

No Sound of Water

Son of man,

You cannot say, or guess, for you know only

A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

And the dry stone no sound of water.

--T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 20-24

Thirst tormented the land. For more than a year there had been no rain. Crops withered in the fields and the slightest movement or breath of air stirred the dust in the streets. Each morning men woke with dry mouths and spent their days thinking about the falling water level in the city wells. Blood-colored sunsets brought nights punctuated by mournful wails that originated from everywhere and nowhere, reverberating through every neighborhood in Bhellin until men shuttered their windows and huddled in terror.

At last, the king went to the Snake Mother's temple and offered rich gifts to the oracle, who took the sacred serpent's bite and fell into a trance, and yet there was no word from Below. The priests who interpreted the oracle's fevered hallucinations said that the Mother did not answer prayers with rain, and that men must look elsewhere.

A second pilgrimage was undertaken to the temple of the Rain, where this time the splendid offerings of gold, wine and incense, coupled with the most fervent dedication of the king, yielded the answer he sought. In a niche behind the rain god's image, a hidden priest spoke through a bronze flue, so the thunderous voice of the god filled the many pillared hall. "Make unto me a Great Offering, so my thirst may be quenched, and to thee I will do the same."

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No explanation was given. His father simply came into his room in the middle of the night with his servant and ordered him to pack his things. "It is time to go, Camros."

Camros, fuzzy with sleep, feebly shook off the hand nudging his shoulder. "Where to?" he mumbled. Although he could barely hold his eyes open, he saw that it was still dark but for the single oil lamp in his father's hand.

"Quickly now," urged Narisen, "and do not argue with me. There is no time for dawdling."

Packing was always done leisurely, the household servants taking their time choosing what their masters would need away from home and carefully filling the great iron-bound chests. Now the servant rummaged through Camros's clothes press and stuffed garments into a canvas bag as if they were laundry. Camros wanted to ask what was going on, but his father's tone brooked no argument. He put on the clothes that were handed to him, combed his hair as best he could and tried to rub the sleep out of his eyes.

Horses were waiting for them in the courtyard. "We are going to the estate in Besar," said Narisen.

Spring was not the right time of year for leaving the city. This puzzled Camros, as did riding out while the moon was still high and a chill bit the air, but when his father wished something done no one questioned it.

A pair of guards and the household eunuch Ranu accompanied them from the house. Quietly they made their way down the streets to the first of many gates closed for the night. Camros heard his father say something to the sentries at each post, and each time they were let through. The city, so lively during the day, had a different character at night. The silence was oppressive, so that a single hoof beat striking the pavement sounded like a thunderclap.

As he gradually stirred from his sluggishness, Camros pondered the smallness of their escort. Whenever the household moved to the country for the summer, an entire baggage train was needed to cart furniture, clothing and other necessities. Now there were only five of them abroad, carrying as much as could fit in a single saddlebag. Because of the circumstances and his father's refusal to provide an explanation, Camros wondered if there was some trouble that required so much secrecy. Though he had not yet been presented at court, he knew from his friends and their tutors that sometimes men who displeased the king prudently escaped the city and went into exile before the royal hand could take more punitive measures against them.

Perhaps his father had done something to make the king angry. Camros bristled at the thought that Narisen did not trust him enough to confide in him, whilst hauling him from his comfortable bed in the middle of the night. It was irksome enough that he had all he could do to hold his tongue and not demand to know outright.

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Three days on the southeast road brought them to the Besarian countryside, where on a hillside surrounded by olive trees and wild grapevines stood a villa roofed with fading terracotta tiles. When Narisen and his small party rode up the dusty track running from the gate to the main courtyard, the servants who hurried out were surprised by their master's arrival; once their confusion subsided they quickly went about the business of making the household presentable.

Food and wine were laid out on a terrace downstairs while the suites were properly aired out and fresh linens brought up. As in the city, bath water was more of a luxury than ever these days. However,

enough was available for both Narisen and Camros to refresh themselves before going down to eat.

Despite the rigors of the journey, Camros found he had little appetite. He toyed with the food a servant set before him, drank enough wine to unsettle his stomach, and brooded. Not once had his father explained the reason for the sudden move, and Camros could read his moods well enough to guess his questions would not be tolerated. After a while, Narisen noticed the untouched food on his plate and dismissed him. “A long ride is supposed to sharpen the appetite,” he said, “but perhaps you need rest more than nourishment. Go, and I will speak to you later.”

At twilight, as the moon rose among the first stars, Camros received a summons from his father. Narisen sat in a downstairs room that, during the day, commanded a handsome view of the estate’s orchards. Now the fretted screens were drawn aside to admit a breeze. Narisen wore a loose, belted robe and nursed a glass of the white wine for which the Besar valley was famous.

“After three days,” he said, “you must be wondering why I brought you here.”

Camros did not know what to say. “I thought—that is to say—I was under the impression that—”

“What did you think, son?”

“I wondered if perhaps we had left because the king was angry with you.”

Narisen smiled and took a sip of his wine. His dark eyes remained troubled. “You mean, have I fallen out of favor with Eramen? No, but I might if he learns the real reason for my sudden departure from court. Come, sit here beside me. Gods, you have grown so in the last year! Seventeen already and not yet presented at court? With all the other matters requiring my attention that was remiss of me, but it might be to your advantage now.”

“I am afraid I do not understand.”

Hesitating, Narisen indicated the decanter on the sideboard. Camros looked at it, puzzled as to why his father wanted him to drink when it was not his custom to ply his son with wine. “More than a year has passed without rain. Of course, we have cisterns throughout the land to see us through such difficulties, but the water levels are dangerously low and what harvest we will have this year will be poor. People will die of hunger and disease.”

“What has this to do with us?”

The raised eyebrow his father gave him told Camros this was the wrong thing to say. “Has your education been so neglected that you do not understand the importance of a good harvest? I should see about having your tutors instruct you in more practical matters than they have been. Food and water do not magically appear, son, and this is something you will have to understand if you are ever to hold a government position.”

Camros chewed his lip. Whenever his father began chastising him, time dragged. Now was one of those moments. *And all I did was ask a simple question.* Instinct advised him against speaking further.

“Priests have consulted all the oracles in the city, and have come back with word that there is to be a Great Offering to Shedhu.”

Rumors of such a sacrifice had reached Camros’s ears in the academy where he studied with the other sons of government officials, but fearing to betray his ignorance he had not asked what it was. “Is it a special sacrifice?”

Narisen gave him an odd look, then dismissed his bewilderment with another sip of wine. “It slipped my mind that the last Great Offering took place when you were very small. Yes, son, it is a very special sacrifice. A Great Offering is when the most beautiful youth or maiden of high birth is given to the rain god in exchange for his blessing. Sometimes Shedhu wants a girl, other times he wants a pretty youth; only his oracles can tell us. This time it is to be a youth, so you understand now why I had to get you out of the city.”

But I am not beautiful or highborn, Camros wanted to say. “I am sure they would not have chosen me, Father.”

“Priests select ten candidates, but the final offering is chosen by lot, so I could not take that chance. Camros, your sisters are now married with families of their own and you are my only son, all I have left of your dear mother.”

Camros thought only of the secrecy with which his father had carried out their midnight escape from Bhellin. “The king will be angry when he finds out, Father.”

“If he knew the real reason,” replied Narisen, “then he would be, yes. I have accepted an assignment away from the city so it will not seem that we are defying the royal edict. I will hire a tutor for you and you will have some leisure pursuits, just as you do when we visit in the summer. By now, the priests will have already chosen the sacrifice and taken him into the temple. We will wait a few months and go back in the autumn, as we do every year. Think of this as a pleasant idyll.”

For one who was accustomed to the noise and bustle of the Khalgari capital, the Besarian countryside was dull. The villa and its grounds were more extensive than the house in the city, but that counted for little. In Bhellin, visitors were always coming to the house and Camros had many friends in his academy. Here, there was no one to talk to except Ranu, the guards, and the servants, who were all uniformly boring, and since his tutor had not yet arrived from Bhellin he could only fill so many hours of the day with horseback riding.

Sensing his father no longer wished to discuss the Great Offering, Camros did not mention it again, but in quiet moments he wondered if the king knew the truth and would send soldiers to arrest them, or if his name had been added to the lottery anyway. Perhaps not. He was the son of a mere minor official and had been kept out of the public eye, so it was entirely possible the priests would forget about him.

In any case, it did no good to worry about it.

A narrow channel from the nearby river irrigated the estate's orchards. Fed by strong winter rains, the channel usually ran high. Now one could see the channel's muddy bed, and the orchards, always budding with new life in the spring, still looked barren. Only one corner of the estate was green, a shaded area where the channel diverted into a little pool. Camros's native curiosity, coupled with an off-key whistling from the trees, impelled him to investigate this odd oasis.

A man knelt in the short grass over the channel, tending the plants that grew on the bank. His back was to Camros, and he wore a wide-brimmed hat, so Camros could not see his face. "What are you doing?"

Slowly the man straightened and stood. He was tall, and younger than Camros expected, with the long, sinewy limbs of a laborer. "What does it look like I'm doing? I'm tending the water cress. Would you care to help?"

Camros regarded the tumbled soil between the man's fingers with disdain. "I am the master's son. I do not scabble about in the dirt."

Snorting, the man shrugged. "Then you'll pardon me if I go back to work."

Although this was evidently his cue to leave, Camros lingered. Why the man bothered with this one little corner of the grounds when there were orchards that needed tending was beyond him.

Insufferable peasant. Camros gave up and went back to the house, but was back the following

morning. This time the man knelt in the same place, working as if his task was merely a leisurely pastime. Camros stood under an ancient dry oak, glaring at the laborer's back when his discreet cough and shuffling went unacknowledged.

Finally, without turning around, the man spoke, "Is there something you want?"

"Has no one ever taught you to mind your betters?"

Dark eyes roamed the garden before resting on Camros. "When I see my betters," the man said coolly, "then I'll mind them."

No one had ever dared speak to him like this; he found it infuriating. "My father could have you whipped for this."

The man tilted his head, pressing his lips together in a tight line as he studied Camros. "Is there something you want, boy, or are you always such a nuisance?"

Camros knew he should turn on his heel and march straight back up to the house to report this outrageous behavior, but part of him was intrigued enough to stay. "I am *not* a nuisance. I just want to know what you are doing."

"I am tending these plants, as I told you yesterday. Is there something wrong with your wits?"

Camros rolled his eyes. "I can *see* what you are doing, but there is an entire orchard that is withering."

"There is only so much a single mortal can do. If you want a miracle in the orchard, you'd best make the proper offerings to the Rain Lord."

"A Great Offering is going to be made," said Camros. "Then the rain will fall."

Other servants, for whom news from Bhellin came slowly, were duly impressed by this tidbit of information. For this man, however, there was no moving him. "If Shedhu is pleased by the morsel, he may well piss on your fields. Or not. Now do you intend to help me, or do you intend to stand there all day with your aimless questions?"

The blasphemous remarks were both shocking and thrilling to hear. Despite his better judgment,

Camros ventured closer. He saw no tools, only dark, moist soil sticking to the man's fingers, which he was using to prod the earth. "You have not yet told me your name."

"You didn't ask, boy. My name is Sedir," answered the man. "Now you can return the favor and tell me *your* name. You can be certain I'm not going to call you 'master' or some other such nonsense."

Such insolence begged punishment. Narisen would have had Sedir sent away long ago. "My name is Camros ké Narisen."

Sedir arched thin black eyebrows at him. "Such a large name for such a small youth," he commented. "Well, then, Camros. What do you intend to do, stand there all day and gawk at me? Haven't you ever seen a common laborer before?"

"Never one with a tongue like yours." Camros shifted the loamy soil with his toe but did not bend down to help. "Do you live here?"

"Sometimes. I'm what is called a hired hand."

"I *know* what a hired hand is," Camros answered stiffly.

"And here I thought young lordlings like you had no idea what a field hand was."

Not for the first time, Camros wondered why Sedir's tone was laced with such sarcasm. Most servants and laborers maintained at least the appearance of respect even when they clearly bore a grudge. Sedir did not seem to care what rank Camros held, or what the consequences might be. "What I meant was all the other laborers work together in the fields but you are alone."

"That's because I do special work. Now then, if you want to stay you'll either help or sit quietly over there." Sedir indicated a grassy place under the tree where two roots diverged to create a natural seat.

Camros sat in the shade as the day steadily grew warmer. Spring usually was not so hot, but the drought had done its worst, drying out the vegetation and the springs, and sapping the coolness from the air. He should have returned to the house by midmorning, but was intrigued enough to stay.

Sedir went about his business, going to and from a wooden shed where he kept various tools and a pallet for sleeping. He said very little unless prompted, though when the noon hour came he relaxed a little and joined Camros by the tree. "What are you supposed to be doing right now?"

“My tutor has not yet arrived from Bhellin.”

“You came with a rather small train, didn’t you? Just you, your father, a fat eunuch, and some guards. The entire household is gossiping about it.”

“They should not,” said Camros. “Father had to leave the city very suddenly.”

Without further explanation, it was no surprise that Sedir immediately drew the wrong conclusion. “Oh, a bit of trouble with our almighty king?”

“No, my father is a scribe, and he took a job gathering information about the low water levels here in Besar,” answered Camros. “It is very important work and could not wait for all the usual arrangements.” Everything he said was true, after a fashion. Narisen *was* compiling figures, a dull task that often kept him away from the estate or awake until very late at night.

Sedir smiled over the olive he was munching; he offered none to Camros. “So why did he bring you with him? I imagine it must be rather dull around here if one isn’t working the land. I can’t imagine what you would do all day if you weren’t irritating the hired help.”

“I told you I would go if it bothered you.”

“Such a cross little thing! Try taking the stylus out of your ass, boy. I never said you couldn’t stay.” Sedir popped the rest of the olive into his mouth, chewed, and spit out the pit. “Tell me some more about your fascinating life here in the country.”

The sarcasm of this invitation was not lost on Camros, but he was strangely reluctant to call the insult and storm out of the clearing. “We usually come here for two or three months in the summer, when it is too hot and unhealthy to stay in Bhellin. Father did not want to leave me alone in our house. I suppose he does not trust Ranu—that is my eunuch—to look after me properly, or perhaps he wants me to help him with his work, though he has not said anything to me about this.”

“Have you asked him?”

“Why would I do such a thing?”

“You don’t want to help your father with this very important work of his?” asked Sedir.

Camros shrugged. "Standing around measuring the drop in water channels and wells and making all those calculations is not very interesting."

"People are dying all over Khalgar, or will be very soon," Sedir pointed out. "I'd think you would care something about that."

"Did I ever say I did not?" Camros asked sharply. What right did this peasant with his overblown sense of self-importance have to question his betters so? "Nobody would have to die if Shedhu made the rain fall."

Lifting an earthenware jug to his lips, Sedir tilted his head back and took a draught. "It's not for you to question what the gods do or why they choose to do it. You can pray for the rain all you like, but it's clear that the god wants something. You can't expect to receive blessings if you don't give in return."

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The tutor, an emaciated scribe named Arsem, arrived the following day and had scarcely refreshed himself with a bath and meal before he insisted on getting to work. He had a thick accent and a preoccupation with neat script. Naturally Camros did not meet his high standards, so he was obliged to spend hours crammed over wax tablets, holding the stylus in the manner Arsem insisted upon, practicing penmanship until he thought his fingers would fall off.

In the evening, Arsem spoke of more esoteric matters. Narisen delighted in the intellectual conversation. Camros was thoroughly bored. Some of his tutors could make history and politics sound interesting, but all this talk of ancient philosophers and dead religions was like the buzzing of insects in his ear. As soon as it was seemly, he excused himself for bed, and gritted his teeth through the next morning's lessons until he was free to take his exercise outside.

Once more, he was drawn to the oasis by the channel. He found Sedir near the shed, weeding a patch of early vegetables. "I am sorry I am late."

Turning, Sedir gave him a look that hovered somewhere between bemusement and irritation. "I wasn't aware you were supposed to be here."

Camros took a deep breath; it had been a long, brisk walk. "Well, do you want me to go?"

"That's up to you, boy. If you really want to stay, by all means, stay and fill my ears with your buzzing."

Camros seized upon Sedir's retort as an invitation to sit down under the ancient oak. "Why do you not like me? I could have had you whipped for speaking the way you do to me, but I did not."

"Oh, and I suppose you think I am supposed to be grateful for this?" Sedir asked. "Boy, you've been spoiled far too long."

"And you are insolent for saying so. I am *not* a boy."

Sedir slapped dirty palms upon his thighs. "How high and mighty we are today! How old are you, boy? Fifteen, maybe?"

"I am seventeen," Camros answered coldly.

"You don't behave like it." Sedir looked up through the faded leaves of the tree that shaded the vegetable garden and shed. Doffing his straw hat, he fanned himself with it. "A drop of rain would be welcome. It's too warm and dry for spring. It isn't good for the soil."

"The Great Offering will be made soon," Camros said hopefully. "Then the rain will come."

"Were you part of the lottery to choose the Great Offering?"

"No," admitted Camros. "I do not think so."

The knowing look Sedir gave him turned his stomach. "You don't *think* so? You either know or you don't, boy."

Camros was not going to have this discussion, not with an insolent, lowborn field laborer. "My name is not *boy*. As for the lottery, I do not know. My father is a minor official, one of many scribes in the royal household, and the offering comes from only the very highborn."

Either he was not a convincing liar, or Sedir had already made up his mind. "Any idiot can see your father's hiding you from the priests while some other boy is to be sacrificed."

Heat rose to Camros's face. "How dare you! I already told you, I was not part of the lottery. I am not highborn and the priests would never have chosen me."

“Oh, I thought it was the god who did the choosing. How ignorant of me!”

“Why must you always twist everything I say?” demanded Camros. “You are always so angry with me. I told you before—if you want me to leave, just say so.”

“I never said I was angry with you,” replied Sedir. “You’re the one who’s raising his voice. And I never said you had to leave, but if you’re going to stay you’re not going to take that high-and-mighty tone with me. I’m not a slave, you don’t pay my wages, and I don’t have to put up with it.”

Camros, the edge now blunted off his anger, was quiet for several moments. “Where do you come from, Sedir? Just about everyone who lives here was born here, except for the seasonal hands who come in to help with the harvest.” He did not mention it, but Sedir seemed too well educated to be a laborer. Most of the others spoke with a broad Besarian patois and certainly did not have Sedir’s range of vocabulary.

The reply he received was deliberately vague. “I’m from here and there.”

“Have you ever been to the city?”

“I’ve been to Bhellin a few times, and other places, but I prefer the countryside. There’s too much noise and confusion in the cities.”

“Do you have a wife?”

The corners of Sedir’s mouth crinkled, then turned up into a smile. “Now you’re being nosy, young man. Do you have a girl, or maybe a pretty boy back in Bhellin?”

“No, of course not,” Camros sputtered, “and it is none of your concern.”

“What, almost a man and no lovers? And such a pretty boy you are, too!”

Those words and the playful tone in which they were delivered made him feel uneasy. For the first time he noticed that Sedir, though at least ten years older than he, was rather attractive for a man. He tried very hard to concentrate on his answer, rather than on the strange sensations flooding through him. “There are no girls in my academy, and Father warned me off the serving girls. He believes one should be a man before one dallies around like that.”

Sedir snorted. "I suppose he expects your cock to remain limp until you're ready for marriage, is that so? And then I suppose you're somehow supposed to magically get it up and know what to do with it."

Camros stiffened. "You are vulgar."

"No, I call things what they are. As a scribe's son, you ought to know better, or do they teach you that nauseating flowery language in that academy of yours? Do they refer to a man's cock as a rigid pillar of love, or perhaps a glistening rod of joy? If you feel better talking about it in the style of Juvan love poetry, by all means let me know."

Those words went straight to his groin. "You should not even be asking me about it. It is not proper, and it makes you sound like—"

"Like what? Like I'm going to seduce you?" Sedir rolled his eyes before dismissing the idea with sharp laughter. "Oh, please, boy. I prefer my lovers with a bit more flesh on them, and a bit more humility. Even if I wanted to drill you up the ass, one doesn't do that sort of thing with young noblemen and I find that scribes are too much like priests to make me hard: they're too holier-than-thou to enjoy a good romp, and most of the time they think their seed is like the attar of roses."

Camros could no longer stand it. "You are insolent *and* vulgar."

"And *you* are a foolish and selfish child," Sedir shot back.

His eyes burning with hot, angry tears, Camros fled the clearing. All the way back to the villa, he imagined he heard Sedir's laughter chasing him. At this point, he knew he really ought to say something to his father, but then he would have to contend with his own embarrassment at letting the conversation go as far as it had. Sedir certainly was not the sort of man who would shy away from revealing to everyone what they had discussed. As far as Camros could tell, the man had no compunctions about anything.

Upstairs in his suite Ranu was waiting for him. "Your tutor has been looking for you. I told him you were taking your exercise. Will you see him now?"

Camros twitched with the urge to slam the door or throw something. "I do not want any of his boring philosophy!"

The eunuch frowned at him. "Are you feeling quite well, sir?"

Camros plunged his hands into the wash basin the servants and bathed his face until the cool water revived him somewhat. "I hate it here," he said. "I wish we could go back to the city."

"Not until your father is finished with his work, you know that," said Ranu. "Now then, you are red in the face. It is not good for a nobleman's complexion to spend too much time out in the sun, or good for his character to spend too much time with lowly servants."

"I was bored."

Ranu proffered a linen cloth with which he dabbed his face dry. "Still, it is not seemly, and it is not good to keep the servants from their work."

Camros clutched the cloth tightly, twisting it between his fingers as though it were Sedir's neck. "You are right," he said coldly. "I will not waste my time further."

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Cool breezes made the villa a pleasant haven at night. The grounds were quiet but for the stirring of the air through the fallow fruit trees in the courtyard, and the faint sound of a dog barking in the distance. Camros saw an oil lamp burning in a downstairs room across the court and knew his father was busy at work again. They had not eaten together that evening.

When his mother was alive and his sisters still lived at home, it had been very different. In those days the household had been cheerful and full of activity, but then his mother had become ill and overnight a fearful hush descended on the house. Once she was gone, Narisen had found husbands for his daughters with almost unseemly haste while making it clear that he would not countenance talk of a second wife. Camros did not mention his mother where his father could hear; instead he relished those rare moments when his father lowered his guard enough to reminisce.

Camros spent the rest of the day closeted with Arsem, and was now more than ready for sleep to come, but it would not. He shifted and tossed in bed until restlessness compelled him to get up and go to the screen. In the adjacent cubicle, Ranu snored peacefully, oblivious to his young master's distress.

Gods, how he hated Sedir! He would have liked nothing better at that moment than to storm down to the shed under the trees and have it out with the laborer, to shout at and pummel the man until his anger was gone. No one, not even his worst tutor, had ever spoken so to him, and he was not about to swallow it now.

What do you care what some peasant thinks? he asked himself. *He is nothing to you.*

No, the man was too perceptive, too close to the truth in so many ways. While it did not take much thought to guess the true reason Narisen had brought his son to the countryside out of season, and while the rest of the household probably knew as well, Sedir did not stop there. *The priests would not have chosen me. I am not highborn or beautiful enough to make a Great Offering. He has no right to judge me.*

Camros trembled with shame and relief at what his father had done, while knotting his hands into fists at the remembered sarcasm that had dripped from Sedir's voice. Somewhere in the back of his mind he wondered if the gods could see him hiding from them; the thought, it seemed, had always been there, only now being given voice. *I know it was wrong, but I want to live and perhaps it would not have been me anyway. He has no way to know. He just wants to annoy me and make me feel guilty for being the master's son.*

No, I would not have been chosen. Camros shut the fretted screen with a determined gesture and climbed back into bed. *He is an angry, vulgar fool, nothing more.*

The next morning, Narisen surprised him with an invitation to breakfast. If taking evening meals together was uncommon, for Camros to see his father so early in the day was rare indeed. Camros fretted over his toilette until Ranu hustled him down to the terrace, where he spent the next hour picking over his food under his father's watchful eye.

"Is something troubling you?" Narisen finally asked.

Camros felt his throat constrict at the knowing tenor of those words. "I miss the city."

Narisen nodded over his quail eggs. "Yes, it has come to my attention that you have been somewhat bored here, even with your tutor. I have made arrangements for you to accompany me for a few days. It will be good for you to help me in my work."

This was a dull prospect, going from one dusty village to another to talk with local overseers, field workers, and landowners. Camros, wilting under a wide-brimmed hat, helped his father's slave with the portable writing table and supplies. When he received his assignment, he bristled at the indignity, and quickly lost interest in the proceedings.

Occasionally his father came to see what he had observed. Camros tried to sound intelligent and give his best answer, but it was clear Narisen knew he had not been paying attention. "I did not bring you out here so you could daydream."

“They are just numbers,” said Camros. “I do not understand what they all mean.”

His feeble attempt at an explanation did not improve his father’s opinion of him. “Then I will show you,” Narisen said coldly. Instructing the slave to remain by the channel with the writing table, he had Camros follow him into the village.

Mudbrick hovels faced narrow, dusty thoroughfares along which children ran, chasing each other or playing with rickety wooden hoops. A weathered old goatherd led a flock of animals along the edge of the village toward the low-lying hills in the distance. As they walked, Narisen motioned to several gaunt-faced women standing in their doorways spinning fleece.

“If the water drops below a certain level,” he said, low enough that no one else would hear, “then there will not be enough food. You saw for yourself how poor the crops are coming in. Those women will have no milk and their children will die of starvation and disease. It is a terrible death. Without the rain, sooner or later death will come to the city, and you will see for yourself what kind of suffering and lawlessness famine can bring.”

“I heard that the king has put supplies by to see us through a famine,” said Camros. “There are granaries throughout the kingdom.”

Narisen nodded. “Yes, that is true, but you cannot expect that we will be able to eat as we did before. Last year’s harvest was not a bountiful one, and those granaries are not at full capacity. When this harvest fails, we will all go hungry. These people will be the first to die.”

Camros swallowed hard, unable to look at either his father or the village. The place seemed so mean already that he could not conceive how the lives of these people could possibly become worse; the thought was so uncharitable it immediately embarrassed him. *A good man does not think these things.* He simply nodded his head and let his father lead him back to the edge of the fields, where he went back to work compiling the figures Narisen gave him.

As the day got hotter and dustier, he found his thoughts drifting back to the green shade of the estate and Sedir. Had the man been able to see him grimacing over his thankless task, he would have laughed, saying it was only right that someone as coddled and selfish as he should see how others less fortunate lived.

Other thoughts followed: the remembered warm tenor of Sedir’s voice explaining his love of growing things, and the clean lines of his face and body. Now was not the time to be thinking about that, improper or not. Camros chewed the ragged end of his stylus, a habit from which successive tutors

had tried to wean him. *You just want to see him again because he is interesting and not like these hopeless people, not because you like him. You cannot possibly like him. He always says such insulting things to you.*

Narisen, sweating through his scribe's white linen tunic, bent over his shoulder to see the columns he was subtracting. At each stop, he and the local overseer took measurements at equidistant points along the irrigation channels. These numbers he brought back to Camros, who sat with the slave at the portable table under a tree or makeshift awning, and they subtracted the new figures from previous ones to calculate the rate of water droppage.

The air was still and tense, and Camros wanted more than ever to go back to the villa. Not just because he hated the work and heat and dust, but because the desperation that followed each new measurement grew so thick it was fast becoming a lump in the back of his throat. He honestly did not see how his work would benefit the people who looked as though they were already dying.

After three days, Camros yearned to go back to Sedir and tell him that he understood, and that he was not as selfish and blind as the other man believed.

It was ridiculous, craving the pardon and approval of a commoner, and yet somehow it was terribly important that the man think well of him. Three days spent away from home, sleeping on packed earth floors in houses rancid with too many unwashed bodies, choking down whatever meager, unappetizing food he was given and having to smile and say thanks for fear of offending his hosts was all Camros had been able to stand of his father's work. He hated the villages with their poorly built hovels and hollow-eyed people, he hated his father for compelling him to come, and most of all he hated his own uselessness. Rain and food were what these people needed, not scribes with notched sticks and knotted strings.

In those moments, he let his mind wander to a cool place of greenery and water, where the sole occupant was the furthest thing from desperate that Camros could envisage. He wanted to sit beside Sedir, to hear his voice again, even if it meant having to endure his insults and improper questions.

Ranu had a sponge bath of warm, scented water and fresh clothing already laid out upon his return. Food and wine waited upon an inlaid table; he drank enough to wash the taste of dust from his throat, but ate sparingly. Throughout the meal, the eunuch hovered over him with tidbits of gossip or queries about how the excursion had gone. Camros reined in the urge to order him from the room; his father would have been cross with him for raising his voice at the staff, and he had seen and heard enough of Narisen's grim humor in the last three days to make that a sufficiently unwelcome prospect.

At last, Camros yawned and told Ranu to turn down the bed. Twilight painted the inner courtyard and sun-faded trees a muted shade of cobalt. Cooking smells pervaded the air; sweet bread was being prepared for breakfast, and the aroma of spiced lamb still clung to the courtyard. It was the most

restful time of day, and the excursion had left him exhausted enough, but sleep eluded him. As Camros lay awake in bed, studying the ceiling, dusk passed into night and the moon rose. Gradually the night scents mellowed and the sounds grew fainter, more remote as the household retired. In the adjoining cubicle he heard Ranu take off his sandals and lie down. Sleep was not as difficult for the eunuch, and within a short space he was snoring.

Frustration urged Camros to get up. He slipped on his sandals and a light robe and, making sure Ranu did not hear him, left the room. His intention was to go downstairs to the inner court and sit under the lime tree by the dry fountain. Instead, he surprised himself by leaving the house altogether, going down the kitchen path in the darkness to the fields and channel below.

The moon rode high and full, and the air was cool. It was a night for lingering, for walking, for dancing. Mad thoughts for one who never ventured beyond the safety of his father's house, who rarely dared anything. Narisen would demand to know what he was doing, and Camros would have no answer.

Dry earth turned to grass under his feet, and the darkness became pungent with green growth and softly running water. A black shadow obscured the moon, the ancient oak whose roots clawed the earth like gnarled fingers. Off to the right stood the shed. No light came from within. Camros took a step forward then hesitated, thinking that Sedir might be sleeping. Whatever it was he had to say could surely wait until morning.

Lifting his hand, he hesitated again, until with a tremulous breath he made a fist and rapped lightly on the door. "Are you in there, Sedir? It is me."

Breathless moments passed, anxious heartbeats in which Camros counted the various ways Sedir would shoo him away. Finally, the door opened a crack and a presence filled the darkness. Camros just could make out the contours of Sedir's face in the moonlight. "It's late, boy. What do you want?"

Sedir did not sound happy to see him. "I wanted to see you. I could not wait until tomorrow."

"Did you sneak away from that fat nursemaid of yours? Boy, hasn't anyone ever told you that even lowly peasants need to sleep?"

"Please stop!" Camros hissed, amazed at how hard his voice was shaking. "Every time I see you, you have to mock me. I am not stupid or selfish, and I am not a boy!"

Sedir expelled a hissing breath. "Did you come here all this way in the dark just to tell me this?"

“I just spent three days going from village to village. It was miserable, horrible. I know how those people live, but I cannot do anything for them. You think I am selfish, but *there is nothing I can do*. It is—it is like when my mother died. My father consulted with the physicians and took notes, and there was nothing he could do then either.”

“Perhaps you should come inside.” Sedir placed a steadying hand on his shoulder and guided him into the dark shed. The blackness smelled of old wood, dirt, and sweat. “Sit down on the floor and I’ll find a light.”

A rushlight sputtering in a battered brass lamp was the only illumination Sedir could provide. Camros waved the light away; darkness made confiding his fears easier. “I know what you think, but I hated it, Sedir. I hated how poor they were and how they looked at me and gave me their moldy food and I had to say thank you and eat it even when they needed it more. Father says they are going to die and all he does is take measurements and make me write them down.”

“Yes, he is measuring the fall of the channels.”

“I *know* what he is doing!”

“Camros, don’t get sharp with me,” said Sedir. “I had no idea about your mother.”

“Would it have made any difference?” Tears came to his eyes, and the knot in his throat threatened to choke him. “You think I am selfish, some pampered lord’s son. My father is only a minor official, and he does not spoil me. My mother was the one who used to fuss over me. I wanted to tell you that. The entire time I was in those villages I kept thinking about you, imagining what you would do or say if you could see me.” The words spilled from him faster than he could contain them, and he knew most of them made little sense.

Sedir was clearly puzzled. “You could have waited till tomorrow to tell me all this. I’m not going anywhere,” he said gently.

Camros did not understand what drove him. He certainly did not care about some peasant’s opinion of him, but that did not stop him from closing the distance between them, crawling forward on his hands and knees and clutching blindly at the darkness until he found Sedir. His hands ran up the man’s arms and shoulders to find his jaw, his lips, and then he was kissing the man—kissing him hard without knowing what madness possessed him. Sedir made a surprised noise but did not resist, and Camros willingly yielded control of the kiss to him.

Between them lingered the taste of warm earth and growing things. Camros felt callused hands run up

his back, under his tunic to graze his skin. Suddenly the air in the shed was too close. He did not protest the hands that pulled at his clothes, stripping them off, or wonder at what was going to happen next, because in his hunger he was doing the same. All he cared about at that moment was feeling Sedir's naked skin against his own and finding gratification.

Lips brushed his neck, the curve of his jaw, the hollow of his throat. Not once did he stop to ponder how Sedir, so cynical and judgmental of him, desired him so fiercely. His body needed no explanations or theories when there was proof enough in the erection grazing his thigh and the tongue that was beginning to explore his chest.

Oblivious to all else save their naked bodies and their mutual murmurs and grunts of pleasure, they sank to the floor amid their fallen clothes, kicking aside tools and other items so they could move freely against each other. Camros was hard, trapped against the heavier body grinding down upon him; his hips moved in a reciprocal rhythm, his breath came in short little gasps. Sensations both painful and pleasurable jolted through his groin. He gave a cry that was quickly smothered by Sedir's mouth and tongue, and felt a sudden wetness against his belly.

A few moments later Sedir convulsed and collapsed on his shoulder. He could feel the man's heartbeat pounding against his own, the sweat cooling on their bodies, and the warm seed on his belly. Camros knew they would have to clean up, that all evidence of this coupling would have to be concealed, but for the next few moments he did nothing beyond try to regain his breath. "What did we do?"

Sedir took his time about answering. "What do you *think* we did?"

"Should we have?"

"It's a bad time to regret it."

"I did not say that," murmured Camros. "It is just that I do not understand— You are crushing me. Sit up."

Sedir shifted his weight so he lay beside Camros. "You don't understand because you've never been in love."

Love was not the word Camros would have used; he bit back the retort that rose to his lips. This wild new passion was something for which he had no name. Lust answered the physical need, yet now feelings stirred in his breast which the definition of lust did not encompass. "Sedir," he said softly, "I hated going to those places. I wanted to scream at those people to wake up, to *do* something."

“What are they supposed to do that they aren’t already doing? They have crops in the ground, I gather, and are digging wells to find whatever hidden water the earth holds. What else would you have them do?”

“They looked so helpless,” said Camros. “I saw their fields, and people working, so it is not that they are lazy. It is just that they looked at me and Father as if we could work some miracle.”

Fingertips lightly traced his arms. “What you did was important,” said Sedir. “Not that I know much about numbers and measurements, but I know it was important.” He leaned in for a kiss before reaching over and drawing his rough blanket over them. “Why don’t you tell me about your mother? Did she die long ago?”

Camros did not know what had possessed him to mention it. A strict code of silence governed his world when it came to his mother. Anyone with whom he might have spoken had clearly been instructed to avoid the subject. “Three years ago,” he said. “She got sick and wasted away. She was always so happy, fussing over me and my sisters, and then all of a sudden she was so tired. Father made her go to bed and rest, but she never got better.”

The tears that had threatened to fall earlier now spilled from his eyes. Camros knuckled them away, giving in and letting go when Sedir’s fingers brushed his cheeks. In the past, Ranu had been the one to hold and soothe him in his grief; to be comforted now by this virile stranger seemed a far greater intimacy than what they had shared earlier. Sedir cradled him, stroking his hair until his crying subsided.

“Tears aren’t always bad,” said Sedir. “They say Shedhu weeps when he is happy.”

“Then he must be very angry right now.”

“Only the gods can say for certain.” He kissed Camros on the lips and forehead before sitting up. “I would keep you here all night if I could, as you seem to need it, but you need to think about going home before you’re missed. I’ll get a light so you can get dressed. There’s some water in a bowl over there. Clean up and when you leave don’t let anyone see you.”

Ranu was still asleep when Camros crept back into his bedchamber and slipped into bed. Delicious lassitude flooded his limbs, yet he remained awake a while longer to let his mind sift through the memories of that evening. A smile stole across his lips, and he idly ran his fingertips along his thigh and chest to recapture some of the sensations Sedir had elicited from him.

As he drifted halfway between wakefulness and dreaming he became aware of a low, rhythmic pattering on the roof and on the flagstones of the inner court. Only when he heard cries of alarm did he open his eyes.

Ranu was already up and at the screen, pulling it back to see what the commotion was. Cool air pungent with moisture filled the room. The eunuch put up his hand and drew it back with a broad grin. "It's raining."

Half-dazed, Camros got out of bed and nudged him aside. Down below the household was milling in a courtyard whose dry pavement was now dark with fat droplets. Shrieks of amazement and laughter filled the air. More people spilled into the court until there was scarcely room for movement, while others leaned out of windows with their hands outstretched to touch and taste the miracle.

Distant thunder rumbled beyond the horizon. Joy suffused the air, infecting all who came outside. It was a night for being awake, for dancing, for making love.

* * * *

Narisen's initial elation was replaced by bewilderment. "Where did this rain come from?" he asked, thinking aloud. "Yesterday was a cloudless day."

"Perhaps they made the Great Offering?" suggested Camros.

"No, that will not take place until the equinox. It takes a hundred and twenty days to purify the sacrifice." Narisen pushed his plate of food to one side to begin leafing through a sheaf of papers. "I must write to my contacts in Bshellin and see what they have to say about this."

Camros took his morning lessons with Arsem, then after lunch lay quietly in his room, listening to the light rain pattering against the roof tiles and flagstones while Ranu occupied himself with a book. More than anything he wanted to go out and see Sedir, to celebrate with him this unexpected blessing, but he dared not take the chance.

His heart raced, both at the delectable secret knowledge of what he had done and the terror that it would somehow be discovered. What little he knew about lovemaking cautioned him against taking a submissive role unless he wanted to be considered effeminate and derided. There was no harm in bedding a social inferior, which his father regularly did with several serving girls, but this was different. Sedir was not a woman or a young boy he could use for his own pleasure and then dismiss. What he had done was unwise, even dangerous.

This must never happen again, he thought.

News took nearly a week to pass between Bhellin and Besar, and Narisen was able to disguise his queries among his usual business. What he heard appeared to set his mind at ease. "As I suspected, the sacrifice is still alive. The priests are taking the rain as surety that the offering will be made on the appointed date, and have announced that Shedhu is pleased with the youth."

Rain fell intermittently over a period of ten days. Once the skies were clear again, Narisen took Camros with him back to the villages they had visited before. New measurements were taken in the channels, but to Camros's dismay his father seemed disappointed by the figures. "Two weeks of drizzle is not enough. We need at least two weeks of heavy downpour before the water rises to acceptable levels."

"Then it will not help the crops?"

"It is early enough in the growing season that it may help a little, provided there are more days of rain," said Narisen. "A downpour at this time of year, however, would be detrimental to the new crops, and the harvest still will not be what it ought to be."

Upon his return, Camros was able to take his afternoon exercise in the orchard and see Sedir again. Their visit was chaste only in deed; the smoldering looks that passed between them charged the air with such heat that only a night's frenzied passion could relieve it.

"I wanted you so badly." Camros let his hands roam the planes of Sedir's body, until Sedir captured one of them and guided it to the hardness between his thighs. "I was afraid to come. If only you were a girl, it would not be so dangerous."

Sedir gasped into his ear, flicking the tip with his tongue before delving deeper. "And if you were the lord's daughter this would be unthinkable. I know what you're afraid of. We won't do anything of the sort. Here, lie back and let me touch you, and I'll show you something you've never had before."

What Sedir did next with his hands and mouth were beyond anything Camros ever imagined, so that for days afterward whenever he thought of it he became giddy with arousal.

The following day, Sedir revealed that his vegetables were ripening. "All is not lost," he said, flashing Camros a melting smile. His penchant for blunt talk had not ceased when their lovemaking began. Only his tone had changed, becoming gentler, more playful, or perhaps Camros no longer felt threatened.

Spring passed into summer, and the days grew lazy and sweltering. Now it was too hot to go out in

the afternoons to visit Sedir, and to have done so would have invited suspicion when the rest of the household retired at noon for a light meal and a brief siesta. In the warm dusk, Narisen wanted Camros to work with him in preparing his report for the king. Only on those rare occasions when he went away on business and did not take his son with him was Camros able to slip into the twilight, go down to the channel, and see Sedir.

Any lovemaking they did was in secret. Their trysts occurred late at night when the rest of the estate was safely asleep, though in the summer it was not so easy to judge. Some of the servants slept in the courtyards or on the roof to escape the heat. To avoid detection, Camros had to pretend he was sneaking down to the kitchen or to the privy before making his way across the fields.

Eventually Ranu noticed. "You have a girl," said the eunuch.

Not knowing what else to do, Camros hung his head and confessed. "I know Father will not approve, but I could not help myself and she knows how not to get with child. He has his girl, why should I not have mine?"

Iba, the girl in question, was a sleek, lazy thing with a tongue that grew sharper by the day. The airs she put on made Camros yearn all the more strongly for his mother.

"Not that I know anything about such things," replied Ranu, "but a young man like you needs a bit of comfort now and then. We will not tell him unless he asks."

Near midsummer, the rain returned for a brief spell. No sooner had the droplets fallen to earth, spattering against sun baked dust and stone, than they evaporated. Humidity clung to the air. Camros, frustrated at not being able to go out, stayed indoors and brooded. Rain was no longer the blessing it had been.

Sedir laughed to hear him complain. "One can never please you," he said. "Here I thought the rain was a sign of divine favor."

"It is hot and damp and the crops are still withering," answered Camros. "If I had to guess, I would say the gods were punishing us, just in a different way."

Sedir bent to kiss him. "That's why you're not a priest. Come here and let me love you."

Camros returned his kiss by sucking softly on his tongue; it aroused the man as much as a firm hand on his cock. "I want to do everything with you."

“That’s your erection talking.” Sedir broke away to nibble at his throat. “There are things you and I can’t do.”

“And who would know? I am not a girl who has to protect her maidenhead.”

Sedir pulled back, and propped himself on his elbow to gaze down at Camros. “Would you really want me inside you?”

“You are the only man I would want to do those things with.”

That night, Sedir entered him, slowly at first, testing his body with a slick finger, touching a place deep within that made him writhe and want more. When Sedir finally mounted him, Camros felt an almost unbearable sensation of burning and being stretched beyond what his body was meant to take. Urging him to relax, to breathe, Sedir gave him time to adjust before he began to move, and when the tension eased from his limbs Camros felt once again that sharp pleasure, only now it was building and he was straining toward it, wrapping his legs around Sedir’s back to pull him closer.

“More!” he cried. Stimulated by the friction of their bodies coming together, his cock throbbed insistently, and he began to come.

Never once did it occur to him that he was doing anything unnatural, and even afterward, when he realized that he had gone too far, still he could not bring himself to regret it.

* * * *

“I am taking you to the bazaar in Lasith,” said Narisen. “I need to purchase fresh writing materials and thought perhaps you might wish to accompany me.”

Two miles south of the villa, Lasith was a small town of whitewashed buildings and narrow streets set against brown hills. Neither its meager monuments nor its bazaar could compare with the cosmopolitan splendor of Bhellin, but the trip offered a diversion from the mundane routine of the villa that Camros could not resist.

The bazaar bustled with activity. People and livestock crowded the narrow thoroughfare as vendors competed with each other, shouting into the din of traffic and shamelessly accosting potential customers. Narisen twice shook off women who shoved garishly dyed cloth under his nose. His horse liked the intrusion even less, snorting and shying as if about to throw his rider. Camros, marking the unusual behavior, would have commented on it were his own horse not behaving in a similar fashion.

“We will find a stable,” said Narisen, “and then walk. They will be calmer away from this press.”

As they passed under a striped awning, the ground suddenly lurched. Pottery and baskets flew into the street, and people stumbled. A low rumble vibrated through the air, the sound of the earth rippling, shrugging its mighty shoulders. Stalls and buildings began to sway; an awning collapsed a few feet away. Dust filled the air. Camros felt his horse quaver under him; the mare, frothing at the mouth, tossed her head, jerking at the reins until Camros leapt from the saddle and let her bolt.

Neither his father nor Ranu were anywhere in sight. Camros ducked his head under his arms as part of the awning gave away above him. Everywhere he heard screams, but he could not seem to get breath enough to do more than gasp and shudder. Across the street, across a debris field of scattered wares and shattered stalls, he saw one of the tenements lean precariously toward the street before crumpling on itself. It was only afterward, when the shaking stopped and he saw townsfolk digging frantically among the rubble that he realized people had been inside.

Aftershocks followed hard upon the initial temblor. Stunned and not knowing where to go, Camros stayed where he was, clinging to the bent awning post even as what was left of the stall rattled with each new jolt.

A hand on his arm gave him a start. “You are not hurt, are you, sir?” It was Ranu, dusty and shaking as hard as his voice.

“My father—”

Ranu gestured down the street. “He is trying to calm the horses. Come, I will take you to him and we will go home.”

* * * *

The earthquake did only minor damage to the villa. A servant had been struck a glancing blow by falling masonry, while another lost his footing and twisted his ankle as he tried to get under a doorway. Hairline cracks zigzagged the plaster in many of the rooms, things were shifted and broken, but otherwise it was nerves that had suffered most. For several nights, as aftershocks continued to jolt the countryside, people were afraid to sleep indoors. Narisen arranged for tents to be set up in the orchards.

Ten days after the quake a courier came to the villa. Narisen received him outdoors, under an awning where his servants had arranged a cot and writing desk. Camros, who sat in the shade nearby with Arsem and a servant with a broad willow fan, was not privy to the meeting but could see even from afar that his father was troubled by the message.

That evening, as they took a light supper on an open terrace, Narisen shared with him the courier's report. "News is slow to leave the city with all the recent upset, but a reliable source has told me something rather troubling."

Those last words Camros had heard before. Narisen had phrased the news of his mother's illness in almost exactly the same fashion. *I have learned something troubling, son, and now I must tell you.* "What is it, Father? Has someone died?"

"Yes, and I do not know what to make of it. Parts of the city were more heavily damaged than others. The palace is still standing, and most of the temple complex, but part of the Rain Lord's house fell in. Apparently this is the building where they were housing the Great Offering; the poor boy was crushed when the shaking started."

Camros did not know what to say. It was inconceivable that the gods would permit a holy sacrifice to die before the offering was made. The only possible explanation that came to mind was that perhaps Shedhu had not liked the youth the priests had chosen for him. "What will happen now?"

"Of course, the priests must choose candidates for a new lottery, but it will be a few weeks before they can do this and then, I have heard, they will have to proceed as before. They cannot wait another hundred and twenty days."

As the harvest drew near, they made yet another trip to the local villages. Whatever rain had fallen had not been enough to undo the damage done by the drought, and the fields and orchards stood to bring in less than half their normal yield. The village elders had plenty to say about the matter, especially when they heard about the fate of the Great Offering.

"This poor yield is a sign from above," said one man. "The god wants his sacrifice."

"Then he ought to have made sure the boy wasn't flattened," said a second man.

"You watch your tongue!" The first man made a gesture warding off blasphemy. "I've heard talk in Lasith that in five other villages they're sacrificing boys and maidens to the god."

With his final calculations made and noted, and queries arriving from Bhellin, Narisen could not postpone his return. "This report is needed by the royal council and I am expected to deliver it in person. I am sure you will welcome the opportunity to go back to the academy and see your friends."

Camros quietly absorbed this news. While he wanted very much to see Bhellin again and return to school, going would mean leaving Sedir behind. "How soon must we go?"

"In a few days, once I have made arrangements. If you intend to say goodbye to this girl of yours, you had better do it now."

Ranu had sworn silence on the matter. Camros could only wonder how his father found out. "How did you know?"

"I know you have been up to something at night, and at your age it is not difficult to guess," answered Narisen. "Had I known which of the serving girls it was, I might have sent her away. Then again, you are more than old enough to want sex so perhaps I should not be too harsh. As long as you remember discretion, I will keep my peace."

The following afternoon, Camros went down to the channel, but to his dismay Sedir was not in his shed. He waited a while, expecting the man might return at any moment, until late afternoon cast its shadows across the orchard and he was forced to leave. A midnight excursion produced the same result. The shed was dark and untenanted. Even Sedir's tools were gone.

Camros brooded over the mystery throughout the next morning's lessons. At noon, as the household retired for lunch and an afternoon siesta, he walked down to the orchard and casually asked one of the field workers if they had seen Sedir.

The man simply frowned and said he did not know anyone by that name.

* * * *

Bhellin's municipal workers were so efficient that one had to look hard to find evidence of the quake. When Camros asked how badly the city was shaken, one of the servants told him that in the eastern quarter an entire row of tenements had collapsed, killing many people, but those buildings had been poorly constructed. Glazed tiles had been dislodged from the Serpentine Gate and part of the temple complex was damaged. Otherwise, the damage was superficial.

Camros was glad to see his friends and teachers, and his return to the academy meant Arsem could be dismissed. Everyone wanted to know what he had been doing in Besar, so he told them about the various villages he had visited and the work he had done, even about the quake in Lasith. As everyone had earthquake stories of their own, his was but one of many. No mention was made of Sedir.

Sedir was the shadow that clung to his homecoming. He never returned, and Camros had been forced to leave without seeing him again. Anger gradually replaced his initial confusion. *Who is to say he*

does not have a pretty boy every place he goes? Bile stung the back of his throat and his belly roiled. Was that all I was to him, a good tumble? Why else would he leave without saying goodbye? He did not want a scene.

And I gave him what I should never have given anyone. Camros covered his face with his hands and groaned. How could I have been so blind, so stupid?

Ranu, noticing how melancholy he had become, suggested he find a new girl. "I am sure there are plenty of girls in the household who would not mind warming your bed at night."

Camros shook his head at the suggestion. Sex was the last thing he wanted at the moment. "It is not your job to play the panderer," he said. "Do not be so impertinent as to suggest it again."

His father was busy making arrangements to present his findings to the king and council. It was rare that he as a minor official was called into the royal presence, so he fretted over his notes and opening remarks as well as his attire and was snappish. When he left for the palace, the household held its collective breath in waiting for the results.

Narisen did not return until well after dusk. His supper, now growing cold, waited for him in the dining room, and the senior members of the staff anxiously gathered in the entryway to glean clues as to how the day had gone. Ignoring their scrutiny and the steward's comment that his food was ready, he searched their faces until he found Camros. "Come with me," he said.

Camros followed his father into the study and waited with rising apprehension as Narisen closed the door after them. His father moved slowly, as though he had been struck, and his hand appeared to be trembling. "Are you all right?"

The face that turned toward him was ashen. "Camros, I—"

"What is it? Did you make your presentation to the council?"

"Yes, but—" Narisen hesitated, licked his lips and started again. "Yes, but afterward the king and several lords wanted me to stay, to go with them to the temple of the Rain Lord to witness the lottery. I thought it had already taken place. I could not fathom why they would ask me, a minor official, to join them, but I went."

"Why did they wait so long? The offering is supposed to be made in a week. Father, you are shaking. Perhaps you should sit—"

“No! Let me finish!” Narisen turned away to pace the room. His breath came in short, sharp gasps which he punctuated with his frantic words. “When they drew the lots I saw the tiles. I heard them call the name, *your* name. I did not believe it, I *would* not believe it. I did not care that the king was there, I threw the jar over so the tiles spilled out and *your name was written on every single one!*”

“I was furious with the priests. They never even told me that you were a candidate. I argued with them, and with the king, quoting as many laws as I knew covered this situation. I *made* them replace the tiles with fresh ones and I *watched* them write down each name and put each tile in the jar. They drew again, and again it was the same, your name on every single lot. Camros, I do not know what sorcery this is. It is a black thing, some punishment for my taking you away.”

Halfway through his father’s frantic explanation, as the first realization came to him, Camros lost the ability to speak. Only shock kept him from gibbering in terror, from screaming and bolting from the room. All he could do was stare at his father and shake his head in dumb disbelief.

“The gods hate me.” Narisen put his face in his hands. “First your mother and now you, and there is nothing I can do, nothing. Oh, if only I had the sense to keep you in Besar until the offering was made. I assumed—gods, how I assumed everything was all right, and now they know how I tried to hide you. The priests already have a guard on the house. They will be here in the morning.”

* * * *

Camros envisioned armed guards breaking into the house at daybreak to drag him away, and so spent part of the night watching the entryway in terror. Instead, a quiet procession of priests accompanied by an honor guard came to the door at dawn. All courtesies were observed. The priests bowed deeply to him and his father, uttering the ritual salutations, then they placed him in a litter with plump cushions and gauzy blue curtains. Like a prince he was borne to the temple complex, yet he never once forgot he was a prisoner.

His eyes drooped from too little sleep. All night he had stayed awake in the study, alternately sobbing and lying in his father’s arms. An agitated Narisen occasionally broke the embrace to rant and pace, swearing he would draw upon every legal precedent he could find to stop the sacrifice, but they both knew it was pointless. Objects were hurled, papers and scrolls swept off tables to lie in a disorderly heap on the carpet.

“I was a fool, Camros, a fool.” Narisen uttered the words in a daze, over and over, until they lost their shape. Then he covered his face and wept. “I am sorry.”

It did not take long for the entire household to learn what had happened. Within the hour, Ranu joined them. The eunuch’s profuse sobbing was more than Camros could bear, but he could not send Ranu away when he knew it was the last time they would ever see each other.

The Rain Lord's house was a modest white building tucked away among the grander edifices dedicated to more prominent gods. People gathered around the litter, murmuring and pointing; the priests quickly hustled Camros through the crowd and away from the public spaces. Upstairs they went, past rows of temple guards with their ceremonial pikes, to an apartment furnished as if for a king.

"Holy one," said a priest, "this is not the house you should have occupied, but we have arranged these comforts for you so your last days among men might be pleasant ones."

Camros was momentarily awed by the splendor of the chambers that were to be his. The bed was of the finest cedar, its soft blue and green hangings imported brocade. Inlaid tables and chairs of exotic wood awaited his pleasure, and a priest told him that scrolls, music, and other amusements would be provided at his command. Camros almost did not hear him, for in the bathing room he found a sunken marble tub large enough to hold four men. No longer would he have to content himself with a hip bath but could enjoy the outrageous luxury of a thorough soak.

Servants stood ready with linens and unguents with which to anoint him. The priests withdrew, and a eunuch entered the room and instructed him to remove his clothing, the same clothing he had worn the day before and not changed. He was given a linen shift to put on and offered a bitter drink that had him clutching his belly and dashing for the privy within moments. "What did you give me?" he groaned.

"You must be ritually purged," explained the eunuch. "It will not take long."

As he writhed and moaned on the privy floor, the eunuch bathed his brow with a moist, scented cloth and offered encouraging words that he did not want to hear. Half the morning passed before the spasms stopped and his belly settled. Servants entered and helped him into the steaming tub; he had not noticed them bringing in the water.

The bath was scented with jasmine. A male servant washed his hair and sponged him down. Two more servants dried him with towels and smoothed scented oil onto his skin before draping him in a robe of red silk brocade.

No sooner was he dressed than did a priest come in. He was middle-aged, with the shrewd, intelligent look of a scribe, and made a short little bow. "My name is Osiran," he said, "and it is my duty to instruct you in the protocols of your station." Camros was informed that he had just undergone ritual purification. From this time forward he would adhere to a special diet and perform certain daily meditations to prepare him for the sacrifice.

As Osiran spoke, three more priests came into the room. All wore the silver pectorals Camros associated with high priests, but one also wore a headdress signifying very high rank. Osiran introduced the man as Idiso, chief priest of the god in Bhellin. He was thin and sharp-boned with a hooked nose. Camros did not trust him.

Idiso inspected him, scrutinizing him for a long, silent moment before speaking. “We are aware of how your father tried to hide you from the god. Now that you are here, you will fulfill the mighty destiny for which you were chosen.”

Camros did not think it the best moment to point out that he had not been the first choice, and that he was not of the high birth required of a Great Offering.

“In a week’s time, on the day of the solstice,” Idiso continued, “you will be dressed in wedding finery and taken from this place to the place of sacrifice.” He went on to describe the ceremony, how he would be dedicated in sacred marriage to the god, how his feet would be bound and he thrown into the sacrificial well to drown. It was all very matter-of-fact, the chief priest describing how he would die while Camros himself tried hard not to think about what his death would be like.

Before leaving, the priests asked if he wanted anything. Within the strictures set by the temple, he was permitted certain amusements and food, even a pretty girl or boy to keep him company if he wished. What he wanted most was to see his family, but he had been informed at the outset that once he was ritually purified he must forget all ties to the outside world.

Philters were slipped into his food to calm him. The drugs were not potent enough to incapacitate him, just to take the edge off his anxiety. Camros spent his waking hours in a stupor, knowing he should be able to do more but too apathetic to care. Much of his time he spent in thought, letting his mind wander the alleyways of memory and imagination. Osiran came three times a day to guide him through the required prayers. These were not, as the priest stated, to purify him but to help him reconcile himself to the necessity of his death.

Many nights he lay in the great cedar bed with its silken hangings stirring about him and listened to the sounds of the dark. In such solitary moments, he often found his thoughts drifting back to Besar, to the green garden and shed occupied by Sedir. *What would he say now, if he knew? He would laugh at me and say there is no use in trying to run from the gods.*

Memories of Sedir no longer brought anger or pangs of sexual desire, only an abiding sadness, as though he had misplaced something valuable and could not find it again.

One night, rain began to fall hard. Camros lay awake, listening to the downpour splash against the gutters. Through the screens, the air smelled moist and green, like Besar in the spring, and he thought

he heard the sound of familiar whistling. He started, his heart calling out Sedir's name, but when he sat up to find the source of the sound it vanished. *Too many drugs*, he thought. *I am dreaming even when I am awake.*

As expected, the priests glowed at the obvious signs of the god's approval. "He looks with favor upon you," said Osiran. "Do not look so downcast. In death, you will be wedded to the god. You see, he sends the rain to tell us how eagerly he awaits you."

"There was a boy before me," said Camros. "Why was he killed?"

Osiran turned his eyes away to inspect the dishes the servants were bringing in. Several times before he had asked the question; the priests never gave a satisfactory answer. "Perhaps the god did not care for him."

"I thought the oracle and the lottery were supposed to take care of that."

"You are preoccupied with things that do not concern you," Osiran said quickly. "Come, you will eat something and we will perform the morning devotion."

Camros sometimes wondered what would happen if he told the priests that he had been a man's lover, that he had been submissive. On several occasions he started to tell the truth, to reveal what he had done in blind passion, but always closed his mouth at the last moment. Surely the god already knew whose lover he had been, and what they had done together. All that would come of his confession would be that the priests would send him home in disgrace, or kill him, and a third boy would be chosen to die.

No good would come of it, whatever punishment they gave me, he told himself. *Even if they sent me home, I would have to tell Father why, if they did not tell him first, and he would never look at me again and call me his son. And if Sedir knew, he would call me a coward for taking the easy way out.*

Right away, he stopped that strand of thought. *Why do you care so much for what that peasant thinks when he left you without saying a word?*

Camros looked at the screen, the bed with its rich hangings and the inlaid ebony table where the servants had set out his breakfast. *Because you spent all that time telling him how much you wanted to do something more than what you were doing, because you were so frustrated at not being able to help, that now you have the chance to do it and you are afraid. You will say nothing, and go through with it.*

Such bravado was fleeting. More often than not, when the drugs permitted him to experience strong emotion, his heart pounded and his belly ached with pangs of terror. *I am too young to die. Too young, and I have not even lived yet. It is not fair!* He did not see how he would be able to walk from the temple to the place of sacrifice. Surely they would have to drag him when the time came.

The day before the solstice, the eunuch and servants dressed him in a crimson robe embroidered with tiny flowers and set a circlet of golden leaves upon his head. Osiran came with two other priests and the temple guard to lead him into a chamber where they made him sit upon a golden chair. From a side door, an image was brought in and placed beside him; he did not turn to look at it. Prayers were chanted, and one after another priests and richly dressed noblemen knelt before him with offerings of incense, cloth, wine and precious oils. Although no one bothered to explain what was going on, Camros had seen this ritual enacted with his sisters and knew it was a wedding rite, the presentation of the gifts.

Several nobles came forward to congratulate him on his good fortune at being the god's beloved; one might have been the king. Osiran, hovering at his ear, whispered that he should thank them. Camros managed as well as he could, his voice sounding oddly slurred even to him.

That night, he asked for the god to be brought to him, which the priests duly did, carrying in a fine silver image adorned with flowers. From their smiles, they evidently thought he wanted to acquaint himself with his divine bridegroom before he went to the marriage bed.

A Khalgari child learned the names of all the gods almost as soon as he could talk, but Shedhu was not a deity to whom Camros could remember ever having prayed. In his father's household he had worshipped the Snake Mother, and his father regularly burned incense for Mesi, the patron god of scribes. If Camros knew any tales about the Rain Lord, he could not remember them now.

Shedhu was slender, with a youthful face and prominent phallus upon which some well-meaning priest had draped a chain of white flowers. Camros wondered if he truly looked like his image, and what it was like to love a god. *Oh, but why do I have to die to find out?*

My lord, he thought, afraid to speak the words aloud in case the priests were eavesdropping. *You would not be the first. There was another before you, a man in Besar. You must have known this when you chose me.*

The image of the god was silent, implacable, keeping its secrets. He bowed his head, pressing his brow against the edge of the table on which the image stood. His heartbeat pulsed unbearably loud in his ears.

No, I cannot do this!

Rising, turning away from the god, he flung open the doors and called for the priests. Osiran, who had elected to keep vigil that last night, quickly hastened to his side. “What is it?” he asked. “Do you need something to help you sleep? I told you before, we cannot give you anything too strong or you will not be able to walk tomorrow.”

Camros clutched at his arm. “I cannot do this, I cannot lie. I must tell you.”

“What is the matter? Come inside and tell me.”

Camros waited only until the door was closed before blurting out his answer. “I had a lover in Besar. He—”

“Is that what is troubling you? Why, that is nothing,” said Osiran, laughing. “We told you in the beginning that you were permitted a boy, if that was your pleasure.”

Osiran’s beatific smile was aggravating. “No, it was not a boy! That is to say—what I mean is that I am not—”

Osiran went out and returned a few moments later with Idiso and two other priests. Then the questions began. The priests were relentless, wanting to know everything he had done, every detail about Sedir that Camros could remember. More than likely they wanted the information so they could find Sedir and punish him for violating a nobleman’s son. Never once did they suggest stopping the sacrifice or disciplining him.

After a while, Camros realized the priests only heard half of what he said. Naturally they assumed that Sedir had taken advantage of his youth and seduced him. “He did not rape me,” he said, loudly enough that they all stopped talking. “I went to him. I consented.”

“Yes,” said Idiso, “and we will deal with it. We are grateful that you told us.”

“Please, do not tell my father.” Camros stared down at the fingers he was twisting in his lap.

Idiso surprised him with a smile, the first sign of tenderness Camros had had from him in nearly two hours. “You are not being sent back to his house in disgrace, and we are not going to take you down to the basement and cut your throat, if that is what you fear. There were thirty witnesses who saw the tiles change when the lots were drawn. The god has made it very clear where his choice lies, so we must honor it.”

“Why did the first boy die? I have asked again and again and no one says anything. The least you can do tonight is to tell me the truth.”

The priests withdrew for a moment to a corner, conferring in hushed tones before coming back. All four of them looked defeated. “You were hidden from the god’s eyes when the first lottery was taken,” said Idiso. “Perhaps he saw you later and decided he did not want the other boy.”

“But I was still in Besar when the earthquake struck.”

To that, the priests had no answer.

Camros did not sleep that last night, so he was wide awake at dawn when Osiran led the servants in to prepare him. They gave him no breakfast, as the priests did not want to chance his being sick during the procession. A hot bath was drawn, after which the servants anointed his body with fragrant oil, lingering on his intimate areas until he blushed. A robe of fine pleated linen was draped over his shoulders and cinched at the waist with a belt of silver plaques. His hair was dried and combed out, and upon his head Osiran placed a crown of flowers so deeply red they seemed like blood drops.

Last of all, Idiso entered in his ceremonial finery, bearing a silver cup from which he urged Camros to drink. “This is the draught that will bear you to the place of sacrifice. You will be awake and able to walk, but this will dull your fear and enable you to go consenting. It is sometimes given to virgin brides on their wedding night, so it is fitting for you to drink.”

Honeyed mead masked the bitter liquid. Camros drained the cup to the dregs and waited for the dullness to come. So many drugs had the priests given him in the past seven days that he did not know how much duller his senses could become without his stumbling and losing consciousness.

The place of sacrifice was nearby, but he would take a roundabout route to get there. From the Rain Lord’s house he would be led into the complex’s central plaza so the crowds could see him, and then back into the temple for the sacrifice. Fearing that he would lose heart, the priests had not taken him to see the well, but they had described it to him. Camros put all thought of the destination from his mind and concentrated on holding his head up and placing one foot in front of the other. Whatever drug the priests had given him was beginning to take hold, smothering his emotions and blurring the edges of his vision. People called out and tried to touch him as he passed, but he could not focus on any of them.

Ranu once told him that when a criminal was executed in this way, people jeered and threw refuse. How strange it seemed that he should remember that now.

Above, the sky was as gray as ashes, yet the morning air was thick and muggy. Stumbling, leaning against one of the priests who flanked him, he felt a bead of moisture spatter across his hand, onto his shoulder, and his head. Fat droplets struck the pavement before him, not enough to quench the land's immense thirst but enough to excite comment. People cried out to the god, and they cheered.

On the steps of the temple, Idiso made a sweeping gesture to Camros before lifting his arms to the lowering sky. Camros could not follow what he said, though some of it was meant for his ears. All he grasped was that the god had seen the offering and was prepared to render his part of the bargain once the sacrifice was made. More cheers greeted these words. Camros thought he heard a woman's shrill voice shouting at the priests to hurry up and drown the offering, but she was cut off in mid-sentence.

From the crowded plaza Camros was led back into the temple, along a colonnade and then into a large, open-air space filled with people who parted to let him pass. By now, his body felt heavy, his heart pumping wildly to supply him with enough energy to move, and his breath came short. Vaguely he knew these onlookers were nobles, for he could smell their expensive perfumes and see the flash of jewels. For a fleeting moment he wondered if his father was there.

Idisou led the way up to a platform garlanded with ribbons and greenery. At the back, the silver image of Shedhu stood on a pedestal, presiding over all. Camros stepped up, and for the first time saw the open space yawning at his feet. The sacrificial well was deep, and wider than he expected. Floral offerings floated upon the surface, which was cast in partial shadow. Camros saw he would have to drop several feet before he struck the water; he wondered how cold it would be.

Seeing the drop and the water below made him dizzy. Osiran put out a hand to steady him. "It will not be long," he murmured.

Directly across from the platform stood a dais shaded by a crimson awning fringed with gold. Camros saw a man in scarlet and gold cloth; the king was present. Unable to focus, he let his gaze fall to the ground. It was getting increasingly difficult to stay awake, to breathe.

Osiran nudged him. "Keep your head up if you can."

Lifting his head was like bending iron. Once again the royal pavilion blurred into view, and then beside it, in perfect focus, he saw a sun-browned, handsome face. A name slowly came to him: *Sedir*. No, it could not be. In his drug-induced haze, he was seeing only what he most wanted to see. *Sedir* had deserted him in Besar. Even had he known, he never would have come to Bhellin for this, and could not possibly have been admitted to stand among the ranks of noblemen and kings.

And yet there he was, his dark eyes and flashing smile brightening the gloom. Camros felt his heart race. A lump formed in his throat and his eyes grew moist.

Sedir blew him a kiss. Camros blinked, but his lover was no longer there.

Idiso uttered words which Camros did not hear. He felt Osiran's hands on him, holding him upright. The priest leaned forward to whisper in his ear. "It will be only a few more moments. Do not be afraid."

"I do not want to die and find he is not there," Camros said thickly. Was he talking about the god? It did not seem to matter now.

Two priests came forward to remove his sandals and bind his right ankle. He did not turn to look, but he knew that the rope trailing away behind him was attached to a weight.

Before stepping away, Osiran squeezed his hand. "It is time. He is here for you."

Rain droplets spattered the platform. Camros looked back at Osiran in confusion. The priest smiled at him. "You have loved him before. Take the last step. Go to him."

Camros did not remember putting out his foot to take the step. A breathless second suspended him in midair before gravity wrenched him downward; his stomach lurched at the drop. He struck the surface of the water faster than he had time to draw breath and was sucked under. Water poured into his open mouth, filling his lungs, and awareness returned to him. Drugs meant nothing, devotion meant nothing—his body wanted to live.

The crown of flowers, shaken by his thrashing, floated away from him, back up to the surface as the weight pulled him into the darkening depths. His lungs screamed for oxygen that was not there. He clawed at the water, jerking his legs to try to free his ankle. Cold flooded into his limbs, and his sodden robe tangled around him.

Suddenly he realized he was not alone in the water. Twisting, struggling against the weight and his wet bonds, he spun into a solid presence that grasped him and slowed his fall. Hands cupped his face, then a mouth came down on his and breathed into him. Warmth moved through him, banishing the cold. Camros could not think past the surety that those lips had kissed him once before; he no longer cared that he was dying.

His lungs could no longer bear the strain. Red burst behind his eyelids, staining the darkness. The

god's kiss was death, and life, and took his breath away.