his appetites.“

„Ah, yes, there it is! O Divine One, you have just given us the weapon we need!“

As the gods listened, frowning slightly, Hupasiya told them his newly born plan.

„That’s impossible!“

„It can never work!“

„There is no honor in this!“

„I am but human,“ Hupasiya reminded them all. „It is my honor, not yours, Divine Ones, that is at stake. And I dare risk it.“ He could feel the gods uncertainty as a chilly wind prickling his skin, so Hupasiya added, „What harm to this? If my plan fails, why, you are no worse off then you were before my arrival. But if it succeeds, then you are avenged.“

„Interesting,“ a stern voice said.

The newcomer was a tall, powerfully built god, the dark masses of his hair like gathering storm clouds, his eyes flashing with the blue-white fire of the lightning. Even as Hupasiya bowed low before the Storm-God, he thought, at the point of terror when one is utterly calm, *I was wondering when he would appear.*

„Let it be done,“ the Storm-God said.

* * * * *

I hoped that the invitation would be made, Hupasiya thought. I knew that the invitation had to be delivered. I just never thought that I would be the one to deliver it.

It was hardly work for a warrior. And yet it made sense, in a purely unemotional way. Illuyankas would never believe any offering made directly from the gods.

And of course if something happens to the messenger, why, that is merely the inconvenient loss of a human.

He hadn’t expected Illuyankas to live in a palace. And sure enough, this was a cave. A cavern, rather, he realized, once he had gotten through the narrow entrance. Excellent defense to keep enemies from following the Dragon into his home. His dark, chilly home.

Illuyankas suddenly loomed up before him, a great mass of darker shadow against the darkness. Other shadows moved behind him.

Wonderful. The Dragon has a family.

Hupasiya promptly abandoned all thoughts of being a dragonslayer. One did not go up against an army with only one sword. Either deliver his message or die.

„O great Illuyankas, the Storm-God sends you humble greetings.“

That eerie repetitive snarl could almost have been a laugh. „Indeed...“ It was the softest, coldest whisper of sound.

„And to show you his sincerity,“ Hupasiya continued, keeping his voice steady, „he has invited you to a great feast in your honor, out on the mountaintop where you two once fought. Will you not join him, O mighty Illuyankas?“

He heard that eerie snarl-laugh echo in the darkness. „Warn the god of faintest breezes that I am coming.“

Not only Illuyankas but his whole family followed Hupasiya out into the light. Nightmares, he thought, living nightmares, sleek and sinuous, scaled and furred, and impossible to see as any one kind of being. Hupasiya knew for the first time why even a god had been overcome.

Something so fully a thing of old Chaos has no right still existing in the world of gods and mortals.

Now, if only the gods have kept up their side of this trap...

And if only their judgment of his character is correct...

It was, it was! The Dragon and his children were not wasting time on gloating or threatening. They threw themselves on the food like so many starving creatures, gorging themselves on the meal.

Gorging themselves as well on the drugs within the food. One by one, they staggered from the feast and fell. One by one, Hupasiya bound them with rope. Only Illuyankas did not fall. The Dragon stumbled and staggered toward his lair. But he was too bloated from his meal to slip through the cave's narrow entrance. As the other gods slew the Dragon's brood, the Storm-God fell upon Illuyankas like a thunderbolt, and slew him.

Only Hupasiya did nothing. It was not a warrior's way to slay a bound captive.

I... am something other than a warrior ... am I not? I cannot remember.

„Come,“ Inaras told him with a purr in her voice. „I have a reward for you, my hero, a fine house here in the mountains, on a cliff overlooking all the world, balanced on the four directions, with windows facing all of the four. You shall live here and want for nothing. And perhaps, perhaps, my hero, I shall visit you. I ask only this one thing of you, a little, little thing. Do not look out of the western window. That is the window of death.“

Hupasiya felt nothing. He had done the gods' bidding, he had been rewarded, and yet ... nothing.

„I will not look out of the western window,“ he agreed, since that, too, meant nothing.

It was a fine house, indeed, with servants to pamper him and fill his every wish. But he had no wishes. Inaras did visit him when the whim struck her. Each time she would warn him not to gaze out of the western window. But when she left, he once again would feel nothing.

„I will not look out of the western window,“ Hupasiya murmured.

Why should he not? What else was there for him to do?

He threw aside the curtain covering the western window and looked out and down to the foot of the mountains. A small farm nestled down there among the fuzz of new green growth, and if he stared, he could almost see a woman... two children...

„Zaliya...?“

As he said her name, memory returned with a rush. His wife, his family. „Inaras!“ he shouted, brushing aside the servants who tried to silence him.

„Inaras!“

She was before him in a rush of air. „My hero, what is wrong?“

„Let me go. I beg you, let me go!“

Inaras straightened, looming over him. „You have disobeyed me.“

„Yes, I admit it. I have seen my wife and family—Inaras, Lady, Divine One, I love them! Let me go.“

Her hair swirling about her, her eyes blazing with blue-white fire, Inaras shouted, „I treat you as I treat no mortal man! I give you the love of my body. And you—is this treason my repayment?“

„I am mortal, yes. I cannot live as a god. Inaras, please, you do not need me and my family does.“

„They shall want for nothing ever again!“

It took him only a moment to realize the possible threat latent in that statement. The dead want for nothing. „No!“ And was that why he felt ... nothing? Was he already dead? „It doesn't matter if I am one among the dead if my family is safe. Take my life if you must—but let them live!“

It took greater courage than ever it had to face down the enemy, but Hupasiya dropped to his knees, head bent, waiting for the blow that was sure to come.

There was utter silence for an agonizingly long time. „You are dead to me,“ Inaras said at last. „This shall not have happened.“

Hupasiya stepped out of his farmhouse, then stopped dead, breathing deeply. He still looked very much like the true Hittite warrior he'd been just a few short years ago: burly and muscular, with a narrow scar like a white blaze of lightning seaming his face, although his hair had turned in one short night from black to white.

„Husband?“

He turned to face Zaliya with a smile. „Smell the air, love. The springtime has come at last.“

