

When Goddesses Clash

By Brandon S. Pilcher

The glowing barge of Ra sailed at a leisurely pace up the sky from the east and beat its light against the black peaks that gave the Ebon Spine its name. Up a broad and sandy pass through the Spine marched the army of Kasakhmat, the young Per'Aa who ruled Kumat. Many times had Ra voyaged over and beneath the earth since they departed their kingdom along the fertile banks of the Iteru to the south, trudging over miles of dusty plains and rolling dunes. This morning, since their scouts had already sighted their enemy up ahead, the army advanced not with the exhausted lumber of thousands of soldiers, zebras, and elephants through the desert heat, but with the excited rush of warriors ready to engage. Their chanting, and the rhythmic thunder of war drums, further animated them in preparation for the greatest clash of bronze weaponry they were likely to ever undergo.

Riding in her zebra-drawn chariot with her bow in hand, Kasakhmat anticipated the battle with the bubbling eagerness of a girl about to play with new friends, even if it was against an enemy as wretched as the Shinarites. Those hairy, lighter-skinned barbarians from the far north had spent most of their history too preoccupied with fighting one another to present a threat to Kumat, but recently they had united under the ruling Lugal Shulgi of Unug and now sought to invade and plunder the wealth Kasakhmat's people had accumulated. As their Per'Aa, descended from Amun and beloved of all the gods known as Netjeru, Kasakhmat would not let the Shinarites touch a single grain her subjects had harvested. She would crush them like a hippopotamus stepping on a beetle, scatter the survivors like a lioness scattering jackals, and then have her victory commemorated with chisels and paint all over her kingdom.

The strategy the Per'Aa had developed was not complicated. Her elephants would lead the charge into the Shinarite front lines, with her infantry and archers backing them up, while the Kumatian zebra chariotry exchanged missiles with the Shinarite war carts along the sides. Kasakhmat's generals had warned that their numbers and the enemy's would be almost equal, and that the Shinarite slingers' barrage of bullets might provoke the elephants into an indiscriminate rampage beyond control. She knew these were valid concerns, and yet she knew the Netjeru would be watching over her people throughout the entire ordeal. Never would they allow the vile Shinarites, or their false gods the Anunnaki, to have the upper hand.

The barge of Ra sailed higher in the cloudless sky, driving away the last of the morning chill with its radiant heat. Through the heat haze that started to shimmer further up the pass, Kasakhmat could make out the front ranks of the Shinarite spearmen, hiding behind rectangular reed shields studded with bronze disks much like the sheepskin cloaks they wore as armor. She smiled as she imagined their tawny-complexioned faces, so much lighter in shade than her own mahogany- to ebony-skinned people, turning pale as they took in her own approaching forces, including the mighty elephants that were now galloping at full speed while trumpeting and flapping their broad fan-like ears. On both sides of the Shinarite army, teams of four donkey-like onagers each dragged their boxy war carts at a laughably more sluggish pace than the Kumatians' fleeter chariots.

This would not be so difficult after all.

The Shinarite spearmen halted their march to merge their shields into a wall with their spears thrust forth. From behind them rose a wave of slingers' stone bullets, arcing high overhead to pelt the Kumatian elephants. The beasts did not turn back. Instead, they accelerated their charge, kicking up thick clouds of sand with infuriated trumpets. On Kasakhmat's orders,

the Kumatian archers stopped to shoot a volley back at the Shinarites. Their arrows zipped past another torrent of bullets in the heavens before raining upon the enemy with their piercing points.

While she and her formation of chariots sped toward the Shinarite carts, the Per'Aa watched her elephants crash into their spearmen. The crunching of shields, spears, and bone beneath the giant pachyderms' feet almost drowned out the black-bearded barbarians' screams. While the creatures ravaged the enemy front ranks with their feet, tusks, and trunks in their rage, the Kumatians' own spear- and axe-fighters hurried to join the fray with a bloodthirsty roar. The Kumatian fighters may not have had any protection on them other than their buffalo-hide shields, but the trampled Shinarites could not match their ferocious enthusiasm while the Kumatians stabbed and hacked beside their seven-ton allies.

An enemy javelin grazed one of the two gold falcons that had its wings wrapped around Kasakhmat's bronze scale cuirass. The Shinarite carts were closing the distance between them and the Kumatian chariots at a faster speed than the Per'Aa had expected, assailing with more javelins that had already brought some of her fellow charioteers and their zebras down. Veering around in a circle, Kasakhmat led her chariots in flight of the carts, sprinting as fast as the zebras could carry them over the pass's sandy floor.

Even with the wind blowing in her face, her arm muscles burned with exertion beneath her perspiring skin as she and the other charioteers shot their arrows back at the pursuing Shinarites. The onager-drawn carts might have looked sturdier, but neither their speed nor agility could surpass those of the Kumatian chariots. Cart after cart toppled over, dragging men and onagers down with them and splintering on the ground, in vain efforts to outmaneuver Kasakhmat and her formation.

It was as she had assured her generals. The Netjeru were watching over Kumat as always, and never would they let those northern barbarians vanquish her people.

A voice rang over the clamor. It was Ramash, Shulgi's young son, who had cried out with outstretched arms from one of the foremost Shinarite carts. "Inanak, evening and morning star, I call upon you to aid us in this hour of need!"

Clouds the color of blood formed to spread across the sky, blocking the barge of Ra from sight and covering the world below with shadow. A jubilant uproar rose from what remained of the Shinarite ranks, who brandished their spears and sickle-swords as if the Kumatians had not been massacring them moments before. There emerged from within the red clouds the giant fiery visage of a woman helmeted with three pairs of bovine horns, glaring down at Kasakhmat with a malevolent grin and a cackle that shook the earth with its reverberation.

Inanak, Shinarite goddess of war, shot twin beams of fire from her eyes. They smashed into the sand in front of the Per'Aa, throwing her off her chariot while her two zebras caught fire. As she fought against the pain of her landing, hearing her poor animals bray and stamp their hooves in agony, Kasakhmat watched with horror as the enemy goddess unleashed more of the flaming missiles upon her forces. Soldiers, zebras, and elephants all shrieked, brayed, or trumpeted in a panicked disarray, trampling one another and smothering the battlefield in dust as well as smoke. The scent of burning flesh flooded the air, suppressing the earlier pervasive odors of bloodshed and exposed entrails.

A terrified elephant hurtled toward Kasakhmat. She dove out of the way while the huge creature smashed into her chariot and those of her nearest fellows, crushing many of them underfoot. Another beam of fire struck less than a pace in front of her, singeing the skin on her

arms with its heat. Through the smoky and dusty melee the Per'Aa ran, dodging both the scorching missiles of Inanak's wrath and her own soldiers and beasts.

A Shinarite sickle-sword sliced across her exposed shoulder. Kasakhmat pirouetted backward, whipped out her short bronze sword from its scabbard, and slashed at her attacker. Her blade lopped off the barbarian's hooked nose. The Shinarite staggered in recoil, giving her the chance to stab through his sheepskin cloak into his breast. Bright orange light from another incoming beam of fire fell upon them both. Kasakhmat left the mutilated Shinarite behind in a dash, hearing him wail while the flames of his own goddess devoured his body.

Above them both, Inanak growled in frustration.

The cart of Ramash rolled out of the smoke to block Kasakhmat's path. She bolted toward him in a zigzag to evade the javelins he flung at her. The Per'Aa had almost reached the enemy prince when his latest javelin pierced through one of the gold falcons' wings on her armor, hitting a rib underneath. She crumpled to the sand, overcome with a much sharper and more severe pain than any she had felt before.

Ramash laughed. "And to think you had almost won this battle, Per'Aa of Kumat! Why, if it weren't for our dear goddess..."

Kasakhmat pushed herself through the torture that pulsed through her body to grab the shaft of the javelin that had hit her. She winced with tears streaming from her black kohl-lined eyes as she pulled it out. Looking toward the spot in the red clouds where she thought the barge of Ra would be floating, she said a prayer of her own.

"Sakhmat...you of the lion mask, our people need you now more than ever before...as the Per'Aa of Kumat, I implore you...please come down to us and save us from annihilation!"

A sliver of Ra's light pierced through the red clouds. The entire world trembled beneath a deafening leonine roar, with the tops of the black crags beside the pass breaking off and rolling down their slopes. Even Inanak's fiery eyes widened with shock as the light of Ra coalesced in front of her to form the feline face of his daughter Sakhmat. Opening her maw to reveal brilliant white fangs, the lion-masked Netjer sprang across the sky to collide with her Anunnaki opponent. As the two deities clashed in the heavens, the clouds swirling around their wrestling embrace, the Kumatians roared with restored fervor much as the Shinarites had earlier. Even the zebras and elephants brayed and trumpeted with apparent celebration of Sakhmat's arrival.

The Per'Aa gave the stunned Ramash a confident smirk. "You forgot that we have a dear goddess of our own."

Ramash blinked out of his befuddled state and threw another javelin at her. Kasakhmat dodged with a roll of her body and threw her sword at him. It bit deep into the shoulder of the Shinarite prince's throwing arm, rendering it limp. With his other arm, he struggled to unsheath his sickle-sword and hurled it back at the Kumatian Per'Aa. It missed her by such a wide mark that it was pathetic if not comical.

Another of Sakhmat's roars shook the land. The sky had cleared of Inanak's red clouds, with the Shinarite goddess having dissolved with them. Only Sakhmat's luminous lioness face remained in the sky, and from her eyes shot beams of bright light equivalent to the Anunnaki fire beams. Every time one of Sakhmat's beams hit a Shinarite, his skin turned deep red and then exploded into hideous blisters before he collapsed to the sand dead. One of these beams would have hit the prince Ramash in his cart had his onagers not galloped out of the way, and the shaft of burning light still inflicted a red mark on the back of his neck.

Emboldened by their own goddess's attack on the enemy, Kasakhmat and her army took the opportunity to harry the fleeing Shinarites, picking off any of the barbarians who had not been quick enough to escape. When the last of the surviving foes had disappeared into the heat haze down the pass, the Kumatians cheered with overhead flourishes of their spears, bows, and axes. Sakhmat roared with triumph one last time before she vanished back into her father's barge.

They had won. The cost had been heavy for sure. The bodies of warriors and animals on both sides lay strewn over the battlefield between craters of charred, shattered weapons and shields, and splintered chariots and carts. Truth be told, Kasakhmat's generals had spoken the truth when they said their armies would be evenly matched. Still, a victory was a victory, and the people of Kumat would not have to worry about Shinarites coming over from north of the Ebon Spine to terrorize them.

Assuming, of course, the Shinarites did not make another attempt. Kasakhmat hoped they would not.

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The barge of Ra had sunk below the western horizon, letting the silver orb of Khonsu take its place in a sky that had turned black, when the Shinarite prince Ramash and his entourage of guards arrived at the Kumatian camp to discuss the terms of peace. The poor young man had had his injured arm chopped off, the stump covered with bandages. The way he prostrated before Kasakhmat with a tearful shine in his eyes suggested that he had no treacherous intentions like she had feared. Truth be told, seeing the wounded prince in such a pleading state melted her heart with sympathy.

“Honestly, Per’Aa Kasakhmat, I did not want this war,” Ramash said. “It was my father’s decree, and he claims it was the will of Inanak. He told me that, since drought has fallen upon our land in recent years, that taking your abundant grain would keep our people fed.”

“There was no need to invade, then,” Kasakhmat said. “If you had asked politely, we could have sent you so many caravans of grain through the Spine.”

“Believe me, that is what I told my old father, but he would not listen. He wanted war, and it was war he got. But now that you have beaten our forces on the battlefield, I believe it is wisest for us to sue for peace.”

Kasakhmat smiled. “If you do so, Prince Ramash, I shall have as much of our spare grain donated to you as we can afford. I do have one more thing to ask of you, though. Why did you not invoke your goddess Inanak until you were almost beaten? You could have had the advantage if you called upon her at the beginning.”

“That too is what my father willed,” Ramash said. “He told me not to call upon the gods until I absolutely needed their aid. Did your father tell you the same?”

“Yes, but today, I was so sure we would beat your army that I did not even think to call upon my goddess before you did yours. I assumed our gods would be watching over us regardless.”

“I suppose that’s the gods for you. They only step in when you call upon them, and then only if you truly need their help. You cannot count on your faith by itself.”

Kasakhmat nodded, even if it would hurt her earlier pride to agree with the prince. “Indeed, you can’t, Prince Ramash of Shinar. But at least they are there when you need them most. At least my gods were.”

The Per'Aa looked up toward the sky where the orb of Khonsu sat among innumerable stars. She could have sworn that, on its surface, the lion mask of Sakhmat was beaming down on her.