

# THE GOLDEN BULL



MARJORIE COWLEY

Of enormous help to me in writing this book were family and friends, the counsel of my writers' group, and eminent scholars in the vast field of ancient Mesopotamia who answered my endless questions with endless patience.

My deepest appreciation to you all.—M. C.

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Published by Charlesbridge  
85 Main Street  
Watertown, MA 02472  
(617) 926-0329  
www.charlesbridge.com

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Cowley, Marjorie.

The golden bull / Marjorie Cowley.

p. cm.

Summary: During a severe drought in Mesopotamia in 2600 B.C., when their parents can no longer support them, Jomar and his sister Zefa are sent to the city of Ur, where Jomar is apprenticed to a goldsmith and Zefa must try to find a way to keep from becoming a slave. Includes author's note on the history of the region.

ISBN 978-1-58089-181-3 (reinforced for library use)

1. Iraq—History—To 634—Juvenile fiction. [1. Iraq—History—To 634—Fiction.

2. Brothers and sisters—Fiction. 3. Apprentices—Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.C8377Go 2008

[Fic]—dc22

2007042620

Printed in the United States of America

(hc) 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Display type set in Mighty Tuxedo and text type set in Monotype Centaur

Color separations by Chroma Graphics, Singapore

Printed and bound by Lake Book Manufacturing, Inc.

Production supervision by Brian G. Walker

Designed by Susan Mallory Sherman

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## **LIST OF CHARACTERS**

**Jomar** (JOH-mar): Son of a farmer  
**Zefa** (ZEH-fah): Jomar's younger sister  
**Durabi** (dur-AH-bee): Father  
**Lilan** (LEE-lan): Mother  
**Malak** (MAL-ak): Temple official  
**Qat-Nu** (CAT-noo): Slave  
**Sidah** (SEE-dah): Goldsmith  
**Nari** (NAH-ree): Sidah's wife  
**Abban** (AH-ban): Sidah's son (deceased)  
**Gamil** (GAH-mil): Abban's friend  
**Bittatti** (bih-TAH-tee): High priestess  
**Kurgal** (KUR-gall): Temple music director

# 1 CHANGES

✦ The drought had lasted for months. Jomar dug for edible roots in the dry, sandy soil, but found only three small, misshapen carrots that once he would have given to the pigs. He glanced up at the squawking blackbirds as they flew high above him. When he was younger, it had been his job to wave his arms and yell at the birds to scare them off before they ate the precious barley seeds. Now they no longer swooped down to pick at the brown and brittle grain.

Jomar stopped digging when he heard the bel-  
lowing of a cow. He had promised his father to help with the birthing of her calf.

As he ran across the scorched fields toward the cowshed, the rocky soil cut into his frayed leather sandals. The entire region was so barren that it was hard for Jomar to recall that all the farms in the area

had once produced abundant grain, melons and grapes, plums and pears, cabbage and carrots. Gazelle and other wild animals had once been plentiful, attracted to the crops and to the water in the irrigation canals that cut through the countryside. Now the canals were empty, and the farm looked as if nothing had ever grown in the sunbaked land that stretched around him.

Jomar heard his younger sister, Zefa, singing as he passed the goat hutch. As she sang she strummed on a small wooden lyre, a stringed instrument he'd made for her when she was a little girl.

Veering from the path to the cowshed, Jomar darted into the hutch. Zefa sat on an overturned bucket, so intent on her song that she didn't look up at him. Squinting into the shadows, he saw that Zefa's eyes glistened like pieces of glassy black obsidian as she began a song to Nanna, the mighty moongod:

*“Moon-glowing Nanna,  
all-knowing Nanna,  
Look down from the heavens  
and pity us—”*

Jomar broke in. “Pity! What pity? Why make up a song to the moongod when he lets his people go hungry?” He didn't wait for an answer. “And don't let Father hear this sad song—he's worried enough as it is.” He turned to leave the hutch.

“Wait,” Zefa said. “I'm in here so he *won't* hear me, but you should listen. This will be the last time you'll hear my music.”

He stared at her and realized why her eyes glistened—they were filled with tears. “What do you mean? Why are you crying?”

Zefa gave her news haltingly. “I heard Father talking to Mother last night. They thought I was asleep. Tomorrow he's sending you away . . . to the city . . . to live in Ur.”

Jomar's breath went out of him. “I don't believe this! You're sure?”

“There's not enough food for us all,” Zefa said. “Haven't you noticed they're growing weaker?”

“Yes, I've noticed,” Jomar said, but he knew he had been pushing this knowledge away. Too full of hurt and anger to talk further, and aching to escape from his sister's sad eyes, Jomar abruptly left the

## 4 THE GOLDEN BULL

hutch. His mouth was dry; he could feel his heart pounding. Where would he live in the city? What would he do there? Farming was all he knew and all he wanted to know.

Trying to calm himself, Jomar looked out across the flat fields and saw the massive mud-brick temple of Ur looming in the distance like a mountain. Nanna, the powerful moongod of Ur, lived in the temple. Jomar had grown up feeling protected by him, but now he felt abandoned by Nanna. And by his father.

Again he heard the bellowing of the cow. Again he'd forgotten his promise to help with the birth of her calf. He started running, but dread as well as hunger made his stomach tighten with cramps. Because of the drought two boys his age who lived in surrounding farms had been sold into slavery in exchange for food. *Would my father do that to me?* It was unthinkable, but he could think of nothing else as he raced toward the cowshed.

## 2 HARD TIMES

Jomar burst into the shed and found his father, Durabi, kneeling over a newborn calf struggling to free itself from its birth pouch.

"The birthing was hard . . . the little one's so weak," his father said. "It must be released from its pouch so it can nurse." Durabi handed Jomar his knife, sat back on his heels, and stared at his son with dull eyes.

Jomar took the knife and cut open the pouch that imprisoned the calf. He brought the newborn to its feet, stroking the small, slippery creature that had somehow survived its difficult delivery. Then Jomar lifted the calf to its mother, but it was so wobbly that he had to put his arms around its body to keep it from falling. The cow turned to lick her offspring as it nursed.

Jomar saw his father watching him, his face creased with care. Was his father worried about the calf? Their last cow, so thin that her ribs could be counted? Or was he worried about him?

Jomar raised his chin and blurted out his concern. “Zefa said you’re sending me away to the city. This can’t be true!”

His father winced, but the silence in the hot shed was broken only by the noise of the newborn calf’s weak suckling.

“Father, speak to me!” Jomar persisted. “I’m needed here.”

“The farm grows nothing,” Durabi said bitterly. “Our barley is gone, and the only wheat left is emmer.” He picked up some of the hard, reddish grain on the floor and let it slip through his fingers. “We planted this to feed our animals. Now it feeds us.”

“Yes, I know, but—”

Durabi continued as if he hadn’t heard. “Our pigs and sheep are gone . . . taken by the temple, traded for barley, or slaughtered to keep us alive.” He pointed to Jomar’s worn sandals and shook his head. “Without hide I can’t even make you a new pair.”

“Father, listen! I know nothing but farming. What will I do in the city?”

“I haven’t told you this because I prayed that the snows would melt . . .” He faltered, then gathered his strength. “The last time I was in Ur—to give my last two pigs to the temple—I stopped at a bazaar to eat my midday meal. There I met a man named Sidah, a goldsmith who works for the temple. We talked. I told him I feared I would have to send you to the city to survive because of desperate conditions on the farm. He told me his only child, a son about your age, had recently died. Sidah and I made an agreement. . . .” Again he stopped speaking, and looked away. “You will be his new apprentice.”

“I have no interest in being a goldsmith’s apprentice!” Jomar’s throat closed up and his words came out in a whisper. “Will I be his slave?”

“He’ll take you into his house and teach you his skills, but I didn’t sell you to him,” Durabi said. “How could I do this to you? Or to your sister?”

Jomar stared at his father. “Zefa?”

“She must go with you,” Durabi said. “She grows too thin, and her hair has lost its luster.”

“This isn’t fair! How can I learn new skills and look after her at the same time?”

“You can’t,” Durabi answered. “She must have her own work.”

“And what would that be?” Jomar asked in a challenging tone he had never used with his father before.

Durabi bit off his words. “I made no arrangements for her because I had no thought of sending her away. You’re fourteen—soon you’ll be a man. Zefa will be your responsibility.”

Jomar felt his stomach hollow out. “I beg you, Father, let us both stay. The snows will melt, the river will run full again, and the canals and reservoirs will fill with water. Then you’ll need me to help with the replanting. Mother will need Zefa to help with her chores.”

Durabi shook his head sadly, the anger drained out of him. “I can’t wait any longer—I must act before you and Zefa weaken. The arrangement I’ve made for you with the goldsmith is good. Early tomorrow morning I’ll take you to the broad, well-traveled road that leads to the city. You must stay on it until you get to the great gate of Ur.”

“You’re not taking us all the way?” Jomar asked, embarrassed by the catch in his voice.

“That was my first thought, but your mother’s too weak for me to leave her for that long a time,” Durabi said. “She’s been giving you and Zefa most of her food, pretending that she’s eaten earlier or will eat later.”

Jomar’s anger lifted as he listened to his father’s words and saw his sorrowful expression. “When did you make your decision to send Zefa to the city?” he asked softly.

“Only yesterday afternoon, when I found our last two goats dead of starvation in the far field,” Durabi said. “They were nothing but bones, their hair matted and coarse. I thought of Zefa’s hair . . . how it used to shine. . . .” He let the words fade away.

The calf stopped nursing and made small, plaintive noises. There was no more milk. The cow bent her scrawny neck to lick her newborn again. Jomar felt his future was as shaky as the calf’s. He was certain of only one thing: he would not be here to find out if this small, struggling creature lived or died.



### 3 PREPARATIONS

Jomar turned restlessly on his narrow cot throughout the hot night. He felt the gritty sting of sand that had drifted into the house in spite of his mother's unending efforts to sweep it out. How completely his life would change when the darkness lightened into dawn. Not only was he being forced to leave, but in the city he would have the heavy burden of caring for Zefa.

Jomar must have finally dozed, because the familiar scent of sesame woke him. His mother came in carrying a lamp that burned the pungent oil made from crushed sesame seeds.

"My son, my son," Lilan crooned, putting down the lamp and kneeling beside his bed. "I never wanted this to happen to you, to Zefa," she said, burying her face in her hands.

"I know you didn't," Jomar said, taking her hands

away from her thin, lined face and holding them in his own. "Has Zefa found out what's going to happen to her?"

"I took her up to the roof last evening to tell her," Lilan said. "She cried in my arms like a toddling child through half the night. Oh, Jomar, help her. Her strong spirit has fled."

"I don't think she'll let me help her—she's always gone to you when she's needed comforting." Jomar stopped talking as Zefa came down the ladder from the roof. Rumpled and red-eyed, she stared sullenly at Jomar as if this upheaval were his fault.

Lilan stood up and brushed the tears from her eyes. "The journey to the city will take a full day. You must leave soon so you'll have some cool walking time before sunrise." She brought out two reed traveling baskets. "Both of you have a change of clothing and what food I could give you. You must make it last until you get to Ur."

Durabi appeared in the low doorway. "I've come from the cowshed. The little one is weak and needs more milk than its mother can give it, but it survived the night."

“Good news, Father,” Jomar said, then busied himself attaching his basket to his back and adjusting its leather straps.

Zefa rummaged in her basket. “My lyre isn’t here!”

Lilan patted her arm. “I didn’t want to burden you with anything unnecessary.”

“Your basket’s heavy enough,” Jomar said, thinking that he would have to shoulder it along with his own when Zefa got tired.

But Zefa spoke slowly, emphasizing each word. “I want my lyre.”

Lilan stroked her daughter’s face, then added the instrument to Zefa’s belongings. When she hung the basket from Zefa’s thin shoulders, her mother received the glimmering of a smile. Jomar received an angry look.

Durabi turned to Jomar. “I’ve heard a guard has been stationed at the city gate during these troubled times. When he asks your reason for entering the city, tell them you are to be apprenticed to Sidah, a temple goldsmith.”

“You’re working for a goldsmith?” Zefa asked, wide-eyed. “What will I do?”

“Work will be found for you,” Durabi said quickly, then turned to Jomar. “Sidah told me that his house is on a street in the back of the temple where craftsmen live. When you find him, present yourself as the son of Durabi.”

“And Zefa?” Jomar asked.

“I’ve told you what your responsibilities are,” his father said.

When Jomar frowned, Zefa glared at him with narrowed eyes.

“Go while it’s still cool,” Lilan said. Now openly weeping, she drew her children to her and touched each of their faces tenderly. “We do this for you . . . only for you.”

Durabi patted his wife’s shoulder. “I’ll return as soon as I can.”

Jomar, Zefa, and their father went out through the low doorway into the still-dark morning. They could hear Lilan’s soft, insistent crying as they walked away from the farmhouse. Finally the only sound heard was the slap-slap of their sandals on the hard, dry ground.

## 4 ON THEIR WAY

Too numbed to talk, they walked along the sandy road in silence. The sky grew brighter, then the edge of the sun appeared on the flat horizon. Gradually the cool of the night disappeared as the blazing circle rose slowly in the sky. The heat increased until it became so intense that Jomar thought he could see rays of sunlight shimmering in front of him.

Jomar walked beside his father, who was holding Zefa's hand. Without warning, Durabi swayed, then pitched forward. In an instant Zefa was down beside him, cradling her father's head in her lap.

Jomar knelt down and spoke quietly. "Father, you're too weak to make this journey. I know you wanted to be sure we took the right road, but I can find it from your description. Stay here until you feel stronger, then go back to the farm."

Durabi raised himself to a sitting position and

started to protest, then sank down again. "I wanted to take you to the city, and now I'm unable to take you to the road that leads to the city. Go on without me—you must be in Ur before nightfall."

They helped their father settle under an almost-leafless tree that offered a bit of shade. Durabi pressed Zefa to his chest, his hands smoothing her hair. He looked at Jomar with teary eyes. "You must have better sandals. Mine are newer. Take them and give me yours." After the exchange was made, he reached up and embraced Jomar. "I know Zefa will be in good hands."

Aware their father was watching them, Jomar and Zefa started off at a rapid pace. But when the road curved and they knew Durabi could no longer see them, Zefa's steps began to falter. She fell farther and farther behind.

Jomar stopped. "Try to go faster," he called back to her. "I'll wait for you."

"Not fair!" Zefa shouted back. "While you wait, you'll be resting."

"If you keep up with me, we can rest together," Jomar yelled.

"I'm hungry, and tired of walking," Zefa said as she reached him.

Jomar sighed and pointed to some yellowing tamarisk trees growing close to a reservoir some distance ahead. "Maybe there's a swallow of drinking water there. Anyway, we need to get out of the sun for a while."

But the reservoir held just a rubble of rocks, silty dried mud, and a trickle of stagnant water. Kicking off their sandals, they sank to the ground under the meager shade of the trees.

Jomar opened his basket. Only a small clay bowl, a handful of dates, and four small, shrunken pomegranates.

Zefa wrinkled her nose. "They look like dried-up pieces of leather."

Jomar said nothing. Removing the top of the bowl, he found a thick porridge made of boiled emmer, the wheat they grew to feed their animals. "This'll fill us up."

"But it's tasteless," Zefa said.

"That's all I have," Jomar said sharply. "What's in yours?"

Zefa took a woven pouch from her basket and untied its reed string. She showed Jomar a small mixture of almonds and hard raisins. Searching deeper, she found a boiled egg still in its shell and held it up as if it were a carved ivory treasure. "Mother gave me the last one," she said tearily.

Their mother was right: Zefa's spirit was gone indeed. Mothers knew how to help, but what could a brother do to make his sister strong?

Jomar could only think of one thing. "Eat."

She looked lovingly at the egg, then stuffed more than half of it into her mouth.

"Share the food!" Jomar said.

Zefa began weeping. "You told me to eat."

"All right, I did," Jomar said. "We'll divide the egg and dates between us and save the rest for the long walk ahead of us."

Zefa raised her chin. "Why are you the one who makes all the decisions?"

"I'm in charge because I'm older than you," Jomar answered.

Zefa shook her head angrily. "You've gone from ignoring me to ordering me around."

“It’s a job I don’t want!”

“Don’t try to make me feel sorry for you.” Zefa’s tone changed. “I’ll give you what’s left of the egg for one of your dates.”

Exasperated, he handed her a shriveled date.

“I wish it was a syrupy one that Mother saved to make into honey.”

“You know they were gone a long time ago.” Jomar looked at Zefa, thin and miserable. His eye fell on her basket. The lyre was inside. “Sing a song for me.” He felt his cheeks flush. “The one you were singing in the goat hutch when I made you stop.”

Zefa’s eyes widened with surprise. She swallowed the date, her face brightening as she brought out her lyre. She began to sing with her head tilted back, her eyes closed.

*“Moon-glowing Nanna,  
all-knowing Nanna,  
Look down from the heavens  
and pity us, born only to serve you;  
Comfort us, born only to serve you.*

*Moon-glowing Nanna,  
all-knowing Nanna,  
Look down from the heavens  
and pity us,  
comfort us, weep for us.  
Your tears will water our wasted land.”*

Jomar chewed his bit of egg slowly as he listened to her soaring voice. For years he’d heard the songs that Zefa made up, heard them without really listening. They had been about such childish things as a lost doll, the death of a pig, and the sun’s magic that shriveled a grape into a sweet raisin. But now Jomar was struck by the words of this song. How could a girl of twelve make up such a solemn prayer?

As Zefa was repeating the last line of her song, rustling sounds behind him made Jomar wheel around. A dozen men stood gazing at Zefa with rapt expressions. He had no idea how long they’d been there.

## 5 “A GOOD VOICE”

Jomar sprang to his feet and stood over Zefa, his hand gripping her shoulder. Zefa stopped singing, opened her eyes, and saw the group gathered in front of them. She looked up at Jomar with alarm.

A tall, heavyset man stepped forward. His fine linen garment stretched tight across his large belly. The men behind him wore frayed sandals and rough cotton tunics that hung loosely on their thin frames. All carried knives attached to their belts, and digging tools rested on their shoulders.

Gesturing toward Zefa, the stout man spoke to Jomar. “A good voice, a good musician—surprising for one so young.”

Jomar tried not to show his fear or anger. Hadn’t he urged Zefa to leave her lyre behind? This man who spoke with such easy authority could only cause trouble.

“Why are you two on the road alone?” The man emphasized the last word of his question.

“I go to Ur to be an apprentice to Sidah, a temple goldsmith,” Jomar said.

The man studied Zefa with calculating eyes. “And the little lyre player? What will she do?”

“I’ll find work for her,” Jomar said.

The man shook his head. “That’ll be hard to do in the city, but there’s work to be done here. I’m Malak, sent by the temple to patrol the irrigation system and see that it’s clear of rubble.” He glared at the men. “The moongod is displeased with you farmers for letting the canals and reservoirs fill with rocks, dead plants, and silt. You’ve forgotten that you live and work on land that is owned by Nanna’s temple.”

The sullen men were silent until one spoke out. “We’ve kept the waterways clear in the past, but the long drought has made us lose hope.”

Malak turned to Jomar. “These farmers have no faith that the moongod will eventually provide for his people. Soon you’ll be a man, so you must join my crew.”

"I can't. The goldsmith waits for me," Jomar said. "But when the drought is over and I return to our farm, I'll gladly join your work crew."

Malak snorted. "When you return? It's the custom that an apprentice can leave only if he's been poorly taught."

Jomar was stunned. Raised in the country, he knew nothing of city rules that governed craftsmen and their apprentices.

Malak dipped his head in mock courtesy. "Be on your way to this man who works with glorious gold. The girl will stay to help with meals and keep up the spirits of the men with her music."

"You can't separate us." Jomar's hand tightened on Zefa's shoulder. "She's my sister."

"Ah, but I can," Malak said. "I'm a temple official with the authority to enslave any child found wandering far from home without a parent."

"But she has parents!" Jomar cried out.

Malak slowly looked around. "I do not see them." He turned to Zefa. "You're thin. You'll be well fed in return for your work."

Jomar felt weak. With an effort he pulled his

eyes away from Malak and looked at the other men. Most seemed sympathetic, but a few looked more entertained than concerned. Two men with their heads thrust forward toward Zefa frightened him.

"I'll join your work force," Jomar said quietly. He felt Zefa's shoulder sag with relief under his grip.

A thin smile played on Malak's lips. "You will receive Nanna's blessing for your efforts." The smirk disappeared. "I've wasted enough time with the two of you. Girl, see that old man stirring the pot? Help him prepare the evening meal."

Jomar bent down to whisper a promise of protection to Zefa, words he knew would be difficult for him to uphold.

Malak's hand cut the air. "Leave her! There's work to be done."

## 6 TRAPPED

Malak took the lead, heading off with short, fast steps. But under the scorching sun, his pace soon slowed and his bald head gleamed with sweat. The silent men walked behind Malak in a haze of dust and dirt scuffed up by their feet. Jomar, near the end of the line, had grit in his eyes, his mouth, his nose.

“We were next to a reservoir that needed work,” Jomar said quietly to the man nearest to him. “Why are we leaving?”

The man looked straight ahead. “First we must clear a canal some distance away.” He pointed his chin at Malak. “When we’re close to exhaustion, he’ll have us return to clean out the reservoir before he lets us eat or sleep.”

“He’s cruel,” Jomar said.

The man shrugged. “Cruel and clever. He knows how to get work out of the farmers. If their labor

pleases him, they’ll have a good meal and all the beer they can drink tonight.”

“You sound like you’ve done this kind of thing before,” Jomar said.

“Many times for many years,” the man said. “I’m Qat-nu, a temple slave assigned to travel the farmlands with Malak.” He turned slightly so that his bare back, covered with welts and jagged scars, could be seen by Jomar. “Marks of his displeasure.”

Horrified, Jomar stared at Qat-nu’s back.

Qat-nu looked at Jomar with a sorrowful expression on his wrinkled, sunburned face. “I pity your young sister. Both of you must do your work well and give Malak no cause for anger. I’ll leave your side because it will go poorly with me if he sees me talking to you.” Qat-nu lost himself among the other men.

The crew came to a halt at the bank of a debris-filled canal that had once carried water to neighboring fields. “Remove the loose rocks from the canal and put them on the banks,” Malak ordered. “Shovel out the silt and spread it on the ground. Rebuild the collapsed banks with the rocks to hold the water that



will someday return.” He settled under a yellowing palm tree, the only shady spot in the parched field. Soon his eyes were half-closed.

The work called for no special skill, only endurance. Without a shovel to remove the caked mud, Jomar collected and stacked the rocks that the others heaved out of the canal.

The hot, dusty day wore on. The ache in Jomar’s back gradually increased and his hands became covered with cuts from the sharp, jagged rocks he handled. He listened to a steady, soft rumble of complaints from the men who worked close to him.

“What right do they have to take us from our farms? Let slaves do this work.”

“I treat my animals better than he treats us.”

“My mouth feels like a desert—I need something to drink!”

Only Qat-nu was silent. Jomar guessed that a slave had no right to complain. To avoid Malak’s anger Jomar stayed as silent as the slave.

After the canal had been cleared, Qat-nu woke Malak, who had been sleeping with his head lolling

to one side. Malak rubbed his eyes and lurched to his feet.

“Your tasks here are finished,” Malak barked while tugging at a small silver flask that hung from his belt. “We return now to clear the reservoir.” When he put the flask to his lips and drank, there was angry muttering. “See that the work is finished before the sun disappears,” he said. “Tomorrow you’ll repair the other canals that you farmers have ignored.”

*Tomorrow.* They had expected to be in the city tonight. They were trapped, unable to escape Malak’s powerful hold on them both.