

Murder in Shuruppak
by
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2713 B.C., City-State of Uruk, Southern Sumer

IT WAS MARKET DAY in the walled city of Uruk, a fact Shin Eqi-unninni silently regretted as his chariot made its way slowly through the throngs of merchants, townspeople, and livestock choking the main thoroughfare leading to the city docks. Shin held a jasmine scented, linen cloth to his nose, trying in vain to arrest the overwhelming stench of animal urine and feces and the pungent odor of unwashed humanity. The dust from the street hung thick in the air, trapped between the two-story *dag-gias* lining both sides of the street. These were family dwellings, each sharing a wall with its neighbor to form an unbroken chain of mud-brick facades and doorways. Bright sunlight gave way to sharp, geometric shadows as the street meandered at odd angles through the artificial canyon of earthen walls.

“*Make way!*” bellowed Shin’s attendant, a burly, bare-chested man in a woven flax kilt. He was walking several feet ahead of the chariot, prodding commoners out of the way with a long, wooden staff. “*Make way for the king’s architect!*”

The crowd squeezed obediently against the walls of the houses to allow the royal party to pass.

“We should turn around,” whispered Shin’s younger brother, Nur-Shamash, clearly nervous. He and Shin were the only occupants of the chariot.

They were clad in luxurious, white, linen tunics, their right arms and shoulders exposed as was the current fashion amongst the elite class. Both had long, braided beards. Nur-Shamash’s hair was straight and shoulder length. Shin’s was long and neatly coiled into a bun on the back of his head, secured with an ornate clasp of electrum.

“Do not fret,” said Shin calmly to his brother. “Today is not a day to worry, but a day to be calm. Assured. *Brave.*”

Nur-Shamash nodded meekly.

“You there!” shouted the attendant to an elderly woman dawdling in the middle of the street. “*Make way!*” He poked the woman rudely in the back with his staff, shoving her out of the way.

“Do not beat them!” Shin called to the attendant. “They’ve done nothing wrong.”

The attendant shrugged. “As you wish, sir.”

As they passed the old woman, Shin tossed her a tiny *bulla* of baked clay, bearing the official royal seal of Uruk and a triangular indentation representing a sheaf of wheat.

“*Thank you, Master Shin!*” the old woman exclaimed, beaming a toothless smile as the chariot creaked slowly by.

Shin Eqi-unninni was well known in Uruk, and well liked—a virtual *celebrity*. At forty years old, he had the poise and intelligence of an elder yet the physique and striking features of a much younger man. He was a scholar, a writer, an architect, and—most importantly—a close confidant of the king, Uruk’s ruler, legendary hero, and living god.

The Giant.

THE CITY DOCKS and marketplace were a beehive of human and animal activity. Burdened donkeys and oxen crisscrossed the open air market, carrying every manner of goods and produce on their backs—from fine cloths and precious stones to bitumen and cut reeds. Beyond the marketplace, three long docks jutted out into the watery expanse of the Euphrates. Several large, wooden boats with cedar masts were moored firmly to the docks, secured to wooden pylons with braided, flax twine. Upstream, dozens of small, tub-shaped *guffa* boats and square *kalakku* rafts dotted the riverbank.

“Over there!” shouted Shin to his attendant. He pointed to the farthest downstream dock, where a long, wooden riverboat was tied neatly alongside. Several workers in woven kilts and sandals were busy on the boat, making final preparations for their voyage—driving bronze spikes at strategic locations, lashing wooden pieces together with twine, and smearing black, gooey bitumen over every seam and crevice. These boats were meant to travel in only one direction—downstream with the swift current of the Euphrates. When they reached their downstream destination, the sailors had to disassemble the boats and haul them by donkey or oxen back upstream to Ur or Uruk, where they were then reassembled and set upon the river for yet another voyage. It was grueling work, but, as indentured servants working off family debts, these men had no choice.

Shin and his brother alighted from the chariot and made their way to the awaiting riverboat. Merchants and sailors—even those from foreign cities—stepped clear of the brothers’ path, recognizing their fine garb and ornate jewelry as the marks of either the priesthood or nobility, either of which warranted a wide swath of respect.

Shin reached the riverboat first and strode confidently aboard. He’d made this trip dozens of times in the past seven years and knew the boat and its indentured crew quite well. His brother stepped aboard behind him, his movements tentative and unsure.

The two made their way to a canopied compartment at the stern of the boat and ducked quickly into it, closing the woven-grass flap of the enclosure behind them. Inside, they stared silently at each other for several seconds. Then, slowly, Shin pulled a long, wrapped object from his tunic and unfolded its soft, sheepskin wrapping to reveal a bronze dagger, its serpentine blade reflecting the tiny pinpricks of morning sunlight that permeated the thatched canopy above. They both stared with heavy hearts at the cruel blade—longer than man’s foot with honed, razor edges culminating in a single, deadly point. This was a weapon with only one purpose. *Death*. They nodded slightly to each other, acknowledging their murderous conspiracy. Then Shin re-wrapped the dagger and handed it to his younger brother, Nur-Shamash—no mere accomplice in this plot—who took it reluctantly and slipped it into the folds of his tunic.

THE RIVERBOAT REACHED the solitary dock at *É-ganba* in the late afternoon. As Shin and his brother knew, *É-ganba* was not a true village but, instead, a mere transfer point—a place to unload the riverboats and transfer their building materials, food, and supplies to teams of donkeys and donkey-drawn carts that would make the remaining overland trip to Shuruppak. Shin and his workers had built the dock at *É-ganba* several years earlier and had given the small encampment its utilitarian name, *É-ganba*, which meant, simply, “transfer point.”

Nevertheless, over the years, several mud-brick structures had been built at *É-ganba*, and a number of crude roads had been cut through the marsh and incrementally built up and reinforced with packed mud. Many laborers, particularly those without families, chose to stay in *É-ganba* between shipments of timber and mortar, rather than return to the city. As a result, *É-ganba* now boasted a crude dormitory, a public house, and—not surprisingly—an *és-dam* located directly between the two.

A brothel.

The first of the king’s boats arrived shortly after Shin’s, carrying the king’s chariot and several of the royal attendants. Shin directed his workers to unload the magnificent chariot and other royal accoutrements, while Nur-Shamash showed the young attendants the public house and, surreptitiously, the brothel.

The second of the king’s boats arrived shortly thereafter, carrying the king’s guards and the high priest of the temple of E-anna, a thin, sulky man with a dour expression and distrustful eyes. Again, these men were shown to the public house and treated to free food and spirits as a cadre of women descended upon them. The high priest, himself, partook of several chalices of fortified wine.

The king’s boat was delayed.

As planned.

It arrived three hours later—just before dusk—carrying a disgruntled king and three of his most trusted guards. Shin met them at

the dock with a concerned expression. “Your eminence,” he said earnestly, “I was concerned for your safety.”

“We began taking on water,” said one of the deck hands. “We had to row ashore for repairs.”

Shin nodded knowingly. *The man had earned his pay.* “The royal chariot awaits, your eminence,” said Shin. “But we must leave now if we wish to have the assistance of the sun—”

The king cut him off. “Where are my attendants?” He stepped off the boat with Shin’s help. He was a huge man—towering more than a full hand above Shin’s head with broad shoulders and muscular arms bulging beneath his white, linen tunic.

He never ages, Shin thought to himself. “Your eminence,” he said carefully, “they were hungry . . . and thirsty. So I sent them to the public house for replenishment. It’s entirely my fault, I should have—”

The Giant held up his hand. “It’s all right, Shin. We were delayed. You did the right thing.”

Shin smiled affectionately at the king, a man he’d known since he was a child and loved like a father. Just as his *own* father had loved the king, and his grandfather before that. Indeed, the two families shared a kinship that stretched back more than a century.

And, now, with The Giant having produced no offspring . . .

“I would like to see the temple now,” said the king. “Summon my chariot.”

Fifteen minutes later, a small caravan departed É-ganba for Shuruppak, the king’s ancestral home. The king and Shin rode in the royal chariot, with one of the king’s guards guiding the chariot’s donkey on foot. Nur-Shamash and the high priest rode in a wooden donkey cart, well worn and rickety, with another of the king’s guards leading it on foot.

As they rode in silence, Shin recalled the day the king had first unveiled his plan to build a gleaming new temple in *Shuruppak* . . . a ghost town devoid of a single, living soul.

It seemed preposterous!

But, then again, The Giant was known for his bold plans. Like building a wall around the *entire* city of Uruk, or building a massive shrine to E-anna out of *imported* limestone from the northern mountains.

Shuruppak was the fabled city of the king’s ancestors, once a mighty city on the Euphrates. Centuries ago, it had overflowed with grain from the bountiful harvests of the rich, Sumerian plains. But that was before the Great Flood, which had destroyed the city and changed the course of the Euphrates River . . . forever. Now, Shuruppak was a ghost town of disintegrating ruins, fully three thousand rods from the nearest bend in the river, and devoid of natural resources, citizens, or commerce.

It was nothing.

Except, now, it had a new temple. A temple designed and constructed by Shin Eqi-unninni of the great Eqi-unninni clan. A temple

like none ever before seen in Sumer. A temple dedicated to the hero of Uruk. A living god. *The Giant*.

The king eyed the temple curiously as it came into view through the forest of *gis-gigs* (date palms), which had suddenly given way to a clearing. It looked something like a small ziggurat—a square base with four sides that tapered gently inward as they rose toward an imaginary point in the sky that they never actually reached. Instead, the walls terminated abruptly about ninety feet off the ground, leveling off to form a flat, turreted platform. The structure resembled a giant obelisk that had been chopped off about one-third of the way up. Yet, something about it was strange. The sides of the temple seemed to reflect the blood-red rays of the sinking sun like mirrors. They were smooth . . . almost *shiny*.

“Where are the steps?” the king asked in a baffled tone. Every ziggurat he’d ever seen had steps leading up to a chamber at the top, where priests and royalty could reach out to the heavens.

“*No steps*,” said Shin flatly.

The king furled his brow, apparently confused . . . or disappointed. *Or angry*.

Minutes later, the entourage pulled alongside the north wall of the temple, which now loomed high over their heads. Up close, the reason for the temple’s shiny appearance became immediately apparent. The bricks were *glazed*, and subtly contoured to exactly match the taper of the walls. The king ran his hand across the smooth, glassy wall, obviously impressed with the ingenious idea and with Shin’s superb craftsmanship.

“This way, your eminence,” said Shin, waving a flaming torch toward a set of narrow steps that led *down*—deep into the ground.

The king said nothing but looked genuinely confused.

“We can go *inside*,” Shin explained, already starting to descend the narrow steps.

The king and his guards exchanged baffled glances, then followed Shin cautiously down the narrow, brick steps in single file. The high priest followed the guards, shuffling his feet under the lingering influence of the sweet, fortified wine.

Nur-Shamash brought up the rear. Beneath his tunic, he could feel the cold blade of the bronze dagger pressing against his ribs. His heart was thumping wildly. *It was time*.

The six men passed, one by one, through an arched doorway at the bottom of the stairs and into a small, subterranean anteroom on the other side—just inside the temple wall. Now stretching before them was a long, narrow hallway of superb masonry construction, illuminated with flaming sconces every few feet. It extended deep into the heart of the temple and disappeared into the darkness.

“This way, your eminence,” said Shin, starting down the corridor.

The king followed hesitantly, as did his guards.

“*Nobles and priests only*,” announced Nur-Shamash abruptly, stopping the guards. A small scuffle broke out.

The king turned and was about to speak when Shin interjected. “This is a sacred chamber, your eminence. *Your* sacred chamber. Those unworthy will defile it. It must remain pure or it will lose its . . . *magic*.”

The king considered those words for a long while and glanced, askance, at the priest, who shrugged stupidly. Finally, the king nodded in agreement. “Wait here,” he ordered his guards.

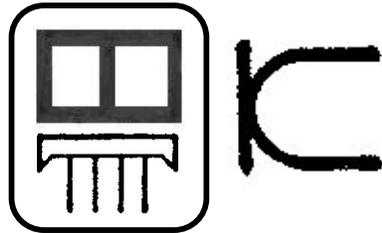
The four worthy men—the king, the priest, and the two Equinninni brothers—traversed the hallway in single file until they reached a large chamber on the other side.

The flame of Shin’s torch illuminated the vast, columned chamber in flickering hues of yellow and orange as the king and the priest gaped in breathless silence, clearly awestruck by what they saw.

“What is *that*?” the king asked finally, pointing a long, graceful finger at the most prominent fixture in the room, a massive construct of alabaster, marble, and limestone.

“The inscription is over here,” replied Shin, strolling around to the far side of the structure and disappearing behind it.

The king followed the glow of Shin’s torch, which was now held close to the structure’s limestone pedestal. A chiseled inscription was clearly visible in the flickering halo of the torch’s light:



“I . . . I don’t understand,” said the king, turning to face Shin. He was visibly surprised to see Nur-Shamash suddenly standing beside his brother.

In a single flicker of flame, a flash of polished bronze sprang from Nur-Shamash’s tunic and plunged, in one forceful arc, deep into the king’s chest. A guttural groan escaped the king’s throat as he fell to his knees, his eyes bulging wide, his mouth agape in utter disbelief.

Working quickly, Nur-Shamash gripped the dagger’s handle tightly with both hands, twisted its serpentine blade until it found a groove between the king’s ribs, then ripped it forcefully to one side. The Giant—Uruk’s king and living god—grunted in agony, then collapsed awkwardly to the ground, his punctured chest gurgling blood into a widening pool of red on the hard, dirt floor.

The high priest gasped loudly and recoiled at the gruesome spectacle unfolding before him. Yet he said nothing. *Did* nothing. When it was all over, he glared angrily at Shin, shaking uncontrollably. Yet, still, he made no move.

He knew better.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, the threesome emerged from the temple, whereupon the high priest dutifully announced to the awaiting guards: “By the will of E-anna, Queen of Heaven, Protector of Uruk, Shin Eqi-unninni is now the rightful king of Uruk. He shall henceforth be called *Ur-Nungal*, son of The Giant. And all shall obey his command.”