

The Story of Inanna and the God of Wisdom

Source: *Inanna, Wolkstein and Kramer*

Adapted by *Witchlets Story Charrette*



In the first days, in the first nights, in the first years, all that was needed came into being, and the world was properly nourished. It was then that the gods came to be. They pulled the world into pieces and claimed each piece as their property. What once belonged to all was now held by a few.

In these times, a woman walked along the bank of a riverside. Her name was Inanna, and she had taken nothing, and been given nothing. As she walked, she saw a tree drifting in the river. The tree was torn in half, uprooted and left to drift helplessly down the river. When she saw that the tree still lived, she waded deep into the water, pulled the tree back to the shore, and planted it again.

Though Inanna herself had little, she dedicated her time, many long days and nights nurturing the tree, and tending to its needs. She brought water from the river. She pruned its dead branches, and, for fun even, carved a wooden crown out of them for herself. She worked hard, and alone. And, eventually, thanks to her efforts, the tree returned to health, standing strong and tall.

Soon, the tree's wide branches bore leaves, and the homeless were able to rest in the shade beneath them. Soon, the tree's wide branches bore fruit, and the hungry were able to eat. So many people came to the tree needing food and shelter, in fact, that Inanna became worried. How many people, Inanna wondered, had been abandoned by the gods?

One day, a woman arrived from the East, with a shining crown upon her head.

"I am Ninshubur," the woman said. "I am the Queen of the East." She bowed before Inanna.

"Why do you bow to me?" asked Inanna.

"You are a queen!"

"You are more of a queen than I am," said Ninshubur. "Your crown may only be wood, But you have provided for my people where I could not. You have fed and sheltered them. Once, the East was beautiful. But the rivers there have all dried up. The fields have withered. Many of us go hungry. We have no home left to us, and so we wander."

Inanna knew why this had happened, and she sighed. "I am Inanna, and I am no queen. I am the daughter of Enki, the God of Wisdom, but I have no divinity. Despite all the power he wields, my father has given me nothing. Enki, for all his wisdom, has never known what it is to be in need. He has never known loss. Within his halls is the Abzu, the fountain from which all water flows. If your lands have gone dry, it is because he is keeping the waters of the Abzu for himself."

"Where can I find this god, Enki? Where is the Abzu?" asked Ninshubur.

"This river flows from the temple of Eridu," said Inanna. "Sail up it, and you will find his halls. I know them well. I lived there once. It felt more like a prison than a home to me, and so I left."

"But I have no boat for the river," said Ninshubur. "And I don't know the way. Please, Inanna, I need you to guide me. My people live in misery. If we can aid them, we must."

Inanna looked at the gathered people, huddled together by the riverside, and she nodded.

"Yes," she said, quietly. "I can take you there." Then she walked over to her beloved tree. Placing her hand on it, she began to plead:

"I know what you are, I have felt your magic. I cared for you, and you cared for others. Now there is something I need from you, even though I have no right to ask for it. Will you help me?" In response, the tree shook, fell, and landed on its side, as though pulled up by a storm.

"Thank you," said Inanna. With Ninshubur's help, she reshaped the tree, carving it into a boat. The boat was beautiful, sleek, and strong. Rowing together, they traveled up the river, towards Eridu.

As they approached Eridu, they were heard by he whose ears were widest open, he who knew all the laws of heaven and earth, and the hearts of the gods by Enki, the God of Wisdom. Enki the ruler of the gods, and the keeper of the keys to abundance. Enki, father of Inanna, who had given the gods their power, but had given his daughter nothing.

Enki, already planning his next move, called for his most loyal servant, Isimud. "Come here, Isimud, and listen closely," said Enki. "My wayward daughter returns to Eridu. Give her water from the Abzu to drink. Offer her simple treasures and shiny trinkets. Treat her as though she were an equal. Seat her at my holy table, but do not let her leave. Gifts will surely bring her to her senses, but it is wise to be prepared. I will take her boat and hide it away. She stole herself from my halls, once. This time she will stay."

Isimud heeded Enki's words. When Inanna entered Eridu, Isimud gave her butter cake to eat. He gave her water from the Abzu to drink. He offered her gifts, jewelry and trinkets. He treated her respectfully, but always from a distance, more like a guard than a servant. Inanna accepted these gifts silently, and sat beside Ninshubur at the table of heaven.

"This is all so lonely, isn't it?" Inanna asked. "Is this really Eridu, the great temple of Enki? Isimud, does your master not know how to properly host his guests? Is this the best party that a god can offer?"

Enki heard Inanna's words. Using his wits and power, he quickly threw a magnificent festival. Countless guests came from lands near and far to visit, and Enki himself hosted the party. For a day and a night the festivities continued in earnest, as loud and as jovial as any party could be. But when the night was done, and the dawn came, Enki started to grow tired,

Inanna, having worked for so many long nights, was still full of energy. So, as Enki went to end the festival, Inanna said,

"But this party is lovely, why must it end? Do you lack the wisdom to keep the festival going for another day, father?"

"I lack no wisdom!" said Enki, and he kept the festival going for another day and night. And so Enki's home was filled with singing, dancing, and games.

The festival went on like that for days. At the end of each day, tired Enki would move to end the party, only for Inanna or Ninshubur to ask if he did not know how to keep it going. Of course he knew how to keep it going, and out of pride, he did. So it went, day after day, night after night, on and on. Inanna and Ninshubur would sneak away in turns, and rest where they could. Older guests would sleep or leave, with newer guests arriving to replace them. But Enki, as the host, still could not rest while the party continued. His eyes became misty, his legs wobbled, and his mind wandered.

Yet Inanna, hardworking Inanna, was used to spending days without rest, caring for her tree. So her eyes stayed quick, her legs stood fast, and her mind was as clever as ever.

Enki and Inanna drank from great bronze goblets, crafted from glittering metal from deep underground. Their cups overflowed with sweet water poured from the Abzu. As they drank, they challenged each other to games and riddles, and Enki, God of Wisdom, won them all, one after another. It was as though he couldn't lose. Then Inanna made one last challenge, in front of all the guests.



"I challenge you to a game of gifts," said Inanna.

"A game of gifts?" asked Enki. "What kind of game is that?"

"A simple one," Inanna explained. "We take turns giving each other gifts. Each gift must be more valuable than the last. We give gifts in turns, without hesitation. We keep going until one of us cannot offer a gift better than the last, and so loses."

"You're right," said Enki. "That is a simple game. Only..." He paused, a foggy worry in his head. The nights without sleep had taken their toll yet before he could think better of this challenge, Inanna laughed.

"Come now, father!" she jeered. "Are you afraid to play, even after all your victories?"

Enki scowled, shaking his head, pushing the anxiety out of his thoughts.

"As though I could ever lose to you!" he boasted. "How could you win a game of gifts? You, who have nothing to offer, against me, the God of Wisdom?"

"Then are you wise enough to accept my challenge?" Inanna asked, sweetly.

"Of course I am!" Enki replied, arrogantly.



“Then I shall start,” Inanna said. “I give you the feeling of a cool breeze on a hot day, when you have no home, and no shelter from the heat.”

“I will give you a home, then!” Enki announced. “I will give you safety and shelter.”

“And I accept it,” Inanna said. “I give you a balcony with a view of the city Uruk, a vision wider and more beautiful than any painting.”

“Then I will give you a temple in Uruk,” Enki said, certain that he would never let Inanna leave to see it. “What can you give me that is worth more than that?”

“I accept the temple, and I give you a crown,” Inanna replied. “A crown, and all that it brings.”

“You have no crown,” Enki snapped.

“But I do,” Inanna said. She turned to Ninshubur. “Do I have a crown, Ninshubur?”

“Of course you do,” said Ninshubur. “I’ve seen it myself.”

Enki could tell that Ninshubur wasn’t lying. He wondered, for the first time in his life, whether his knowledge had failed him, but he dared not say so aloud.

“Very well,” he said. “Then I shall give you a better crown – the noble crown of Uruk, and all that it brings. There is no throne more desirable than that.”

“I accept it,” said Inanna.

And so the gift giving went on, back and forth until Inanna spread her arms wide and said,

“I give you the land of outcasts. I give you the ditches by the roads, and the shadows under

bridges, all the vast and empty spaces under the wide sky, those nameless countrysides. I give you the kingdoms of the lost and forgotten.”

This gift seemed so tremendous that all the guests at the festival gasped and cheered, and all eyes turned to Enki to see if he could match her gift, or whether he would lose at last. Enki had been exhausted by sleepless night after sleepless night, yet still, he refused to lose, no matter what. He decided to give a gift so great that he knew nothing could match it.

“I give you Divinity,” he said slyly. “But only outside of Eridu.” Where Inanna’s great gift had caused the guests to break out in cheer, Enki’s gift caused the whole festival to fall silent.

“I accept it,” Inanna said, without hesitation. “You’ve won the game of gifts, father.”

“Of course,” Enki laughed. “The outcome was never in question.”

“You’re certainly right about that, father,” Inanna agreed.

When the festival began to die down again, on this night, Inanna yawned alongside her father.

“Well, it is getting late,” she said. “Don’t you think we should all turn in?”

Enki, glad to finally be allowed to rest, rubbed his eyes and told Isimud: “Bring the festival to an end, my servant. I am tired, and must sleep. But I tell you again: be sure that Inanna does not leave.” Isimud nodded.

But as soon as Enki went to sleep, Inanna collected the gifts he’d given her, with Ninshubur’s help. They made their way underground to the Abzu, the source of all water, and on to the great river flowing from it through the caves underground. There, they found their boat, which had been stolen away by Enki.

“Enki took it!” said Ninshubur. “How did you know?”

“Because I know my father,” said Inanna. “He does not yet know the difference between a person and a thing. To him, I am just another object to be owned, like a picture on a wall. But I have escaped him before, and we will escape him now.”

As Isimud ended the festival, and began to see the guests out, he realized that Inanna and Ninshubur weren’t there. Isimud yelled for the guards, and quickly searched all of Eridu. The remaining guests followed along, curious. Before long, they all arrived at the underground river of the Abzu, just in time to see Inanna finish loading the boat.

“Stop!” shouted Isimud. “Stop, or we will strike you down!”

But Inanna just smiled at him.

“Enki has given me safety and shelter. You cannot hurt me.”

“But that was only a game!” Isimud gasped.

“Yes, a game of gifts,” said Inanna. “And those gifts he gave me, I have accepted. I accepted the crown of Uruk.” She held it up, and it glittered in the light. “I accepted a home, a temple, a city, and Divinity itself. All of this he gave me.”

“But what of the gifts you gave?!” shouted Isimud. “What of the crown?”

“Here is the crown,” said Inanna, and she tossed her old wooden crown to the ground, where it lay at Isimud’s feet.

“There’s the crown, and all that it brings.”

“What of the balcony overlooking Uruk?”

What about the breeze on a hot day?” Isimud asked.

“The balcony is a cliffside,” Inanna explained. “And the feeling of a breeze belongs to everyone.”

“But what of the kingdoms you promised?” Isimud asked. “You offered the land of outcasts!”

“I offered the kingdoms of the lost and forgotten,” said Inanna. “The homeless have no homes. The outcasts have no land, no country. Their kingdoms are nowhere and nothing.”

“But then all your gifts are worthless,” Isimud realized. “And you have taken so much!”

“I have *accepted*, not taken. Enki gave me these gifts,” Inanna replied. “It was his choice. Unless you’re saying that the God of Wisdom has been fooled.”

And Isimud knew that Enki truly had been fooled, but he dared not say it in front of the guards, the servants, and the guests. He knew the story would spread, and Enki’s divine wisdom would be questioned. So Isimud stood still, staring at the crown at his feet, and said nothing. Inanna laughed, and Ninshubur steered the boat away from the shore. The two of them sailed off into the underground river.

Isimud ran to Enki’s bedchamber, and woke him. “Inanna has taken the gifts you’ve given her! The temple, the crown of Uruk, everything! She’s loaded all of them into her boat and has sailed away down the Abzu!”

“What?! Ready my boat to follow her!” yelled Enki. “Send the Guardians of the Abzu after her! The flying giants, the Lahamu Serpent, send all the creatures at my command! Be sure that the river’s exit is blocked! Go, now!” And Isimud went.

As they rowed down the river, Inanna glanced back and saw that they were being chased.

“My kindly old father has gone back on his word,” said Inanna. “We have to row faster!”

“No need to row,” said Ninshubur. “This current carries us faster than any river I’ve ever known. Hold the boat steady, dear Inanna.” And Ninshubur stood, facing back towards their pursuers.

“What are you going to do, Ninshubur?” asked Inanna. “Look at them all!”

“Cleverness may have won you your crown, Inanna,” said Ninshubur. “But I earned mine through combat. Let every monster in Eridu see how I became Queen of the East!”

Ninshubur released a wild battle cry. With one lightning motion of her arm the air splintered with a sound like breaking glass. All at once, the creatures were swept away by a powerful wind, and sent hurtling back to Enki.

“Well done, Ninshubur!” said Inanna. “You are more than a Queen – you are a warrior!”

“Yes, the greatest in all the East,” said Ninshubur. “But look ahead, Inanna! The river ends!”

It was true. There was a great wall, a dam, blocking the path of the underground river. Behind them, Enki was following in his boat of heaven, leaving vast waves rolling in his wake.

“What can we do?” asked Ninshubur. “We’re going to crash!”

Inanna leaned low to the boat, putting her hand on it. She could still feel the spirit in it. “You are a boat now,” whispered Inanna. “Yet I feel your tree spirit within. Remember your gifts as a tree to grow, grow and grow strong and powerful enough to bear us safely through all obstacles. To Uruk. Remember. Remember.”

For a long moment, nothing happened. Enki was catching up to them. The dam loomed ahead. But then the boat began to shiver, and then it began to grow. The oars expanded, each end of the boat grew thicker and stronger, the bow grew sharper. The boat grew so large that when it collided with the dam it burst through it, sending the wide heavy doors flying. Inanna and Ninshubur remained protected within the huge hull. They rode the massive wave of water as it flooded out from the caves of Eridu, and into the world.

“Look at this, Inanna!” cried Ninshubur, as she saw the freed water spreading throughout the land. “The East will live again! My people are saved!”

They rode the ship downriver, and with its great size, they were able to pick up the homeless and hungry who the tree had provided for before. They brought them all to Uruk, docking at its beautiful white quay. Quickly, crowds of awed onlookers gathered to witness their arrival.

"We have brought water back to the land!" Inanna announced. "And we have brought safety and shelter to Uruk, so it may be a place for all to live without fear of the gods, or each other! All that I ask of you is that you allow this city to be a home for all who need it."

"Inanna!" Ninshubur yelled, suddenly. "Look!" She pointed.

Arriving at the dock behind them was Enki. He stepped off of his boat, and stood there, staring at Inanna. For all that Enki looked unhappy at having lost the chase, he looked oddly peaceful, as well.

"You've won, my daughter," said Enki. "How clever of you. Let it be, then. Keep your power, and do great things. You've tricked me, daughter, for all my wisdom. So your power is rightly earned. Rule in Uruk as the Goddess you are, just as I ruled in Eridu!"

"No," said Inanna. "I will not rule these people. They do not know me, and I have no desire to force anyone to obey me. I will only give them the tools and peace that they need to learn and grow, provided they make space for the hungry and homeless. Beyond that, I will leave them be, unless they ask for my help. I am more than content with a temple alone. I accepted power with the intent to share it, not to keep it. Let the civilization of Uruk grow from the seeds that its own people plant, for this city belongs to them, not me!"

Enki listened intently, and wise as he was, he felt ashamed for his own treatment of his subjects and Inanna, and grew regretful of the way he'd kept the waters of the Abzu to himself.

"You humble me, Inanna. So shall it be," said Enki. He turned to the crowd, and continued:

"May Uruk be an example wonderful enough for all other cities to follow, and may Inanna be an example for all other deities!"

The people of Uruk cheered, overjoyed with this turn of events.

In the years that followed, Uruk prospered, becoming a haven to all those who had been abandoned or were in need. True to her word, Inanna left her power in the hands of the people. The great ship grew back into its tree form. It was brought to Inanna's temple garden, and replanted there, so that she could always care for it.

Eventually, the sacred tree grew to a magnificent size, bringing cool shade to the whole city, and growing enough fruit to feed everyone.

Every year on the anniversary of Inanna's victory, a grand festival took place under the tree. People would journey from all around to gather under the tree's branches, so they could all sing, dance, and make merry together. Gifts were given frequently, but it was widely known that the most generous gifts always came from Inanna and Enki.

