

# **The God of Chariots**

## **The First Heroes New Tales of the Bronze Age**

**by Judith Tarr, 1955–**

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*Chariotry became the hallmark of Bronze Age warfare, a status symbol from Egypt to northern Europe and far to the east. Some scholars argue that eventually new military tactics spelled the end not only of chariot-based warfare but of the Bronze Age itself. In the beginning, however, chariots promised protection from marauding tribes and commanded a great price. Judith Tarr demonstrates just how valuable by returning to the speculative Bronze Age of her Epona Sequence.*

Enmerkar the king stood on the walls of Uruk. The hordes from the desert had withdrawn at last. In their wake they had left devastation: fields and orchards stripped of their harvest, villages burned, cattle slaughtered or stolen, and an echo of laughter as they marched away with their spoils.

He had hoped—gods, he had prayed—that if he raised the city's walls higher and doubled the guards on the fields, the Martu would give way. But they had only grown bolder, the more the city tried to resist them. Those who understood their language said that the raiders reckoned the city folk soft and their king a coward, too weak to put up a proper fight.

The men of Uruk were brave enough, but these savages were relentless. Their blades of flint and their spears of fire-hardened wood killed as thoroughly as the finest bronze. And there were so many of them. Uruk was a great city and powerful, but it could not send out the hordes of fighting men that these tribes bred like swarms of locusts.

Now they had gone away. A good half of the harvest was taken and much of the rest trampled and fouled. It was too much to hope that the Martu would not come back when the grain was tall again, as they had for year upon year, and each year in greater numbers and with stronger weapons and more outrageous contempt. The men of Uruk grew the grain; the men of the desert took it, as if the gods had given it to them as a gift.

Enmerkar stood under the open sky before the eyes of his people. He could not rend his beard in frustration, still less fling down his royal staff and trample it. He stiffened his back and squared his shoulders and made himself descend from the sight of a war that he could not, with all his wealth and power, hope to win.

„We need Aratta,“ the king's sister said.

She was Inanna, the living goddess, unlike Enmerkar, who was a mere king of men. In her divinity she could run far ahead of mortal understanding; she was not always patient, either. She glared at the blank faces of the king's council, a circle of round cheeks and round eyes, with no more wit in them than in a cairn of stones.

„Aratta,“ she said as if to children, „has wood. It has stone. It has metal. It has alliances with us from years before, oaths and promises of trade. Aratta will help us, if we offer a caravan of grain and the fruits of the south.“

„A caravan?“ said the king. „It will be a lean winter as it is. We can't spare even a tithe of the harvest—and Aratta will want more than that, if it knows how desperate we are.“

„Then let us not be desperate,“ Inanna said sharply. „Let us be allies with trade to offer. Or are we truly defeated as the Martu declare? Are we their sheep, to be plucked of our fleece in season and led tamely to the slaughter?“

That made some of them bristle and others close their ears and minds against her. Lugalbanda, who had earned his place here by winning a battle or three but who was not the best or most eloquent of speakers, found himself unable to restrain his tongue. „I—I have heard,“ he said, battling the stammer that always

beset him when he had to speak in front of people, „I have heard a story, a rumor really, but it has a ring of truth—that there is a new god in Aratta, a god of war.“

„That’s old news,“ said the councilor who had spoken first. „The god, if he is one at all, has been there for years.“

„Indeed,“ said the king’s sister. She turned her beautiful and terrible eyes on Lugalbanda. „Tell us what you have heard.“

His knees were weak and his wits scattered, but those eyes compelled him. They drew words out of him, words that even made sense—and that was a miracle worthy of her divinity. „I—I have heard that the god came from the east, and he brought with him an art and a weapon. He forges bronze, they say, that is stronger and brighter and keener than any in the world. His swords are sharper, his spearheads more deadly. But even more than those, he has a craft, a thing of power and terror. It rolls like thunder over the earth. Great beasts draw it, swifter than the wind. Wherever it goes, armies fall like mown grain.“

„Travelers’ tales,“ said the king.

„Travelers who have been to Aratta,“ his sister said. „Is there more?“

Lugalbanda had an itch between his shoulderblades. It would have killed his dignity to scratch it, yet it was a miserable niggling thing.

It could not drive him any madder than the sight of her face. „There—there is a little, divine lady. They say the god rides in his great weapon, and rules it with the terror of his will. And—and they say that he is not alone. That he has made more of them, and taught the men of the city to master them, and they are unconquerable in battle.“

„It is true,“ said the eldest of the council, who was deaf and nearly blind, but his wits were still as sharp as ever. „Even I hear a thing or two, and I have heard that no enemy has threatened Aratta since shortly after the god came to it. It’s more than the terror of his presence; he has weapons that deter even the hordes of savages.“

Enmerkar smote his thigh with his fist. „If Aratta has such weapons—if this is not dream and delusion—we need them. We need copper and stone, wood and bronze. We need strength to drive back the Martu and to keep them from coming back again and again.“

Inanna clapped her hands together. „All hail to the king of Uruk! Yes, we need what Aratta has—and it would be best if our messenger went soon, before winter closes the mountain passes. As it is, he’ll not come back until spring, but maybe he’ll come to us with a hoard of god-forged weapons.“

„And maybe he’ll come back empty-handed, or never at all.“ But Enmerkar was less despondent than he had been in all this Martu-embattled year. „It’s a risk I’m willing to take. But, lady, to send a caravan—“

„We can’t send promises,“ she said. „We’re too desperate. It must be sacks of wheat and barley, and jars of dates and baskets of apples and all the riches of the earth that we can possibly spare.“

„And wine,“ the eldest councilor said. „Send the king a great gift of date wine, and see he drinks a good part of it while he haggles. That will bring him round if nothing else will.“

He grinned a toothless grin. Some of them were outraged, but laughter ran round the rest of the circle, easing the mood remarkably. He had won them over more truly with laughter than she had with her fierce impatience.

She was in no way contrite, though she had the grace to acknowledge his wisdom. „We should leave as soon as may be,“ she said, „with as large a caravan as we can muster, under a strong guard. You“—she thrust her chin toward Lugalbanda—„will command the guard. See that you choose men brave enough, and hardy enough, for mountains.“

Lugalbanda could find no words to say. He was the youngest and the least of this council. He was a fighting man, to be sure, and had led a company of stalwarts from the city with some credit and a number of victories the past few seasons. But to leave Uruk, to venture the mountains that walled the north of the world, to walk where all the gods were strange—

„I am not—“ he began.

No one heeded him. The king had heard what Inanna had tried to hide behind the shield of Lugalbanda. „You are going? Lady, you cannot—“

„I am going,“ she said with divine certainty. „My temple will do well enough in my absence. The rest of the gods will look after the city. No one and nothing in Uruk will suffer because I have gone from it.“

„No one but you,“ her brother said bluntly. „Lady, the journey is long and the road is hard. As great and powerful as you are, and as divinely blessed, still you walk in flesh, and flesh can be destroyed. We can't risk the loss of you.“

„You can't risk a lesser messenger,“ she said. „You could send every wise man in this council, and that would be a noble embassy, but my heart declares that they would fail. I may not succeed, either, but the refusal may be less swift. Men will hesitate to refuse a goddess.“

„I can't let you go,“ Enmerkar said.

She raised her chin. When she drew herself up, she was nearly as tall as the king. She met him eye to eye and will to will. „I am not yours to permit or deny,“ she said with dangerous softness. „I belong to Uruk, and Uruk has great need of me.“

He was not struck dumb—far from it. But before he could burst out in speech, the eldest councilor said, „Certainly no man may oppose the will of a goddess. But, lady, Uruk will be a sad place without you.“

„Uruk will be sadder when the Martu break down the gates,“ she said. „A god may address a god, even when kings are minded to be difficult. I will speak as an equal to the god in Aratta, and see what I may win for Uruk.“

Even the king could hardly fail to see the sense in that. He scowled and snarled, but he no longer tried to forbid her. She rose from her chair of honor and shook out the flounces of her skirt. „We leave before the moon comes to the full,“ she said.

Whatever protest any of them might have uttered, she did not hear it. She had swept out, grand as a goddess could be, in every expectation that when she deigned to look again, all would be done exactly as she had ordered.

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Mountains went up and up, but never quite touched the sky. Lugalbanda's men had known no height of land but what men made with their own hands: towers, and walls of cities. This lifting and tilting and tumbling of the earth robbed them of breath and sense, numbed them with cold and pelted them with stinging whiteness.

Snow, their mountain-born guides called that. They were casually contemptuous of the flatlanders, as they called the men of Uruk—but they were in awe of the goddess who traveled with them. Lugalbanda had deep doubts of their trustworthiness, but their fear of the goddess had proved thus far to be greater than either greed or malice.

He had been trudging upward since the world began, and wheezing for breath the more, the higher he went. Some of the men had had to turn back: they were dizzy, their heads were splitting, and when they tried to rise or walk they collapsed in a fit of vomiting. Lugalbanda was not much happier than they, but he had so little desire to eat that there was nothing to cast up.

There had been a raid or two, days ago; they had lost a pair of oxen and a drover. But since they had come to the top of the world, they were all alone but for the occasional eagle. Lugalbanda was sure by then that their journey would have no end, that they would climb forever and never find Aratta.

Inanna, being divine, knew no such doubts or weakness. She walked ahead of her people, beside or just behind the guides, wrapped in wool and felt and fleece, and nothing showing from the midst of it but her great dark eyes. She refused to ride on one of the oxen; she would not let one of the men carry her. Her legs were sturdy and her strides long; she breathed as easily on the summits as in the river valley in which she had been born.

Lugalbanda followed her blindly. The snow was so white, the light so piercing, that his eyes stabbed with pain. He wrapped them in folds of linen and followed the shadow of her, and knew little of where he went. He had no mind left; it was all burned out of him, there beneath the roof of heaven.

Even as dazed he was, he became aware, one bitterly bright day, that the ascent had stopped. They were going down, slowly sometimes, and at other times precipitously. Little by little the air warmed. The snow thinned. The sun's light lost its fierce edge. Lugalbanda's eyes could open again without pain, and his mind began to clear.

There came a morning when, having camped in a green and pleasant valley, they descended by a steep narrow track. It surmounted a ridge and, at midmorning, bent sharply round the knee of the mountain. There before them was not yet another wilderness of peaks but a wide green country rolling toward a distant dazzle and shimmer.

„The sea,“ Inanna said. He had not heard or sensed her coming, but she was beside him. The mountainside dropped away almost beneath her feet, but she stood as calmly as if on level ground. „Look, do you see? There is Aratta.“

He had seen it, but at that distance and out of the last of his mountain-born befuddlement he had taken it for an outcropping of rock. It was built on such, he saw as he peered under his hand, but its walls were deep and high, and within them he saw the rise of towers.

It was a greater city than he had expected. It was not as great or as noble as Uruk, but its splendors were manifold. Its walls were of stone, its gates of massive timbers bound with bronze. Its houses and palaces and the towers of its temples were built of wood and stone. The wealth of that, the extravagance, were unimaginable in a world of mud brick, but here they were commonplace.

They were three days on the road between the mountains and the city. Lugalbanda had sent men ahead, swift runners with strong voices, to proclaim the goddess's coming. They performed the task well: when the caravan came to Aratta, they found its walls hung with greenery and its processional way strewn with flowers.

Inanna allowed herself to be carried in like a sacred image, borne on the shoulders of the tallest and strongest of her guards. She had put on a gown of fine linen and ornaments of gold and lapis, and set a diadem of gold over her plaited hair, with golden ribbons streaming down her back and shoulders. She was as bright as a flame in the cool sunlight of this country, where everything was green, and the earth's bones were hidden beneath a mantle of grass and forest.

The king of Aratta received her at the door of his high stone house. He was a younger man than Lugalbanda had expected, tall and broad and strong, with the look of a fighting man and the scars to go with it. He watched Inanna's coming with an expression almost of shock, as if he had never seen a goddess before.

It was a remarkable expression, like none that Lugalbanda had seen before. After a while he set a name to it. It was hunger: not the hunger of the starving man who sees welcome sustenance, but of the rich man who thought that he had seized all the wealth that was to be had, but now he sees a treasure that is not his—and he must have it, whatever the cost.

As quickly as it had appeared, it receded into his eyes. He smiled the practiced smile of kings and greeted the goddess and her following in a fair rendering of the dialect of Uruk. She replied with dignity.

Lugalbanda did not listen to the words. He watched the faces. The god was not here: there was only one divinity in this place, and she had drawn every eye to her. No god would have borne such a distraction.

At length the king bowed and turned and led the goddess into his house. Lugalbanda followed at a wary distance. The caravan dissipated within the king's house; only Lugalbanda's own men followed the goddess to the depths of it, and there guarded her.

Embassies, even urgent ones, were leisurely proceedings. It would be days before anyone came to the point. Today they feasted and exchanged compliments. No word was spoken of the caravan of gifts and grain, or of the message that had come with it.

Nor did they speak of the god—not the king, and not the high ones seated near him, and certainly not Inanna. But in the farther reaches of the hall, among the young men, the talk was of little else. They were all wild to master the new weapon, which they called a chariot. „It is wonderful,“ they said. „Remarkable. Divine. To ride in it, it's like riding the wind.“

„I should like to see this thing,“ Lugalbanda said. „Is it winged? Do the winds carry it?“

„Oh, no,“ they said. „You should see, yes. Come after all this feasting is over. We'll take you to see the chariots.“

Lugalbanda made no secret of his pleasure in the invitation. They had no wariness in them, and no fear of betraying their city. They seemed as innocent as children. They were full of stories of the god: how he had come from a far country; how he had offended a goddess there and been broken for it, and still walked lame; how that curse had pursued him even to Aratta, and taken his consort and his daughter, and left him alone in a world of mortal strangers.

Lugalbanda must remember that these were strangers to him just as they were to the god, that even close allies could turn to enemies. Trust no one, the elders of Uruk's council had admonished him, and offer service to none but the goddess herself.

He was the elders' servant before all else. He exerted himself to be pleasant company and drank maybe a little more than was wise, but it was difficult to refuse his hosts' persuasion—and the beer was surprisingly good for an outland brew.

They were all much warmer than the sun warranted when the feast meandered to its end. Lugalbanda had a new band of dearest friends, each one dearer than the last, and all determined to show him their wonderful new god.

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The god was in his temple, forging bronze. The roar of the forge and the ring of the hammer resounded in the courtyard, silencing even the most boisterous of the young men. Wide-eyed and mute with awe, they crept through the gate into the inner shrine.

In Uruk it would have been a place of beauty and mystery, glimmering with lapis and gold, and made holy with the image of the god. Here were walls of stone unadorned but for the tools of the smith's trade. The stone was dark with old smoke, but the tools were bright, with the look of frequent use. On the far wall, where would have hung a tapestry woven in honor of the god, was a wonder of work in gold and bronze and silver, brooches and ornaments and oddities that might be trappings for chariot teams.

Later Lugalbanda would marvel at the artistry of the work, but his eye was caught by the figure that bent over the forge. There were others in the hall, laboring as he labored, but they were mortal. This truly was a god.

He had come, they said, from the land of the sunrise. Its light was in him, shining out of him. His skin was the color of milk, his hair new copper shot with gold. His eyes when he lifted them were the color of reeds in the first light of morning, clear green shot through with shadow.

There was a great sadness in them, a darkness of grief, overlaid with pain. He lived, said that flat stare, because he had no choice. Life was a curse, and death was not granted him. The light was gone from the world.

„His consort,“ said one of Lugalbanda's new friends: „the greater gods took her to themselves—oh, a while ago.“

„Five winters past,“ one of the others said. „A fever took her, and the daughter she had borne him. It was the fire of the gods, the priests said, taking back their own. There was nothing left of them but ash.“

„They burned away to nothing?“ Lugalbanda asked, barely above a whisper, although the others did not trouble to lower their voices.

„Not their bodies,“ his new friend said with a touch of impatience. „Their hearts and souls, their lives: all were gone in a day and a night. They were the breath of life to him, but they weren't permitted to linger here below. The gods wanted them back.“

„But they didn't want him?“ said Lugalbanda.

„My work is not done,“ the god said. His voice was soft and deep. He shaped the words strangely, but they were clear enough to understand.

Lugalbanda swallowed hard. He had thought, somehow, that the god was like his greater kin: oblivious to human nattering unless it was shaped in the form of prayer. But he wore flesh and walked visible in the world; of course he could hear what people said in his presence.

The god's expression was terrible in its mildness. „You would be from Uruk,“ he said. „Have you come to steal my chariots?“

Lugalbanda's shoulders hunched. But he had a little pride, and a little courage, too. „We are not thieves,“ he said. Then he added, for what little good it might do: „Great lord.“

The green eyes flickered. Was that amusement? „You are whatever your city needs you to be,“ the god said.

„My city needs me to show you respect, great lord,“ Lugalbanda said.

The god shrugged. His interest had waned. He turned back to his forge.

He was making a sword, a long leaf-shape of bronze. Lugalbanda did not know what—whether god or ill spirit—made him say, Don't temper it with your own heart's blood, great lord. That would cause grief to more cities than this one.“

„I care nothing for yours,“ the god said. But he said no word of Aratta. Lugalbanda chose to find that encouraging.

Inanna's head had been aching since morning. It was worse now, between noon and sunset of this endless day. The sky beyond Aratta's walls was low, the air raw and cold. It would snow by evening, the elders had opined, somewhere amid their council.

She was wrapped in every felt and fleece she had, and seated in the place of honor beside the fire, but she did not think that she would ever be warm again. She clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering, though it only made her headache worse.

She had presented her embassy to the king and his council, offering her caravan of grain and wine and lesser treasures in return for wood and stone and bronze. The king's eyes had gleamed as her men laid gifts before him: fine weavings of wool and linen; ornaments of gold, copper, lapis, amber; a pair of young onagers, perfectly matched; and with them a pair of maidens from the south, so like to one another that only they themselves could tell for certain which was which.

The king was a man of strong appetites, as she had observed at the feast of welcome. He accepted the gifts with unconcealed pleasure, but when they were all given, he seemed faintly disappointed. That vague sourness persisted through the council. His elders haggled like women at market. They wanted as much as Uruk



would give, in return for as little as they could manage. That was the way of commerce, even between kings.

She waited a considerable time before broaching the subject of chariots. Still, it seemed she had not waited long enough.

„No!“ the king said firmly. Until then he had let his councilors speak for him, but in this he would speak for himself. „Those we do not sell or give away. The gods have given them to us, with one of their own to teach us their making.“

„Indeed,“ Inanna said, „and the greater gods have let it be known to us that their gift resides in Aratta. Shall we not fill your granaries and adorn your women, and share this gift in return?“

Some of the council were wavering. One even said, „It will be a long winter. Our trade with the south was not as profitable as it might have been, nor are our storehouses as full as they should be. Surely—“

„We do not give our chariots away,“ the king said.

And that was all he would say, although the council stretched until evening. When it ended, he had not budged, and his elders had shifted equally immovably to his side.

Inanna was glad to leave the hall behind. She had thought only of food and a bed, but as she went to find both, she overheard two of the king's women whispering together in a corner. It seemed they had undertaken to console the god of chariots—a frequent venture, from the sound of it, but no more successful tonight than it had ever been.

„This time he was less angry,“ one of them said. „He's weakening, I can tell. One night he'll give way—and I'll be there.“

„Not before me,“ her sister said.

They hissed a little as cats will, but amicably enough. They did not see Inanna's passing: she made sure that they were blind to her.

It was not difficult to find the god. Inanna had thought he might be still in his forge, where people said he always was, but he was in the priest's house behind it, attended by servants who were both loyal and discreet. But they could not stop a goddess.

When she came into the room in which he was sitting, he had been eating a little: there was cheese by him, and a loaf of bread, barely touched. He had an apple in his hand and was examining it, turning it with long clever fingers.

„One eats that,“ she said without thinking.

Lugalbanda had told her of those eyes, how they were as green as reeds by the river in summer. Even forewarned, she was astonished, taken aback by the light of them and by the grief that haunted them.

But she was a goddess, and his equal. She met him stare for stare. He blinked ever so slightly. She was careful not to let him see her smile.

„I will make an apple of gold,“ he said.

„Make it of bronze,“ she said, „and adorn a chariot with it.“

„So you did come to steal my chariots.“ He did not sound dismayed by the prospect.

„I came to buy them,“ she said. „We're honorable merchants in our part of the world.“

„Honor is a rare commodity,“ he said.

„Not in Uruk,“ said Inanna.

„Then yours must be a city of wonders,“ he said.

„We do think so,“ said Inanna.

He almost smiled—almost. She watched the wave of grief rise up and drown him, the memory so vivid and so bitter that it filled her own heart with sorrow. She could see the two who had died, how beautiful they had been, how deeply he had loved them—how grievous was their loss.

„Come with us to Uruk,“ she said. She had not plotted to say such a thing; the words escaped her of their own accord.

He did not laugh in her face. Neither did he reject her out of hand. He frowned, but not in refusal. „Are you so desperate for chariots?“

„We are desperate for something,“ she said. „A new weapon, new power to destroy our enemies. But I didn’t ask for that. You would be welcome in Uruk for yourself, and not only for what you can give us.“

„Why?“

This was a god of uncomfortable questions. She chose to answer honestly. „There are no memories in Uruk.“

She had overstepped herself: his eyes hooded, and his face went cold. „The memories are within me,“ he said. „I thank you for your kindness.“

It was a dismissal. She bridled a little, but she judged it wise to yield. She had much to think of, and little of that had to do with the need of Uruk or the greed of Aratta. She took with her a vision of eyes as green as reeds, and a long fair face, and sorrow that her heart yearned to console.

After the first storm of winter, the gods of heaven relented and brought back for a while the mellow gold of the season that, in this country, they called autumn. The king of Aratta seemed to soften with the sky. He accepted the riches of the caravan in return for an acceptable quantity of worked and unworked metal, quarried stone, and mountain gold. He would not sell his chariots or their maker, but he granted the king of Uruk a gift: a single chariot with its team and its charioteer.

Lugalbanda had grown uneasy as their stay in Aratta lengthened. There was nothing overt to object to; the people of the city were unfailingly courteous, and some of the young men had become quite friendly. But he was growing weary of the cold, the strangeness, even the way in which the trees closed out the sky. His new friends took him hunting in the forests, and taught him the ways of a country that he could never have imagined in his distant and treeless homeland.

He could have borne that, at least until spring, but he did not like the way the king watched Inanna. It never came to anything; it was only a constant, starveling stare. Yet it did not lessen at all as the days went on.

It was not Lugalbanda’s place to bring it to her attention, but he suspected that there was no need. She had left most of the negotiations to the master of her caravan and withdrawn gradually from the daily councils. No one remarked on that. She was a goddess; she could set herself above mere human commerce.

It was assumed that she retreated to her rooms, which were warm, capacious, and adorned with every luxury. But Lugalbanda had discovered her secret: how she would put on a plain dark mantle like those worn by women here, and slip

away. Sometimes she went into the city, but more often she sought the temple and the one who lived in it.

She would efface herself there, sit in a corner and watch the god and his servants at their work. The god did not appear to find her presence distracting. Often as time went on, she would linger after the day's labors were done and take bread with him, and then they would converse. It was easy conversation, as between friends, or between gods who understood one another. She did not press herself upon him as a woman might upon a man, nor did he seem to see her in that way.

And yet Lugalbanda, standing guard upon them—unmarked by the god and unforbidden by the goddess—saw too well how it was with her. She was a woman in love, hardly aware of it herself, but he knew the signs. He suffered them, too, with just as little hope of requital.

As the fine weather continued unabated, even the god tired of his temple and ventured out to the field on which the chosen of Aratta ran their chariots. His coming was a great occasion. He was brought there in a chair borne by strong young men, to find a chariot waiting, larger yet lighter and stronger than the others. The beasts harnessed to it were like onagers and yet unlike: horses, they were called, born beyond the eastern horizon.

When the god rose from the chair, he was very tall, taller than any man there, but he stooped somewhat as if in pain, and his steps were stiff and slow. He disdained the stick that someone offered, but accepted the shoulder of one of his young men, leaning lightly on it as he moved from the chair to the chariot.

However faltering his gait on the earth, when he had ascended into the chariot and taken the reins, his heart and body were whole again. His back straightened. His head came up. The darkness of grief faded from his eyes. His horses arched their proud necks and tossed their long, thick manes.

He did not let them run as they begged to do, not yet. Inanna had come, walking alone, dressed as simply as a woman of the city. Still there was no mistaking who she was, with the light in her eyes and the beauty of her face.

She spoke no word to the god and he none to her, but he held out his hand. She let him lift her into the chariot. There was space for two of them, if she stood close, within the circle of his arms. She, who was as tall as many men, was small beside him.

Then at last he gave the horses free rein. They leaped into flight, as swift as wind over the grass.

Lugalbanda's heart flew with them, but his eyes were not completely blind to what went on about him. They saw that another had come to see the god and the goddess together: the king of Aratta with his look of perpetual hunger. It was stronger than before, strong enough to fester.

The god and the goddess were far away, caught up in the glory of their speed. Lugalbanda, mere mortal that he was, was left to protect them as he could. It was little enough: a word to his men, a doubling of guards for when she should return, and a prayer to the greater gods for her safety and for that of the god of chariots.

When the god rode in his chariot, he was alive as he never was in his temple. Wind and sunlight lessened his sorrow. For once he saw Inanna, if not as a woman, then as an emissary from another, brighter world.

They rode far from Aratta, too swift even for men in chariots to follow. Inanna tasted the intoxication of speed and found it sweeter than wine.

He saw her delight and shared in it. His smile transformed him; his face that had been so grim and sad was suddenly far younger, and far more beautiful.

They slowed at last by the bank of a river, out of sight of the city. The river was narrow and swift and too deep to ford. The horses trotted beside it, tossing their heads and snorting, still as fresh as if they had just come from their stable.

„Come to Uruk with me,“ Inanna said with as little forethought as before. As soon as the words escaped, she regretted them, but there was no calling them back.

This time he heard her, and this time he answered. His smile did not die; the darkness did not come back to his face. He said, „Tell me—is it true? There are no trees there? No walls of mountains shutting out the sky?“

„No forests of trees,“ she said. „No mountains. Only long levels of land, green fields and thorny desert, and the many streams of our rivers, flowing into the sea.“

„Only once have I seen the sea,“ he said. „My heart yearns for the open sky.“

„That, we do have,“ she said a little wryly. „And heat, too, and flies, and mud or dust in season.“

„Ah!“ he said. „Are you trying to lure me there or repel me?“

„I’m telling you the truth of it,“ she said.

„An honest merchant,“ he said. He was chaffing her, but gently. He drew in a deep breath of the cold mountain air, and turned his face to the sun. „I will go to Uruk,“ he said. „I will make chariots for you.“

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„You will not.“

The king’s face was dark with rage; his eyes were glittering. But they were not resting on the god whom he had tracked to his temple to discover if the rumor was true: that Aratta was about to lose the blessing of his presence. They were fixed on Inanna.

„You will not take our god from us,“ he said.

„That is not for you to choose,“ said the god. „I have served you well, and given you great gifts. Now I am called elsewhere.“

„You are seduced,“ the king said. „Your wits are clouded. Your place is here, where your destiny has brought you.“

„You overstep your bounds,“ the god said very softly.

„You will not be taken from us,“ said the king.

He beckoned. His guards came, shaking with fear of the god, but their fear of the king was greater. They did not presume to lay hands on him, but they made it clear that if he did not let himself be led away, they would bind him like a common mortal.

No fire came down from heaven. No storm of wind swept them all away. The god went as he was compelled.

Inanna stood stiff in a temple now empty of its god, with her fists clenched at her sides and her face white and set. Her guards had closed in about her. The king’s men surrounded them. None had yet drawn weapon, but hands had dropped to hilts.

A war was brewing, and she was in the heart of it. Her three dozen men stood against a hundred, and the whole city of Aratta behind them. Long leagues lay between Aratta and Uruk, and seven mountains, each higher than the last.

Lugalbanda opened his mouth to speak. He did not know what he would say, but he could hope that the gods would grant him inspiration.

She spoke before any words could come to him. Her voice was clear and cold. „Lord king,“ she said. „I offer you a bargain.“

The king’s greed was stronger than his wrath. His eyes gleamed. „What can you offer, lady, that will buy a god?“

„Myself,“ she said. „A goddess for a god. Set him free; let him go to Uruk. In return I will stay, and serve you as best I may.“

The king raked fingers through his heavy black beard. He was trembling; his breath came quick and shallow. „Indeed? You will do such a thing?“

She bent her head. „For Uruk I will do it.“

„What? What will you do? How will you serve me?“

That was cruel. Inanna’s back was rigid. „I give myself to you as your bride. I will be your queen, and the god of chariots will be free.“

Lugalbanda cried out in protest, but no one heard him. He was nothing and no one in this battle of kings and gods.

The king could hardly contain himself. He must have prayed for this; his gods had given him all that he asked for. But the roots of his avarice were sunk deep. „Bring me a dowry,“ he said, „of the riches of Uruk. Every year a caravan of wheat and barley, with all the beasts that bear it, and a tribute of gold, and a mantle woven by the king’s own women, a royal garment worked with images of the alliance between Aratta and Uruk.“

Her lips were tight, her nostrils white, but she said steadily, „In return for the god of chariots, his art and craft, his chariot and his horses, and teams of onagers with their drivers and those who tend them, I will bring you such a dowry.“

Lugalbanda watched the king reflect on the bargain, and ponder the riches that were laid in his hand—and what else might he win in this moment of her weakness?

He was a slave to his greed, but he was not a fool. He could see as well as any other man how far he had driven the goddess. He chose to desist while he held the advantage. „Done,“ he said, „and sworn before all who have witnessed it.“

„Done and sworn,“ she said, still with that perfect, level calm.

„Lady,“ Lugalbanda pleaded. „Oh, lady. Nothing is worth such a sacrifice.“

Inanna looked down at him where he knelt at her feet. She knew how he yearned after her; she would have had to be blind not to know it. But it was a clean yearning, the worship of a pure heart.

She raised him, though he resisted her, and laid her hands on his shoulders. „Uruk is worth any price.“

„Uruk could find another way,“ he said. „You’ll wither and die here, bound to that man.“

„I hope I am stronger than that,“ she said.

She kept the quaver out of her voice, but he loved her well enough to see through her mask of courage. „Lady,“ he said, and he wept as he said it. „Lady, you don’t have to do this.“

„You know I do,“ she said. „Go now, prepare the caravan. The sooner you’re out of this place with the god and his chariots, the better for us all.“

But he was not her dog, to run tamely at her bidding. „I’m not going until the bargain is signed and sealed.“

„If you wait,“ she said, „you may not be allowed to leave at all.“

He did not like that, but he gave way to her wisdom. He must see what she saw: that the king of Aratta was not an honest merchant.

She prayed that it was not already too late. „Go,“ she said. „Be quick. Time is short.“

He hated to leave her. She hated to see him go. But her choice was made, and his must not be made for him—to remain a prisoner in Aratta, with the god of chariots bound beside him.

The gates of Aratta were closed, and the guards were politely immovable. „After the wedding feast,“ they said, „you may go and welcome. The king requires the men of Uruk to witness the conclusion of the bargain, so that there may be no question in their city that it was truly fulfilled.“

There was no arguing with that, or with arrows aimed at their throats and spears turned toward their hearts. The guards’ courtesy was as honest as it could be, but so was their determination to carry out their king’s orders.

„Do you solemnly swear,“ Lugalbanda asked their captain, „that when the wedding is over, when the price is fully paid, we will be allowed to go?“

„I do swear,“ the captain said.

Lugalbanda had to accept the oath. It was no more than his own heart had desired before the goddess commanded him otherwise.

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The walls were closing in. This must be how it had been for the god of chariots, bound in forest and constrained by mountains. Had he felt the narrowness of Aratta’s walls, and the will of its king crushing his own beneath it?

Inanna could not go to him to ask. She was shut within the women’s house, surrounded by an army of servants. In a day and a night, in a fever of activity, they had made a royal wedding.

She had given herself up to them and let them make her beautiful, clothing her in the richest of the fabrics that had come from Uruk and adorning her with gems and gold. She fixed her mind on that and not on the man she had taken for Uruk’s sake. She must not grieve; she must know no regret. This choice was made as it must be. She had been born into this world for such choices.

Even as strong as she endeavored to be, when the king’s maids led her out to her wedding, it was all she could do to keep her head high and her shoulders straight. If she could have turned and run, she would have done it.

The king was waiting in his hall, naked but for the skin of a forest lion. She in linen and fine white wool, with her hair elaborately plaited and her face bravely painted, felt herself diminished by the raw power of this mortal beast.

She was a goddess, a daughter of heaven. She must not falter, even at the sight of Lugalbanda among the king’s men with the rest of the guards from Uruk. She must not think of what it meant that Lugalbanda had disobeyed her command, or

that the men about him had the look of men guarding a captive—or most disturbing of all, that the god of chariots was nowhere to be seen.

The chief of Aratta's priests set her hand in the king's and spoke the words that made her his wife. Her heart was small and cold and remote. She felt nothing, not even fear.

The king had joy enough for both of them. He took her as if she had been a great gift—and so she was, the greatest that had ever been given in this city. He neither noticed nor cared that she was silent. His delight was entirely his own.

The wedding feast was long and boisterous, but all too soon it ended. The women led Inanna away while the men were still carousing over date wine and barley beer. They had prepared the bridal chamber, hung it with fragrant boughs and adorned it with hangings of richly woven wool. The bed was heaped high with furs and soft coverlets, and scented with unguents from the south.

They took away her wedding garments but left the ornaments, and set her in the midst of the bed. They shook her hair out of all its plaits and combed the shining waves of it. Then they anointed her with sweet oils and bowed low before her and left her there, alone, to wait for the coming of the king.

She had hoped as a coward might, that he would lose himself in the pleasures of food and drink and lively company. But he had not forgotten why he celebrated the feast. He came as soon as he reasonably could. The sun had barely left the sky; it was still light beyond the walls. The king's men would carry on until dawn, but he had come to take what he had bargained for.

He was clean—that much she could grant him. He took no care for her pleasure, but neither did he cause her pain. He seemed not to notice that she lay still, unresponsive, while he kissed and fondled her. It was enough for him to possess her.

He was easily pleased. When he had had his fill of her, he dropped like a stone.

She eased herself away from his sleeping bulk. Her body was as cold as her heart. She wrapped it in one of the coverlets and crouched in the far corner of the bed, knees drawn up, and waited for the dawn.

With the coming of the day, Lugalbanda found the gates open and the way clear, as the captain of guards had promised. The caravan was drawn up, and his men were waiting. But the god of chariots was nowhere to be seen.

Lugalbanda was not in the least surprised. He called on the men he trusted most, who were his friends and kinsmen—five of them, armed with bronze. With them at his back, he went hunting the god.

The temple was empty, the forge untended. Its fires were cold. The god was gone. None of the king's servants would answer when Lugalbanda pressed them, and the king himself was indisposed. Still it was abundantly clear that the king of Aratta had not honored his bargain.

The god could have gone rather far, if he had been taken before the wedding feast. The gates were still open, the guards having had no orders to shut them. Lugalbanda stood torn. Go or stay? Take what he could and escape while he could, or defend the goddess against the man to whom she had bound herself?

He knew his duty, which was to Uruk. She was a goddess; he should trust her to look after herself. And yet it tore at his vitals to leave her alone in this city of strangers.

He did the best he could, which was to send the men he trusted most to stand guard over her door. They would take orders only from the goddess, and defend her with their lives if need be. „Let her know what the king has done,“ he said to them. „Do whatever she bids you—but if she tries to send you away, tell her that you are bound by a great oath to guard her person until she should be safe again in Uruk.“

They bowed. They were hers as he was; they did not flinch from the charge he laid upon them.

He had done as much as he might in Aratta. He turned his back on it and faced the world in which, somewhere, the god of chariots might be found.

The king slept long past sunrise. Inanna, who had not slept at all, was up at first light. She called for a bath. When it came, she scrubbed herself until her skin was raw. The servants carefully said nothing.

When she was dressed, as one of the servants was plaiting her hair, a young woman slipped in among the rest and busied herself with some small and carefully unobtrusive thing. She had bold eyes and a forthright bearing, but she was somewhat pale. Her hands trembled as she arranged and rearranged the pots of paint and unguents.

Inanna stopped herself on the verge of calling the girl to her. If she had wanted to be singled out, she would have come in more openly.

It seemed a very long time before Inanna's hair was done. The servants lingered, offering this ornament or that, but in a fit of pique that was only partly feigned, she sent them all away.

The young woman hung back, but Inanna had no patience to spare for shyness—whatever its source. „Tell me,“ she said.

The girl's fingers knotted and unknotted. Just as Inanna contemplated slapping the words out of her, she said, „Lady, before I speak, promise me your protection.“

„No one will touch you unless I will it,“ Inanna said. „What is your trouble? Is it one of my men? Did he get you with child?“

The girl glared before she remembered to lower her eyes and pretend to be humble. „With all due and proper respect, lady,“ she said, „if my trouble were as small as that, I would never be vexing you with it. Did you know that there are five men of Uruk outside your door, refusing to shift for any persuasion? Did you also know that the god of chariots has not been seen since before your wedding?“

Inanna had not known those things. The unease that had kept her awake had been formless; prescience had failed her. And yet, as the servant spoke, she knew a moment of something very like relief—as if a storm that had long been threatening had suddenly and mercifully broken. „Where have they taken him?“ she asked.

„I don't know, lady,“ the servant said. „But I do know that most of your men went to find him. I also know—“ She stopped to draw a breath. However bold she was, this frightened her. „I know that the king means no good to Uruk. He wants—needs—its wealth and its caravans of grain, but he would rather own it than buy it. Now that he has you, he'll seize the opportunity to make a state visit to your brother the king. If he happens to come attended by a sizable force, well then, isn't that an escort proper to a royal embassy? And if while he plays the guest in Uruk, your brother happens to meet an unfortunate accident...“



Inanna's hand lashed out and seized the girl by the throat. „Tell me why I should believe you. Tell me why I should not let my men have you, to do with as they will.“

The girl was not the sort to be struck dumb by terror. Her eyes, lifting to meet Inanna's, held more respect than fear. „Because, lady, you know what a woman can hear if she sets herself to listen. The king never remembers that women have ears. I heard him boasting to one of his cousins. He swore by the gods of the heights that the god of chariots will never leave Aratta. But chariots will come to Uruk, armed for war.“

However painful the truth might be, Inanna could not help but see it. The long levels of the river country were far better suited to the passage of swift battle-cars than these mountain valleys. They offered room for greater armies, faster charges, more devastating invasions. Aratta's king with his perpetual hunger would crave what he could gain with an army of chariots. And now he had free passage through the gates of Uruk by his marriage to its living goddess.

She did not berate herself for a fool. Her choice had been well enough taken. The king's might be less so.

„You have my protection,“ she said to the girl, „on one condition. Tell me the truth. Who are you and what is your grudge against the king?“

The girl flushed, then paled. Inanna thought she might bolt, but she lifted her chin instead and said, „My father was lord of a hill-fort that had been built above a mine of silver. The king sent envoys to him, who made bargains and failed to keep them. Now my father is dead and my brothers labor in the mines, and I was to be the king's concubine—except that you came, and he forgot that I existed.“

There was truth in that, a passion that Inanna could not mistake. She laid her hand on the girl's bowed head. The girl flinched but held her ground. „You are mine,“ she said. „Your life and honor are in my keeping. Go now and be watchful. Bring me word of any new treachery.“

Inanna's new servant bowed to the floor. In an instant she was up and gone, with a brightness in her like the flash of sun on a new-forged blade.

Inanna stood where the girl had left her. She knew what she must do. In her heart's wisdom she had already begun it, in making herself beautiful for the man who came shambling through the door, ruffled and stinking with sleep, wanting her again and with no vestige of ceremony. She suffered him as she had before, but more gladly now. Her purpose was clearer, her duty more immediate. In a little while, all bargains would be paid.

Lugalbanda found the god of chariots near a hill-fort a day's journey from Aratta. There was a mine below the fort, and a forge in it, to which the god was chained. His guards were strong, but Lugalbanda's were stronger—and they had unexpected aid: the slaves in the forge rose up and turned on their masters. The last of them died on Lugalbanda's spear, full at the feet of the god of chariots.

The god stood motionless in the midst of the carnage. He had an axe in his hand and a great bear of a man sprawled at his feet. The man's head had fallen some little distance from his body. Lugalbanda knew him even in livid death: he had been the captain of the king's guard.

The god's face was perfectly still. Only his eyes were alive. They burned with nothing resembling love for the men who had brought him to this captivity.

One of the freed slaves broke his chains with swift, sure blows. He walked out of them over the bodies of the slain, refusing any arm or shoulder that was offered. When he had passed through the gate into the open air, he let his head fall back for a moment and drank in the sunlight.

They had brought the god's horses, which some of Lugalbanda's men had reckoned madness, but Lugalbanda had trusted the urging of his heart. He had only and deeply regretted that they could not drag or carry a chariot up the mountain tracks. The god would have one with him, he had hoped, or would find the means to make one.

But the god needed no chariot. He took the rein of the nearer horse, caught a handful of mane, and pulled himself onto the broad dun back.

The horse tossed its head and danced. The men of Uruk stood gaping. The god swept them with his green glare. „Follow as close as you can,“ he said. With no more word than that, he wheeled the horse about and gave it its head.

The king was dizzied, dazzled, besotted. He lolled in the tumbled bed, reeking of wine and sweat and musk. Inanna rose above him. He leered at her, groping for her breasts.

She drove the keen bronze blade between his ribs, thrusting up beneath the breastbone, piercing the pulsing wall of the heart. It was a good blade. The god had made it, her servant said when she brought it, hidden in a bolt of linen from the caravan. It slipped through the flesh with deadly ease.

The king did not die prettily. Inanna had not wished him to. When his thrashing had stopped, when he had gaped and voided and died, she drew the blade from his heart and wiped it clean on the coverlets. Still naked, still stained with his blood, she walked out to face the people of Aratta.

The sun was setting in blood and the cold of night coming down, when the god rode through the gate of the city. His horse's thick coat was matted with sweat, but the beast was still fresh enough to dance and snort as it passed beneath the arch.

The god rode from the outer gate to the inner and into the citadel, and up to the hall. Inanna waited there, seated on the king's throne, with the bronze dagger on her knee, still stained with the king's blood. His body was her footstool.

She was wrapped in the lionskin that had been the king's great vaunt and the mark of his office. The king's body was wrapped in nothing at all. The five men of Uruk guarded them both, the living and the dead, but there was no defiance in Aratta, not before the wrath of a goddess.

She knew that she could expect treachery—she had braced for it, made such plans as she could against it. But the coming of the god of chariots had shocked them all into stillness.

His wrath was the mirror of her own. The marks on him told the cause of it. He had been taken and bound and forced to serve a mortal will. And she had robbed him of his revenge.

She offered him no apology. She had done what she must. He saw that: his eyes did not soften, but his head bent the merest fraction.

„The great gods bless your return,“ she said to him. „Have you seen my men? They were hunting you.“

„They found me, lady,“ he said. „They set me free. I bade them follow as quickly as they could. They’ll be here by morning.“

„So they will,“ she said, „if Lugalbanda leads them.“ And tonight, she was careful not to say, she would have six men and a god to guard her, and a city that watched and waited for the first sign of weakness.

She would hold, because she must. The king’s body at her feet, his unquiet spirit in the hall, were more protection than an army of living men.

She rose. She was interested to see how many of the king’s court and council flinched, and how many watched her with keen speculation.

The god spoke before she could begin. His voice was soft, almost gentle. He was naming names. With each, the man who belonged to it came forward. They were young men, most of them; she remembered some of their faces from the field of chariots. These were his charioteers. There were a good half-hundred of them, many of whom advanced before he could speak their names, coming to stand beside her loyal few.

They were a fair army when they were all gathered, surrounding her in ranks as if they were ordered for a march, with the god on his horse in the midst of them. He smiled at her, a remarkably sweet smile, and said, „Hail the queen of Aratta.“

„Hail,“ said the men whom he had summoned to her defense. „Hail the queen, lady and goddess, the glory of Aratta.“

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„A bargain is a bargain,“ Inanna said as they stood on the field of chariots, outside the walls of Aratta. A keen wind was blowing, with a memory of winter in it still, but spring softened it with the scent of flowers. „Uruk still needs Aratta—and I’ve made myself queen of it. Now my brother can trust that he will have the means to fight the Martu.“

„But—“ said Lugalbanda, knowing even as he said it that he could not win this battle.

„There are no buts,“ Inanna said. „I’ve won this city by marriage and by conquest. I dare not leave it to the next man who may be minded to seize it. It is mine—and its charioteers will serve me, because their god has bound them to it.“

Lugalbanda let the rest of his protests sink into silence. She was not to be moved. She would stay and be queen, and teach these people to honor their bargains. The god would go, because he had promised.

„There will be a great emptiness in Uruk,“ said Lugalbanda, „now that you are gone from it.“

„You’ve lost a goddess,“ she said, „but gained a god. It seems a fair exchange.“

So it was, he supposed, if one regarded it with a cold eye. But his heart knew otherwise.

He bowed low before her, and kept the rest of his grief to himself. Winter was gone; the passes were open. He could bring the god of chariots over the mountains to Uruk. Then when the Martu came again, they would find a new weapon, and new strength among the soft folk of the city.

When he straightened, she had already forgotten him. Her eyes were on the god of chariots, and his on her, and such a light between them that Lugalbanda raised his hand to shield his face.

„I will be in Uruk,“ the god said, „for as long as I am needed. But when that need is past, look for me.“

„You would come back?“ she asked him. „You would suffer again the shadows of trees, and mountains that close in the sky?“

„Trees are not so ill,“ he said, „in the heat of summer, and mountains are the favored abode of gods.“

„There are no mountains in Uruk,“ she said.

„Just so,“ said the god of chariots. He bowed before her as Lugalbanda had, but with markedly more grace. „Fare you well, my lady of the high places.“

„And you, my lord,“ she said. „May the light of heaven shine upon your road.“

He mounted his horse. The caravan was ranked and waiting, with a score of chariots before and behind. The new queen of Aratta was far more generous than the king had been: she was sending a rich gift to her brother, a strong force for the defense of Uruk.

She remained in the field, alone in the crowd of her servants, until the caravan was far away. Lugalbanda, walking last of all, looked back just before the road bent round a hill. She was still there, crowned with gold, bright as a flame amid the new green grass.

He took that memory away with him, held close in his heart. Long after he had left the city behind, as the mountains rose to meet the sky, he remembered her beauty and her bravery and her sacrifice. She would have her reward when the Martu were driven away: when the god of chariots came back to her. He would rule beside her in Aratta, and forge bronze for her, and defend her with chariots.

It was right and proper that it should be so. Even Lugalbanda, who loved her without hope of return, could admit it. A goddess should mate with a god. So the world was made. So it would always be.

