

Prologue

Urukagina had never liked hunting. Meat found its way to his family's table every night, and though he gave thanks to the gods for providing it and his father for buying it, he never spared the breath or thought to thank the hunters for hunting it. They were just doing their job, and a distasteful job it was. Besides, he preferred the fish of the canals.

Nonetheless he found himself outside the city walls of Girsu, spear gripped in the clumsy palms of his hands.

"This is not my idea of fun," he muttered, more to himself than anyone else, although it drew him several glances. His idea of entertainment was more like trying to sneak into the temple to see the prostitutes, or wrestling with his friends. "I'd rather tackle Suadda than a lion."

But his father was a peculiar and stubborn man, and wanted his son to excel in all things, not just the ways of trade. So while Suadda and Urukagina's other friends had a lazy day back in the city, Urukagina was out killing things.

Other hunters gathered around, readying themselves for the hunt. They were mostly poorer folk, those who had not been able to find land on which to raise their families. Yet they were proud, too, unwilling to go be beggars in Girsu, though the king and the temple, even at their cruelest, would not let them starve. Urukagina looked upon their muddy skirts and then away, with distaste.

"We are ready," one man pronounced. He wore the necklace of a priest, and immediately Urukagina's irritation gave way to respect. The priest met the eyes of each of the individual hunters, chanting appeals to Erra, god of the hunt, for their protection and success.

When Urukagina locked eyes with the priest, he sang to himself his own soft prayer, to Nergal, king of the underworld, who Erra was but an aspect of. "Let me not be too much beloved of you. Let the great cat not deliver me to your domain. For I would miss my mother, and she would miss me."

The priest continued on, and Urukagina looked down, satisfied. A few moments later, the incantations were finished, and the priest stepped aside. One man bowed his head and took long strides past him, and the rest of them followed, even Urukagina, though his feet took slow, hesitant steps.

They began the hunt.

The Cry of the Crow

They returned from the hunt. There was dirt on his hands but no blood on his spear as Urukagina stumbled back into the safety of the little circle of huts where they'd started from.

They'd found no lion, but rather a large-eyed gazelle, which had in turn led them to several others. They had crouched around the herd, creeping ever closer, and as their leader cocked his arm to throw his spear, Urukagina resisted the urge to cry out a warning to the small creatures, and instead fell back against some bushes.

Now they celebrated, the women of the peasant village coming out to cook the gazelles. The boys who had come on the hunt mingled with their young brothers and sisters, boasting and bragging.

"I took down two! No, three!"

"Erra certainly blessed my arm this day, for I felled a grown gazelle where he stood."

"As did I! I was so far away I could barely tell the bushes from the trees, yet when I threw, I lodged my spear in that gazelle's heart!"

One boy laughed. "You missed the gazelle entirely, Riguba," he said. "I saw your spear lodged in a tree. You took it down when the animals had fled and wetted it with the blood of one already fallen."

The boastings of the other boys quieted, then stilled altogether. Riguba's eyes narrowed as he looked at the boy's smiling face. "You lie, Imigu."

"I was right next to you. I speak what my eyes saw."

"No, you lie," said Riguba, stepping close and looking down at the slighter boy.

"You killed no gazelles today. You are jealous."

"I did not," said Imigu agreeably. "But neither did you."

Riguba grabbed Imigu's shoulder, and held back his hand, his fingers closed into a fist. Urukagina looked at the bigger boy, and imagined him with a spear in his arm, imagined that spear crashing into Imigu's smiling face, piercing the skin as it had pierced the gazelles.

"You did not," said Urukagina quietly. Before he knew he had decided to, he walked in between Imigu and Riguba. The latter took a step back and dropped his arm, lest he be seen as threatening the younger boy. He looked around at his friends, as if to say, I am in the right, you know. I cannot help it if this wealthy intruder stands in my way.

Imigu's face was blank as Urukagina took his arm and led him away from the larger boys who, once he was gone, began to mutter.

"You shouldn't provoke them," said Urukagina to the smaller boy. It was the advice his mother always gave him regarding his father, and Urukagina was careful to take it. "There were four of them, and one of you."

There was annoyance in Imigu's eyes. "You think you've done me a favor, don't you?"

"Well, yes."

It seemed that words were at Imigu's lips, but he swallowed them, and shrugged.

"Thank you, then," he said finally, and walked away.

Urukagina would have let him go, would have started the trek back into the city, but the whole encounter had left him feeling vaguely unsettled. "Wait!"

The other boy stopped at his command, and turned to face him. "Yes, sir?"

Yes, sir. Imigu, small and slender though he was, had a man's low voice and, Urukagina guessed, a few years on him. The unease tightened in his stomach, turned to anger. "Why don't you say what you really think?" he asked softly.

Imigu flushed, obviously thinking he was being baited. And, impulsively, he came out with, "Because your muddied skirt is worth more than the price of my sister."

Now Urukagina was imagining trading a little girl for one of his mother's copper necklaces. "I haven't done you a favor?" he asked. "Why not?"

"Because when you leave, they will come at me worse than if you'd not stepped in," said Imigu impatiently, his tone as though he were speaking to a fool or a child.

"Then I will not leave."

The other boy's eyes widened. "That's ridiculous," he spat. "Go back to your fancy house, and your full meal."

Urukagina flushed. It was a strange idea, wasn't it? "Well, I'll leave," he said. "But you'll come with me."

"But - but I have family!"

"To which you shall return," said Urukagina calmly. "I merely wish to do you a real favor, first. Now. Come," he ordered.

Stunned, Imigu followed.

The sun was setting as Urukagina led Imigu through the eastern gates into the city of Girsu. From there it was easy to spot the rising platforms of the ziggurat, the highest spot in the city. It was black against the sunset. Urukagina caught the other boy admiring it, and said, "My mother serves there, you know."

"Really?" Imigu asked, his curiosity overwhelming his pride.

"Yes. Not as much as she'd like to, I'm sure, but she is a mother and my father's wife, so she's got things to do at my home, as well."

"We haven't time either," Imigu admitted. "Even though my family works the temple's lands."

Urukagina smiled, glad that he and Imigu had something in common, then frowned, lest his smile be taken in the wrong manner. "It's a shame," he said. "Not even the worst criminals ought to be kept from the temple, and to be poor is not a crime."

Imigu stared at him for a long moment. "You're all right, you know that?" the other boy told him. Then he groaned. "Even if you're going to make my mother worry about me to no end."

"I'm sorry," said Urukagina. "I shouldn't - I shouldn't have ordered you to come."

"You shouldn't have," Imigu agreed, digging at the sandy ground with the tip of his foot before continuing on next to Urukagina.

They walked in silence for a little longer. The homes around them grew bigger and wider. One room huts stretched to two and three, the walls growing sturdier, and decorations began to be seen through the windows. Such windows were rare, being no help in keeping out the blazing heat of the day, but there were some grilles one could peek through, and although Imigu tried to hide it, he was desperately curious.

"Have you been into Girsu before?" asked Urukagina.

"Of course I have," said Imigu, sharply. Urukagina blushed, and he added, "But not that often. Where are we going?"

"We're going to the temple quarter. Well, not exactly. My home is right beside. My mother insisted." At Imigu's nod, Urukagina added, "We're almost there."

Imigu's steps slowed as he approached Urukagina's house, which was made of baked brick instead of clay. Urukagina led him around, through the central courtyard to the door. He looked into Imigu's eyes and saw fear, the same fear Urukagina had seen earlier when Riguba'd confronted him, the same fear that made his own heart heavy.

Urukagina reached out and touched his arm lightly.

"Come. Let's go inside."

When their teacher released them from the day's work, Urukagina and Imigu raced outside, feet pounding on the sandy ground as they made their way out of the city of Girsu to the temple lands outside the walls. The small clay huts set up every hundred metres or so looked mostly the same, but they knew where they were going - together, they pushed through the deer-hide that served for a door and

collapsed, breathlessly, in Imigu's home.

Imigu's little sister, Shagshag, was making some sort of food. She turned from her bowl and frowned at them disapprovingly. "And what's got the two of you in such a mood today?" she asked.

"Urukagina's finished with school!" said Imigu, with great excitement.

"And what about you?" she asked her brother.

"Oh, no, if I'm to be a scribe I've got much more schooling ahead of me," he answered.

"Poor fool," said Urukagina, elbowing his friend, even though this had always been the plan, ever since Urukagina had convinced his father to pay for Imigu's schooling as a 'favor'.

"We ought to celebrate!" cried Imigu, smiling.

Shagshag looked petulant. "You rejoice upon leaving school?" she asked disbelievingly. "How I would rejoice to enter it!"

Urukagina shrugged, a bit sheepishly. "What can I say? I do not much like numbers or words written out in clay. I have learned enough to serve my father, and to serve Ningirsu. It is enough for me." Then he turned to Imigu, and smiled back at him. "Yes, a celebration... I am far ahead of you, my friend. When I told my mother, she gave me some palm-wine. She said Siris would bless us in this endeavor."

"I believe she would," Imigu replied, looking serious, though a grin lurked beneath. Then he glanced at his sister, and his grin faded. "Oh, cheer up, Shagshag. Come have wine with us."

Shagshag still did not seem happy, but no peasant could pass up the offer of a rich man's palm-wine. They scurried out of Imigu's house, found a tree under which to rest. They drank slowly, savoring the taste, while Urukagina endeavored to explain to Shagshag why school was a burden he was glad to be rid of. He hadn't much success, however - she only grew more and more scornful.

"What about that riddle our master told us the other day?" asked Imigu. "What is the house that those whose eyes are closed enter it, yet those whose eyes are wide open come out of it?"

"A school, of course," said Shagshag angrily. "Was that supposed to amuse me?"

"Come now, let's change the subject to something more pleasant," said Urukagina, and because they were drinking his palm-wine, the other two agreed. So, of course, talk turned to politics. Shagshag, to Urukagina's surprise, was also hungry for knowledge of what went on in the palace and the temple.

"It's not really all that interesting," Urukagina explained. "Usually it's just about money. Who signed what contract, and how much they're owed."

"Money. Of course." Her words were bitter.

"Yes, money," her brother snapped. "There's nothing wrong with it, just because you have none." He sighed at her, and turned to Urukagina. "It's Riguba. He's been filling her head with nonsense."

The name sounded familiar, but the sentiments were much less so. He jerked his head up, startled out of the stupor the palm-wine had put him in by Shagshag's angry tone.

"It's not nonsense!" she said, outraged. "Riguba speaks rightly."

"And what of?" Imigu challenged.

"He speaks rightly that Lugalanda is no good king!"

"Lugalanda is an old man," said Urukagina. "Ningursu will sweep his frail bones aside soon enough."

"Soon enough?" cried Shagshag. "There is no soon enough. The harvest is coming, and if Lugalanda asks as much this season as he did the last, we'll starve, and die before he."

"Don't wail so, sister," said Imigu, looking to his friend, embarrassed. Urukagina shrugged at him.

"You have no right!" said Shagshag. "You are gone every day, into Girsu to study with Urukagina. How could you know how father worries?"

Urukagina and Imigu exchanged glances, unsure of how to argue with her.

Shagshag saw the meeting of their eyes and raised up her chin. "You think you are so grand; son of a wealthy man, and a rich boy's pet scribe. Where do your good clothes and full bellies come from? From the work of my family! Year round we work, and at the end of our labor, when we are resting, you sneak up behind us and press the edge of your sword to our throats!" Her voice was loud now.

"And when you have snuck away, you have taken two-thirds of our crop with you!"

Imigu had his hands out, petting her shoulders and trying to soothe her. She pushed him away, and Urukagina gave it a try. "Shagshag," he began placatingly, "we believe you are in the right, we do. But it is not our fault."

"How can it be anything but your fault?"

"It is not I who takes from you - "

"It is you!" she hissed. "The very robes you wear were bought by my father's toil, and so long as you wear them, you approve."

Slowly and deliberately, Urukagina began stripping off his robes, until he wore nothing but his sandals. Proudly, he gathered them up. "Here. These are yours." He handed them to Shagshag, who took them mutely, eyes never leaving his.

Then, he turned and began the long walk home.

Urukagina kept to the shadows. His father was in his element here, talking amongst the other merchants, flattering the king's men. Suni-Nam had taught his only son how to do the same, but Urukagina avoided doing so. It was easier to stand in the corner like a suppliant or a slave than to deal with such people as populated the palace halls.

"Izizi, my friend!" called Suni-Nam to a passing official, who met smile with smile and stopped to talk. "How are you? Have you captured any Ummaites? Found any treasure?"

"I, myself?" asked Izizi, blushing. He was a thin, retiring old man, who never liked to let conversation linger on himself. "No, and no - at least, not since we last met. But speaking of treasure, where is that fine young son of yours?"

Urukagina sighed and stepped out of the shadows, coming to his father's side. "A treasure, did you call me?" He laughed in the charming way his father had trained him to. "I doubt my mother would agree - it seems like every day I

catch her making offerings to Ningirsu, asking for a less troublesome son."

There were smiles and laughter at that, and courtesy satisfied, the conversation turned to the next ship sailing out to Tilmun for trade. "The ensi has declared that the ship's merchant will be sent to Tilmun with an order for copper," said Izizi, regretfully. "He wishes some decorations to be made..."

"How much copper?" The businessmen crowded around were already calculating what room would be left in the ship.

"Enough for Akitu festival."

This led to groans and scowls, but Urukagina beamed at Izizi. "I'm sure I speak for everyone here, when I wish for Enki's favor on this voyage," he said. "A copper decoration will be a fitting tribute, and a most pleasing addition to the temple."

Izizi blushed. "Well, actually, it is for the palace - "

Urukagina opened his mouth to reply hotly, but his father sent a warning glare his way, and he subsided, knowing better than to speak in anger. He sank away into the shadows again - this time, his father's. He trailed behind him as the merchants discussed weights and contracts with Izizi, as the king's man divulged plans for celebrations and the size of the harvests coming in. Urukagina sighed and spent the rest of the evening trying not to fall asleep even as he walked behind his father.

"Get him, Imigu! Watch your stance!"

"Just missed him. Next time, next time! Riguba!"

Urukagina sat a little ways away from his friend and his friend's former enemy as they wrestled for sport. There was a crowd of people around, calling out encouragements, but Urukagina didn't feel much like joining in. Instead he found himself some shade under a tree.

He was surprised to find someone sitting next to him, and even more bemused when he realized who it was. "Shagshag," he greeted her. "Shouldn't you be cheering on your brother?"

"Shouldn't you be cheering on your best friend?" she rejoined, settling herself.

He shrugged. "I've never been one for wrestling," he admitted.

"No?"

"It's too - it's too violent," said Urukagina, wincing as Riguba slammed Imigu's head into the ground. Imigu had grown in size since their first meeting, and his quickness served him well, but he'd never had a chance against Riguba.

Shagshag grinned. "I don't know. I think Imigu should get beaten around every once in a while. It would do wonders for his demeanor."

Urukagina shook his head, though a smile was on his face. "There are better ways to develop character than to have it forced upon you."

"Ah, but are there more efficient ways?"

"Come now," said Urukagina. He gestured to the wrestling match. "You didn't

leave such a spectacle to debate with me on its merits, did you?"

"No," admitted Shagshag.

"Well?"

She looked away for a moment, towards Riguba, then back to meet Urukagina's eyes. "We've heard rumors. All of us, around here."

"What rumors?" he asked, though he could easily guess.

"They say the king is dying."

Urukagina sighed and laid his head back against the trunk of the tree, the thin bark flaking off into his hair. "Then they speak rightly." Shagshag nodded and ducked her head - Urukagina suspected to hide a smile. "It is not so wonderful as it seems, Shagshag."

"But of course I mourn for my king," she said, mockingly, before resuming her serious demeanor. "... why wouldn't it be?"

"Because it isn't," he said again. Then he elaborated, slowly, as though it was painful to do so. Every word he spoke he had learned from his father. "Lugalanda has not been well for a long time, though that is not widely known. His advisors have had his permission to run the country as they will. Lugalmia, his son, is neither very good at running a country, nor very interested in it. It is likely that one of his advisors - either Izizi or his son, Suadda will take his place. Although Marab, who is the High Priestess of the temple and Lugalmia's mother, might not like that much. Then Lugalmia will rule with the same advisors, and the situation will stay much as it is now."

Shagshag's eyes narrowed. "These advisors are responsible for what's been happening?" she asked. "And they'll take Lugalanda's place?"

"Who can say?"

"Indeed," she replied, voice hard like rock. She stood up. Urukagina half-wanted to stop her, to bid her sit by him a little while longer, but instead he watched her as she made her way back to the wrestling match. She cheered along with the others, but even from behind he could tell she was distracted.

A little while later, when the match was over, she pulled Riguba aside and began to whisper furiously into his ear. She glanced over at Urukagina, saw him watching her. Their eyes met for a moment. Then she looked away.

Some time later Imigu came up to him, grinning despite having lost his fight most pitifully. To his surprise, Riguba was close behind him. "There's a canal that must be raised," he said without preamble. "If it is not, the lands will be flooded, and our families can reap no harvest. Will you join us?"

"Raised?" Urukagina asked distrustfully.

"The river water is filled with mud," Imigu explained quickly. "The mud is left on the floor of the canal, which grows higher and higher with time. Now the canal flows above ground, and we must raise the embankments, lest they break and flood the crops."

"Oh," said Urukagina. "Well, I would. But I am expected home soon."

Imigu nodded in acceptance, but Riguba frowned and walked away.

As Urukagina glided down the halls of the palace beside his father, he regretted for what seemed the thousandth time ever leaving the school room. Learning how to cut signs in clay had been positively enthralling compared to listening to his father and Izizi discuss the day's trade. It was a common practice of theirs, and one which Urukagina did not much appreciate. Today the topic seemed to be whether it was more profitable to trade with Cappadocia by caravan, or with Tilmun across by sea.

"The caravans are quite tempting to we individual merchants, you see," Suni-Nam was explaining. "There is little of the risk involved with the sea trade."

"Certainly our ships sink, occasionally," admitted Izizi, "but think of the treasures available when they reach Tilmun. Ivory from the Indus Valley! Everything from precious stones to delicious onions from Magan!"

Izizi's rhapsodies did little to interest Urukagina, but he perked up a bit as Izizi's son Suadda joined their small group. Suadda was a childhood friend of Urukagina's, although they'd grown apart in recent years as Urukagina favored spending time with Imigu.

Suadda clasped his father in greeting, then turned to smile at the rest of them. "It is a good day to meet such company," he said, bowing his head slightly.

"And it is good to meet such a companion on this day," said Suni-Nam smoothly in reply. "You're well-spoken, dear boy, but even better adorned. What is that you're wearing?"

Suadda smiled and showed off the gem that was set in his necklace as the sparkling point of a spear. "Lovely, isn't it? It's a remembrance of Eannatum, and the glorious days of his rule. I got it with the profit I made off the last ship that sailed to Tilmun."

"The profit you made?" asked Urukagina, mildly, remembering all Shagshag had said about the heavy burden taxes were on her family.

"Yes, the profit I made," said Suadda proudly.

There was something in the way he turned up his nose. Or perhaps it was the conversation Izizi and Suni-Nam had just been having, calculating how much they could make in the next trade. Either way, Urukagina still opened his mouth and said in a voice that was harsh and low and not quite recognizable, even to himself: "Tell me, Suadda, how many famers' livelihoods do you wear on your neck?"

Suadda looked blank, Izizi wounded. His father's own stare was so angry he didn't dare meet it for long.

Suni-Nam smoothly guided the conversation away from Urukagina's comments but when Izizi and his son had gone ahead, he grasped Urukagina's arm with strong fingernails. His grip was tightly painful.

"What was the meaning of that?" he hissed. When Urukagina did not answer, he added, "We shall deal with this in private." Gesturing for his son to follow, he stalked away.

Sometime later, as the sun began to fall from the heights of the sky, he

reached Imigu and Shagshag's home. The former braced him with an arm around his back, the latter ran up before him. "What happened?" she demanded.

He flushed. "I said some things that were not much appreciated," he said, touching his jaw, which was sore.

"What did you say?"

Urukagina was unable to match her eagerness. "I said that Izizi - that's the king's chief advisor - that his son Suadda grows unfairly rich from the work of the poor." It sounded much better when he was telling Shagshag than when he was explaining it to his angry father. "Well, more or less."

Shagshag looked confused. "More or less?"

"I didn't use as many words."

Imigu moved to speak, but his sister spoke first. "And why not? Why not use all those words, and more?"

Urukagina sighed. "Because my father bid me stop."

"And why did you agree to?"

Was she in earnest? Urukagina looked at her as blankly as she stared at him. "Because he is my father."

She turned away with a frustrated scowl, and so it was Imigu who asked, "Is he not a man like any other?"

"Yes," agreed Urukagina, "but he is my father."

Shagshag still did not look at him, but when she spoke, her voice was cold.

"And are you as much a slave to him as we are?"

Urukagina felt his bruised jaw again, then stood up, took a step over to him. He laid his hand on her shoulder. "He is - Shagshag, he is my father."

She threw off his hand and stormed out, leaving Imigu to comfort Urukagina, not that there was much to do but let the injuries heal. They would do it easily enough, given time. Perhaps he would also make some prayers to Ninkarrak, goddess of healing. It was not that they hurt so much, but that he hated to wear evidence of his father's displeasure.

He was explaining as much to Imigu when Shagshag returned. He fell silent, then rose, stunned, as Riguba followed her into the house.

"I have wanted to hit you for a long time," said Riguba, by way of greeting, which caused even Shagshag to look startled. "But I see someone has gotten to your clean, rich face first, so I shall consider myself satisfied."

Urukagina wasn't sure what to say to that. Before he could come up with a good response, Riguba had continued.

"Shagshag and Imigu tell me you are sympathetic to us. They tell me you are to be trusted." Urukagina raised an eyebrow at Shagshag, who stared stonily back at him. "I am not sure I agree."

"And who are you," said Urukagina, "that your opinions ought to mean so much to me?"

"My name is Riguba," he said, and Urukagina realized with a start that they'd never been introduced, though they certainly knew each other's names. "Who am I? I suppose I have no titles to my name, nor much money. In fact, I had so little money that when the collectors came around - when the king's men, the temple men came to take my money - I had to sell myself into slavery in order

to make what I needed to pay."

"I'm sorry you were placed in such - "

"You are not sorry," snapped Riguba. "If you were sorry, I would not have had to come here, I would not have had to shame myself before you." He said shame, yet he stood the proudest in a room of proud people. "No one who does not know what it is like to be owned by another man, can truly be sorry."

Urukagina took a deep breath, and tried again. "Look, I appreciate your admitting this to me, but - "

"But nothing," Riguba cut him off again. "You are either with us, or you are against us."

"Against who?"

"Against us," Shagshag broke in. "Against me. Against Imigu." Urukagina turned to his friend, who shrugged helplessly, and nodded.

"See here," said Urukagina, finally looking back at Riguba. "I am with you, but not because you're threatening me. I'm with you because I don't think it's right that you all should have to work so hard, and me so little. I'm with you because I think the temple as it stands now is corrupt, and nothing like the temple my mother taught me to obey. I'm with you because I believe you are Ningirsu's beloved, not because you are my own."

Shagshag looked angry at this response; Imigu's expression was one of relief and confusion. But Riguba merely nodded, and, after muttering something to Shagshag, turned and walked out.

Imigu let out a sigh. "Honestly, Shagshag," he muttered, once Riguba was gone. "Did you have to bring him? He always causes a scene. I know you're sick with love for Riguba, but did you have to involve him in this?"

Shagshag looked at Urukagina and flushed. "One thing has nothing to do with the other!" she cried. "I brought Riguba because I knew he would convince Urukagina."

"He needed no convincing," her brother retorted.

"I am right here," said Urukagina mildly.

Imigu turned. "I am sorry, my friend, for that, and for such a ridiculous interrogation..."

Shagshag shook her head. "You're both wrong. Riguba has a friend who is a slave in the palace, a servant of Eniggal, who administers the land of Queen Barnamtarra. Lugalanda is dying - our time is nearing."

Urukagina refused to believe that Shagshag could know more about the king's condition than he did. "Come now," he told her. "What does a slave know of the future?"

"That is what you think!" she spat, furious. She let out a cry of frustration.

"I give up on your sort! Go, live richly and happily, and let revelation hit you through a spear in the gut!"

And for the second time that evening, she left in an angry huff, leaving two shocked boys behind her.

"Father," he asked, several nights later, once the bruises had faded from his face. "How does our king fare?"

"He fares well," said Suni-Nam. "I know not the ways of the healers - only the accountings of merchants, which are of little help in these matters. But from what I've seen, he fares well. Better than he has before."

Urukagina took a deep breath. "I have heard rumors that Ereshkigal calls to him."

Suni-Nam shrugged and Ahanisu, his mother, looked up from the meal she was making and stared at him curiously.

"Father," he said, "what will happen when Lugalanda passes?"

Suni-Nam looked at him, eyes grave, and said mildly, "I suppose we'll have to choose a new king."

"Lugalmia?"

Again, his father shrugged. "Or some cousin or general."

"A general?"

"To keep us safe from Umma, of course," said Suni-Nam.

"Small border raids of one or two men are hardly threatening - "

"In your opinion," his father said, voice sharp and short, like he wanted to end the conversation. "And your opinion has not been asked for."

What about the people? he wanted to ask. Do they get no say, either?

But he remained silent.

He was awoken from troubled sleep by hands pushing against his chest. When his eyes flickered open, Shagshag stepped away from him, warily.

"Shagshag - ? What?"

"It is starting," she said flatly. Her feet betrayed her feelings, however - restless, she moved to his window and peered out of it. Torchlight flickered on her solemn face.

He sat up, pushed himself out of his bed, began searching for his sandals.

"Why did you come here?" he asked. "I thought you'd given up on my sort." His own room was bare of decoration, but the rest of the house was filled with carvings, adorned by copper and fish-eyes. He found himself wishing he could've seen her expression as she took his home in. Perhaps then she would have some sympathy, some appreciation for what he was giving up -

"Not entirely," said Shagshag. "You may be rich man's son, and a fool as well, but you've pledged yourself to this battle - "

Urukagina imagined his best friend and his father meeting each other with metal, imagined himself raising a sword against Suadda. He wiped sweat from his brow and murmured a prayer. "Ningursu, please in your grace keep violence from us."

"We'll fight you for this," warned Shagshag with a scowl, evidently regretting having woken him. She looked as fierce as a fighter, though she could not possibly have had a weapon hidden in the folds of her thin robe. "We'll die for this."

"I'm on your side." Urukagina looked at her in anguish. "I don't want to fight

my father or my king, but if I have to, I will." He swallowed thickly, and blinked to keep tears from falling. "I - this - it's hard enough as it is, Shagshag. I need you."

He'd meant to say that he needed her support, her faith, but the words stopped short and then failed him altogether. Suddenly her arms were around him, and he was holding her, clutching her to him, one shaking hand stroking her hair.

"We have to go," she murmured into his chest.

"What do I do? What do I say?"

"Riguba's spoken to you, didn't he?" asked Shagshag. Riguba had - they had talked many times and many nights since that first tumultuous meeting. At Urukagina's nod, she continued, "You know, then. Ningirsu will put the right words in your mouth."

He didn't move. "What can I possibly say to them?"

She looked at him, sad but firm. "More than I."

"Sometimes, Shagshag," he replied softly, "I think you can do just about anything."

She smiled, her lips just barely curving upwards. He leaned down and brushed his own lips across her mouth. Then, wordlessly, he walked past her, out his own door, and the door of his house, towards the palace.

Urukagina found his father sitting around a table with Izizi and his son, Suadda, the high priestess Marab, and Lugalnia, the old king's son. They spoke softly, hurriedly, and didn't notice their observer. Feeling slightly ridiculous, Urukagina cleared his throat.

They all looked up at once. Suni-Nam was the first to speak. "What are you doing here, son? I'd thought to let you get some rest."

Urukagina smiled - a thin, hollow smile, but a smile nonetheless. He bowed his head. "Thank you, father," he said, sincere even if his father wasn't. Then he turned to address the group. "The better question is, what are you all doing here?"

"We are discussing the future of Lagash," said Izizi smoothly. Marab confirmed this with a cold smile, Suadda with an eager nod. Lugalnia looked like he'd rather be anywhere than where he was, but to his credit, his eyes seemed red from sorrow instead of boredom.

"Oh, and what is Lagash's future?" asked Urukagina. "Tell me, I'm eager to know. Will we have Marab and Lugalnia, who shall continue our current way of robbing the poor so much that the whole city and surrounding lands flee from their rule? Or will we have Suadda, who waves his sword in mimicry of the barbarian Eannatum, pushed on by his greedy father, who yearns to reap the spoils of war?"

They were all looking at him now, most in some state of shock. "Be quiet," his father hissed, belatedly. "Do not make yourself ridiculous."

Summoning his strength of will, Urukagina ignored Suni-Nam. He gestured to the others. "Look at you," he spat. "Dividing up the lands as though they were

yours! They are Ningirsu's, and Ningirsu has given the lands to the people."

A long silence greeted him. Then Marab pushed forward, her eyes glittering with rage like the gems of her necklace. "Who are you to speak of Ningirsu?" she asked. "I am the head of the temple. Who are you to tell me what Ningirsu does and why?"

"I am beloved of him," said Urukagina, softly, surely. "And that is enough."

Marab scowled. "Who are you to call yourself beloved? Do you wear the temple robes? Have you ever burned a bone, or read a dream?" Her tone was scornful, and her words brought new life into the eyes of the others.

"No, I have not," admitted Urukagina. "But neither have I robbed the people of their harvest, nor have I stolen their sons and daughters and made them slaves."

Suni-Nam sucked in his breath, but made no move to stop his son. Indeed, he seemed afraid to remind everyone else in the room that he was even related to him. The high priestess had been stunned into silence.

Izizi coughed and stepped forward. "There is no need for such harsh words," he said. "Especially with our king not even properly buried yet. Can there not be peace between us, here and now? He would have wanted that."

Izizi smiled, and Urukagina could not stand that smile. In his mind, it was no match for the fury of Shagshag's frown. "Lugalanda wanted to make the temple kneel to the palace," he said calmly. "He wanted to make both rich by the sweat and the tears of a starving people. I care not for what Lugalanda would have wanted."

Lugalmia looked upset at this, but still content to sit in his chair and watch the others. Urukagina noticed for the first time a flask in his hand, and just as he was about to turn and confront Marab and Izizi on this matter, Suni-Nam stepped forward.

"That is enough!" he shouted, hitting Urukagina across the face. His son stared at him, ears ringing, as he continued. "You are obviously not the man I thought you were. Go home to your mother. We have serious matters to discuss, and we've grown tired of your dramatics."

Urukagina very nearly obeyed. He took a step backwards, fumbled for words. Then, reaching deep inside himself, he found them.

"These are not just words, father. Step outside the palace, father. The rest of you, as well. Lugalmia, even, if you have left him dignity enough to walk."

Urukagina shook his heads. "These are not just words, father. They are demands."

No one said anything for a long moment. Then Izizi barked to his son, "Suadda! Go, see if what he says is true." Urukagina's old friend nodded and ran out.

"I would not lie in a matter such as this," said Urukagina conversationally, as they waited for Suadda to return. "Tell me, who did you plan to name as king in the morning? Surely not the one with the wine?"

Marab and Izizi both looked quickly to Lugalmia, who stared obliviously back at them. Then they glanced at each other, and it all became clear to Urukagina.

"You never meant for Lugalmia to be king," he said, "though I'm sure you didn't tell Lugalanda that." He laughed. "You meant to give the kingship to Suadda, didn't you?"

"We mean to, yes," said Izizi, calmly. "Surely you can not blame me, Urukagina. Who does not want their son to be king?"

"And who does not want to wed the king?" asked Urukagina, sharply, of Marab. "You cannot marry Lugalmia, your own son. Yet if he took a wife when king, he would give her your position, and you would no longer be the high priestess." He shook his head, disgusted. "You'd trade your own son for a few more years of power."

She nodded. "Do not condemn me so easily. I know your mother, Urukagina. She studied under me in the temple, before your father married her. She would have done the same to you."

"Out of love for Ningirsu," said Urukagina angrily. "Not love for herself!"

"It hardly matters," said Suni-Nam, cutting in. "You've made a fool of yourself, boy. I'd meant to arrange for you Izizi's position. You would've been the king's highest advisor. But look at you now! You're not fit to advise a child, let alone a king."

Urukagina opened his mouth to reply, but before he could speak Suadda rushed back into the room. "Father!" he said. "There are - there are great crowds outside!"

"They have heard the news and wish to mourn the king," said Marab. "Calm yourself."

"No!" said Suadda. "I mean, they're not here to mourn. They have torches in their hands."

"It is dark," said Marab.

"They are restless."

"Restless with grief," she said, then turned to Izizi. "If they are not here to mourn the king, then what are they here for?"

"We are here," said Urukagina, with great satisfaction, "to take our city back."

A few hours later Urukagina found himself outside in front of the palace, arranging a peaceful transition of power from Lugalmia over to the people of Lugash. It was not going as well as planned.

"Are they coming out yet?" Riguba complained. He was tall and handsome in the flickering torchlight, and he clutched Shagshag to his side.

Urukagina looked at him wearily. "No, not that I can tell," he said. "They've only just begun to realize that their guards won't fight for them. It could take days for them to understand that their only choice is unconditional surrender."

Riguba groaned, and stalked away, leaving Shagshag to deal with Urukagina. "What do they want?" she asked.

"Safe passage to Ur or Kish, at the very least," he said. "My father refuses to deal at all."

"How ridiculous!" scoffed Shagshag. "We could crush them easily, if we wanted to."

"But we don't want to," said Urukagina quickly. He held out his hands in a calming gesture.

"Well, why can't we give them safe passage?" she asked. "I don't really care what happens to them, once they're out of here."

He shrugged. "Ask Riguba - he was the one who refused the offer before."

"Why should I ask him?" asked Shagshag, looking confused.

"Because you're the one he'll answer," said Urukagina bitterly back. Then he paused, surprised at his own tone. More moderately, he added, "Riguba will tell you, won't he? Because you're lovers?"

To his surprise, she waved a hand dismissively. "That's not important," she said. "Riguba's not important. He's a good man, he's a brave man, he got these people here - but not a single person inside that palace will deal with Riguba. They'll deal with you."

Urukagina's brow furrowed. "What? Why?"

"Because you're the wealthy man's son, you're the rich man, you're - "

He sighed and gestured around them. "I thought this was to change all that."

" - the man with the fancy clothes and the distinguished manner," she continued, ignoring him. "You're the one who'll be king in Lugalmia's place."

Urukagina stared at her, stunned. "What?"

"I said, you're the one who'll be king. Why?" She looked into his eyes, saw his astonishment, and began to laugh. "What, who did you think would be king? Imigu?"

He opened his mouth to reply to her. Then, realizing he had nothing to say, he shut it again, and waited for her to finish laughing. She did, eventually, raising a hand to his cheek. "You really did all this, without a thought of being king?"

He shrugged, wordlessly.

She smiled again, and his hands were on her own cheeks, and his fingers brushed the edges of that smile. "Go on," she said, as he leaned close. "Go on and show them who's giving orders, now."

"Right," he said, pulling away reluctantly. "... king? Me? Are you sure you've got that right?"

"Yes!" she said, laughing again. She shooed him back into the palace.

In the end, Marab and Lugalmia opted for Ur, while Izizi decided to seek his fortune in Kish. Riguba begrudged them the mercy, and warned Urukagina on several occasions that they'd be back, seeking revenge. Neither was he happy when Urukagina announced that Suadda would be allowed to stay, would in fact be kept on as an advisor.

"Ningirsu will guard me well enough," answered Urukagina. "And if he does not, then it is a revenge they were meant to have."

Riguba threw up his hands and walked away. Imigu, chuckling, followed him to cheer him up with the offer of palm-wine. Shagshag, however, stayed.

"Well," he said, not unkindly. "What is it?"

"There's something I request of my king," she said, casting her eyes to the floor. It was almost a joke, her playing the supplicant, after all the times she'd yelled at him. "A favor I'd like."

Oh, he knew he'd forgotten something. "Shagshag," he said. "I told you I'm making you a priestess, right?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Yes, you did, and for that I'm grateful. But there's something else I'd like."

He bit his lip. "And I told you I'm giving your family lands and money so they never have to worry about starving again."

"Yes, you did."

"Then there's something else you want? Merciful Ningirsu!" cried Urukagina when she nodded. He raised his eyes to the heavens. "What more can she possibly need?"

She laughed, but there was uncertainty in her laughter. She raised her eyes to meet his. "My king... Urukagina... I need you."

Before he knew it he had closed the distance between them; he had her in his arms and was saying, thickly, "Riguba. I thought you loved Riguba."

"Once, maybe," she admitted breathlessly. "Not anymore."

Urukagina forced the words out. "Because he's not king?"

"Because he's not you!" Shagshag's eyes flashed in outrage.

He winced. "Don't strike me, I had to ask," he said, holding his hands out placatingly.

"I won't hit you," she agreed, grabbing his hands. He pulled her to him and kissed her instead.

"Your sister," Urukagina confessed to Imigu one day, many days later and several years into his reign, "does not much like being with child."

"It explains why it took her so long to get that way," said Imigu with a shrug.

"Well, no, that might've just been to be contrary. Shagshag's like that."

"She says it hurts her back and hurts her feet and makes it hard for her to run the temple," Urukagina continued. "As if I can do anything about any of that!"

"You'd think she'd have the most luck," mused Imigu. "She's the high priestess. Tell her to pray to Inanna."

"I did," said Urukagina, shaking his head. "She looked like she was going to hit me."

Imigu laughed. "She would, wouldn't she?"

"You would think a king would be better at controlling his wife," said Urukagina with a sigh.

"Not even the gods are their wives masters, always," said Imigu. "Think of Inanna, and how she ruled Dumuzi. When she became trapped in the Underworld out of her own pride and recklessness, she bargained so that her husband could take her place!"

Urukagina shivered. "Let us hope Shagshag and I never end up like that."

"Well, since you are not gods, you should be fine."

Urukagina smiled, but instead of answering, he gestured for Imigu to pick up his stylus and resume the task they'd started before Urukagina had felt the need to relate his marital troubles.

A slab of wet clay was laid out on the table before them, already beginning to be shaped into a cone. There were some marks already made near the top by the thin strokes of the stylus. Urukagina admired Imigu's hand. He could read the markings, but not make them, at least not with the range and style that Imigu could. Besides, it was not considered proper for a king to do his own writing.

The idea for this tablet had come from Suadda, surprisingly enough. His childhood friend had annoyed Urukagina to no end, talking endlessly about Enannatum and Entemena and the "glory days" of Lagash, referring reverently to the "great steles" of past kings. Urukagina didn't much like the idea of setting up a stele praising himself, but if it was describing the reforms he'd enacted... well, those should be praised, and besides, it was best to have the law written down.

"Formerly," he dictated to Imigu, "in days of yore, from the day the seed of man came forth, the man in charge of the boatmen siezed the boats. The head sheperd siezed the donkeys and the sheep. The man in charge of the fisheries siezed the fisheries. The barley rations of the priests were measured out to their disadvantage in the storehouse of the king."

He paused, waited for Imigu to finish writing. Then he began ennumerating all the crimes that had been comitted by Lugalanda and the people under him and the people before him.

"These," he said quietly, when he was done, "were the practices of former days. But when Ningirsu gave the kingship to me, Urukagina, I held close to the word which my own king, Ningirsu, spoke to me. I banned the man in charge of the boatmen from siezing the boats. I banned the head sheperd from siezing the donkey and sheep. I banned the man in charge of the fisheries from siezing the fisheries. I made sure the barley rations of the priests were measured out fairly."

With a heavy heart Urukagina thought of his father, and continued, "In the days of yore, when a good donkey was born to a man, a more influential man could say to him, 'I want to buy it from you' and even if the man refused, the more influential man could buy it from him. I hereby amnesty all those imprisoned or enslaved by the debts they incurred in such a manner, as well as all those indebted by the palace's claims to barley and grain."

There was a long silence, punctuated only by the soft sounds the stylus made as it ran through wet clay. "I am done," he said to Imigu, who set down the stylus.

"Let these words be known."

Urukagina had never seen Shagshag quite so weak as when he came to her bedside after she'd given birth. Shagshag held their daughter, Zagmu, in her arms, love written on her face along with exhaustion. She had a look in her eye. It

said, 'all this work for so little a thing?'

He came to stand beside her, pulling her hair back off her damp forehead. "How is she?"

"She is fine," said Shagshag. "Full – she just came from the wet nurse. And tired."

"As are you," Urukagina added. His wife was pale, laid out along the bed. It seemed that every ounce of her energy was in her arms, held out to cradle Zagmu. Wordlessly, he took his daughter from her. Shagshag murmured her thanks and fell quickly asleep. He sat on the edge of her bed and held the little girl, pressing his lips to her pale, smooth cheeks, rubbing the thin brown tufts of her hair between his fingertips.

"It is hard to believe you were once that small."

Urukagina looked up. He barely remembered to keep his voice low as he reeted his mother happily. Ahanisu, now wrinkled and gray, walked slowly over to him. She took Zagmu's little hand in her wizened one.

"Yes, I remember when you were that small. Even smaller," said Ahanisu, upon further consideration. "Yes, you were a tiny baby, and unnaturally quiet."

"Quiet?"

Ahanisu laughed lightly. "You did not cry so much as others did," she said. "You will find out all about crying babies soon enough – or maybe not. You are a king, after all."

Urukagina did not much like the thought of Zagmu crying. He had not seen her crying yet, and, he decided, never cared to. "Perhaps she will take after her father, then," he said.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," said Ahanisu with a shrug, as she sat down beside Urukagina. "You never did take after yours."

Urukagina looked away from her, away from Zagmu, to the copper-plated door of the birthing room. He asked, heart heavy, "He is not coming, is he?"

"No," she replied.

Urukagina had not spoken to Suni-Nam since the day they'd confronted each other in the palace, before Lugalmia and Izizi and Marab – and most importantly, before Ningirsu. Suni-Nam was a proud man. He would not back down, not even to see his own granddaughter.

"Can you blame him?" asked Ahanisu gently. "Your reforms... they have nearly ruined him."

"I have offered him alms – "

"He does not want the alms of a king. He wants the offering of a dutiful son to his father." She said this flatly, without accusation, and the warmth of her eyes offered no reproach.

"I have tried to be dutiful," said Urukagina. "Oh, how I tried! But my first duty is to Ningirsu, not to Suni-Nam."

Ahanisu opened her mouth to agree, but she was interrupted by Zagmu, who had been awakened by Urukagina's too-firm hold. His daughter began to cry, a thin wail that grew stronger.

"Here, let me," said Ahanisu, gathering Zagmu up. "I know something that may calm her." Closing her eyes, she began to sing.

Come sleep, come sleep,
come to my daughter,
hurry sleep to my daughter,
close her restless eyes.
While she sleeps the crow will not utter its cry,
the lion will not kill,
the wolf will not sieze the lamb.

Come sleep, come sleep,
come to my daughter,
hurry sleep to my daughter,
let not her babbling tongue hold back sleep.
While she sleeps the crow will not utter its cry,
the lion will not kill,
the wolf will not sieze the lamb,
the wild dog, devour of kids, is unknown.

"That sounds familiar," said Urukagina, when she had finished.

"I used to sing it to you, my son."

Urukagina smiled, and placed his hand across his daughter's forehead, and resolved that she would never hear the cry of the crow.

Shagshag was not quite the same after she gave birth to little Zagmu, and though it pained Urukagina to be separated from them, he sent them away. The hustle and bustle of the city did not agree with Shagshag, he suspected, and anyway, it was better for her not to be tempted to return to her work as mistress of the temple of Bau. He ordered a dozen nurses and Imigu to accompany them.

Suadda approached him the next day, claiming that he'd removed the queen from the city because he feared Lugalzagessi's forces, which rumor claimed were massing for war. But he waved Suadda off. "Enough about Umma! Ningirsu will protect us, as he always has." And Suadda stormed off, angrily. Urukagina was alone.

Ahanisu understood, however. She joined him when he took meals at the palace, for although he had advisors and supplicants aplenty, he no longer had the company of those he loved. When his mother could not come, he ate his fish and bread alone. Each time she left, he extended an invitation for his father to join them. Each time she came, she was by herself.

"Your father is a stubborn man," Ahanisu said to him once, when they had finished eating. "When I first met him, I had no love for him, though he clearly had much for me. He asked me to marry him five times, and when I refused for the fifth time, he asked my father."

"He knew that you didn't care for him, yet he arranged a marriage with your

father anyway? That is not love," said Urukagina, "that is cruelty."

"So your father does not love me, then," said Ahanisu with a shrug. "Ningirsu loves me, and that is enough."

"As do I," he reminded her, reaching across the table and taking her hand in his own. "I am glad to have you in times such as these."

"... is it bad?"

He was silent for a long moment. Then he said, in a quiet voice, "We do not know anything for certain."

His mother squeezed his hand with shaking fingers. "Ningirsu will guide you and bless you," Ahanisu said, tenderly. "He always has."

Battle sounded outside. Suadda conducted the defense - Urukagina hadn't wanted to resist, but how could he tell Suadda no, when he'd been right about everything? So he'd given Suadda permission to protect the city, but when his childhood friend pressed a spear into his hand, he dropped it to the floor. It fell, clattering.

Urukagina walked out of the palace, unnoticed in the din. Sand kicked up by the warriors floated into the city and scratched at his eyes. He raised his hands to wipe at his face as he stumbled into the temple, and the guards made as if to stop him, then saw who he was. Surprised and embarrassed, they stepped back to let him through.

The stairs, as he climbed them, seemed endless: one after another, stretching up to the sky. By the time he'd made the second level he could see onto the battlefield. Men fought and died, before his eyes but beyond his reach.

He was gasping slightly as he took the last flight of stairs. He no longer looked down onto the battlefield; his head was tilted back, his face turned up to the heavens. "Oh, Ningirsu, masterful one!" he mumbled, as he at last reached the altar. He raised his voice, pitching it to carry, though he had but one simply thing to say. "Why?"

He knelt, knees and palms pressed against warm clay. After a long moment, he began, "Oh, Ningirsu, what have I done wrong? By the life of heaven, by the life of the underworld, by the life of Enlil, father of the gods. I swear I have done as I thought you wanted."

He gestured blindly to the scene below him, to the cries of war he could still just barely hear.

"How can you let your beloved people fall? We have made your temple beautiful, we have made your city righteous. We have honored you on the holy days. We have praised you before all others, except for Enlil, father of the gods. We have worshiped you, sacrificed to you, even now we fight for you. If one word of this I speak is false, let snakes from the underworld rise to bite at my feet! Let my eyes ache, and my heart constrict, let the bite of illness take me with sharpened teeth! May you not allow me to raise my head."

He was slumped against the altar, prostrate, tears falling from his cheeks and dropping against the ground. He felt for a moment a great hope, as though he

might receive some answer, some resolution. Then he heard footsteps behind him.

It was a messenger boy. "Get out of here!" he roared in outrage. "You are not allowed atop the ziggurat! You blaspheme against Ningirsu! It is your fault that they are dying out on the fields."

The boy flinched, but did not go. "My king," he said. "They have breached the city. Suadda is dead. We must flee."

Stunned, Urukagina stumbled to his feet. "Suadda? Dead?" He remembered wrestling with Suadda when they were boys together, how he never fought hard enough or long enough to win. He imagined Suadda wrestling the troops of Umma, one by one. He imagined Suadda collapsing, tired unto death.

"If you will have no mercy on us," he whispered to Ningirsu, "at least be kind to us. Guide him well to the underworld."

"My king." The boy was insistent.

"Yes, I'm coming," said Urukagina, and he followed the boy down the winding steps of the ziggurat, out of the temple, and out of the city. What few carts and carriages there were had been used in the fighting, so they walked until night fell.

But even then it did not get dark. Every so often Urukagina could turn around and see Girsu burning, and the flames, even from afar, lit their way. They passed towns, some full of worried faces, some emptied by the fighting, and some approached asking for news, but they had little to give. None of them knew his face, and Urukagina realized that he was once again a simple man, no longer king, no longer beloved of Ningirsu.

He looked back at his burning city, and thought bitterly that Ningirsu loved no one anymore.

"Urukagina!" came a cry from beside him. He had reached the town he'd been searching for. Shagshag flew into his arms. She was frailer than he remembered, but she hugged him fiercely.

"Our daughter?" he asked, as he held her. "And Imigu?"

"Zagmu is inside, the nurses are tending to her," said Shagshag. "My brother is - my brother is that way." She pointed towards a nearby field.

"I love you," he told his wife. She nodded, and let him by her.

Imigu, when Urukagina came upon him, was kneeling on the dry field, a large lump of clay stretched out before him. He was facing the city of Girsu, and the flames cast a dim light on his cheeks. Something glittered on Imigu's face, and Urukagina realized his friend was crying. He felt his own face, and realized he was as well.

"Imigu - "

" - the Ummaite has set fire to the Ekisurra! He has set fire to the Antasurra, carried off its precious metal and lapis lazuli. He has laid hands on the palace Tirash. He has laid hands on the shrine of Enlil." Imigu's voice was strained, and his hand flew quickly over the clay, marking words as he spoke. "He has set fire to the altar of Inanna, carried off its precious metal and lapis lazuli, destroyed its statues. He has ruined the barley of the field of Ningirsu, as much as had been plowed."

Imigu threw down his stylus, and turned to face Urukagina, who had fallen to his knees as well. "It is gone," he mumbled to Imigu. "It is gone, and it is all my fault..."

"No!" said Shagshag, who had come up behind them. She took the stylus and forced it into Imigu's hand.

"Because the Ummaite destroyed the bricks of Lagash," Imigu continued, making more marks and reading them aloud, voice full of hatred, "because he committed a sin against Ningirsu, Ningirsu will cut off the hands that have been lifted against him!" He gazed at Urukagina again, tenderly. "It is not the sin of Urukagina, king of Girsu. May Nidaba, the goddess of Lugalzagessi, make Lugalzagessi bear all these sins."

Then Imigu put down the stylus, this time for good. Urukagina stumbled over to him, wrapped his arms around him, and Shagshag threw herself into their embrace. They held each other desperately, weeping, until the fires burned themselves out, and the sun rose.

Epilogue

Twenty years later, Zagmu, now a married woman, led her father, now an old man, to the gates of Nippur. There, in chains, stood Lugalzagessi, the victim of his own ambition. Sargon of Agade had brought him there to be spat upon. It was late in the day, and the sun had taken his toll on Lugalzagessi. He was propped up against the gate, but his eyes were closed, lashes clumped with dirt sticking together.

"And to think this man destroyed Ningirsu's beloved city," said Urukagina, voice bitter but tempered by time. "Truly he must have had Nidaba's help, as he now has Ningirsu's retribution."

Zagmu reached out, as if to comfort the weary man, then pulled her hand away. "Why did Ningirsu wait so long to get his revenge, father?"

Urukagina sighed. "Why did Ningirsu allow Lugalzagessi to raze Girsu in the first place?"

Zagmu waited a moment, then asked, softly, "Why did he, father?"

"I do not know," said Urukagina, taking her hand and squeezing it. "Perhaps he wanted to remind us that we are not gods."

His daughter looked at him, confused.

"We are more like beasts than gods, Zagmu," he said. "We fight, using spears instead of claws. We feast on the bodies of others, though they be cooked instead of raw. We cry out in anger and in sadness. And we die."

Zagmu gazed at Lugalzagessi. "We die, chained like beasts in cages?" she asked.

"Not always," said Urukagina. "Some times we die, beloved by our families, and by our gods." He touched her cheek, fingers gentle. "Come on, Zagmu. This isn't a place I wish to linger."

As Zagmu led him away, Urukagina thought he could hear, faintly, the cry of the crow.