



Bridge of Dreams

Book One: Selling Water by the River

Chaz Brenchley



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK



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of
Dreams

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THE BOOKS OF OUTREMER
THE DEVIL IN THE DUST
TOWER OF THE KING'S DAUGHTER
A DARK WAY TO GLORY
FEAST OF THE KING'S SHADOW
HAND OF THE KING'S EVIL
THE END OF ALL ROADS

BRIDGE OF DREAMS



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Part 1



Chapter One

DOWN in the Shine was Issel, dreaming. It was a very real dream, because he lay curled cold between the ribs of the boat, nested in the old wet smells of fish and weed and netting, and the air was sick aglow.

His eyes were open because he was afraid, because he was listening, because he was dreaming; no one has their eyes closed in their dreams. At first he thought he'd woken up, because he was listening because he was afraid. That was all part of the dream.

He'd heard footsteps in the shale, which had woken him, or so he'd dreamed. He'd been afraid because no one who meant any good walked on the strand in the Shine. That's why he was here, why he was let sleep in the boat. He had a knife, and he was fierce when he was afraid.

He lay curled cold in the boat, and if any thief came to steal it or the nets or himself, then the haft the knife was in his hand, and the blade would be in their belly if he could get it there.

He lay and listened to the footsteps, and then the stillness after; and so he heard the long soft cry of the waterseller, "Suu-uu!" with the bubbling shrill at the end like some marshbound bird, and so he knew he was dreaming.

He lay in the boat where it was drawn up on the strand, a few short paces from the lapping lip of the great river of the world, and here stood a man selling water. In the night, in the Shine.

And here came people to buy, footsteps in the shale. Issel was still afraid, but he was dreaming; he lifted his head a cautious span above the planking. A boy should see what he dreamed about. How to understand it, else?

There were the people come to buy, a handful of them: slave and merchant, mercenary, lady, lad. Only a dream could bring such a foolish, unlikely group together. There could be no meaning in this, unless there was a great deal of meaning, too much to fumble for.

There was the waterseller: not tall, not potent, strong and squat, with no significance to him. He wore the proper dress, though it had no colour in the pallid shimmer of the air. He had the proper stoop beneath the weight of what he carried, the battered urn of beaten tin; he had the cup on a long chain, and the proper turn of his wrist, twist of the spigot to fill it. Issel knew.

No one drank his water. They paid him, and at first Issel thought he poured it into their cupped hands, but they each of them held a little bottle or a flask. They bought the water and hid it away as though it was precious and pricy, as though a massive river were not running just beyond their feet. And then they went quickly, each in a different direction, no words to say between them.

And then the waterseller turned his head to look directly at Issel, where he was spying from the boat. No words, only a smile; but the smile had enough to say. The man had the teeth of a dog.

Issel screamed, because that's when he knew he wasn't dreaming.

Chapter Two

IT was Jendre's privilege, one of Jendre's few privileges, to live and sleep not among the children, because she was not a child, and not among her father's women, because she was neither wife nor concubine nor slave. She was his daughter and a woman grown, or nearly so. There was no precedent she had asked for, begged a chamber of her own, just the short time she would have in this house. Her father was a kindly man, or could be so, and perhaps a little touched with guilt; he had given her key and command of a tower room, the first and last that she would ever call her own. A casement window overlooked the city, her own private view of the world; a second door opened onto a small roof-terrace, her own private garden in the sun.

It was Sidië's privilege, one of Sidië's many privileges, to sleep with her sister Jendre, simply because she was Sidië and other people's privacies meant nothing to her.

Jendre was sixteen, and ought to have been married by now. Her father's overleaping ambition, coupled with his native caution, not to spend his wealth unwisely: those were all that had kept her free or kept her caged. All the girls of her generation were wives long since, most of them mothers. She was castaway, adrift, out of time with her proper music, doomed; she was owed, she felt, a little consideration.

Sidië was eight years old, and was owed nothing. She did not barter, and she would not sacrifice; what she wanted, she took.

Often and often, what Sidië wanted was Jendre. Big sister, little sister: they were twin souls, Sidië said it frequently, because she'd heard it in a story once and liked it, and so taken it to herself. To Jendre they seemed more like slave and mistress. Small and brutal mistress, who rode imperiously over any will but her own.

So, night after night, Jendre slept this badly for this reason, that there was a hot body in the bed beside her. When she was awake Sidië demanded amusement or information, sherbet or water, Jendre's attention entirely; when she was asleep she claimed as much attention and space besides, squirming around like a starfish and tangling the covers, snoring or muttering in her dreams.

Tonight her dreams had woken her, in a gasping sweat. Jendre had woken too, necessarily. She had given the little girl a drink, bathed her sticky skin with cool rosewater, soothed her with soft words, soft hands until she slept again.

Jendre could not sleep so easily. She lay quiet for a while, in a futile pretence that she could. Then she abandoned pretence and sister and bed all three, slipping carefully out between the curtains and padding barefoot over rugs towards the window.

Opening the shutters was a risk, the grate of the fastening and the squeak of the hinges. Jendre held her breath as though that could help at all, caught herself doing it and almost broke down in giggles, almost gave herself away altogether. There was no break in her sister's breathing; reprieved, relieved she opened the window also and leaned out to catch the vagrant breeze that came off the Insea, always before dawn.

Not so long before dawn now. There was a far hint of indigo around the eastern stars and first touch of a horizon below, a line drawn between sea and sky. She might kneel here in the window seat and watch for an hour, two hours, while the colours rose and ran around the great fierce glare of the sun; she had done that before, and never mind the great fierce glare of her sister when Sidië woke to find

herself alone.

First, though—always, though—Jendre's eyes were drawn closer, lower, looking more down than out.

They hadn't lived long so high on the hill. This great house was still new to her, its broad gardens were still a revelation; so was the view, so was the idea of having all the city fall like a skirt below her. Looking out in daylight, she could see their previous home with ease. She could see figures if they moved in the garden, children with their nurses running about. She knew those trees, those paths, those little lawns and ponds; she remembered how fine it felt to have such space to play, so many rooms within. Once she saw a man down there, who must have been the officer promoted to her father's place and power. She envied him and his family, and hoped he would not prove to be too good a soldier, or too ambitious a man. Not like her father, who was both.

If she stared and squinted, she thought sometimes that she could see the house that had come before that, its roof at least, squeezed in among so many others, down towards the docks. She was born in this house, and so were all her father's dreams.

Now those dreams were realised; they lived in the Sultan's shadow, and could rise no higher up the hill. Now they had to pay the price, or she did. She could see no houses in the darkness, only points of light that faded as they fell away towards the river, towards the bridge, where it cast its glow over the lower town and the dark shimmering waters, over the sister-city Sund on the southern shore.

Points of light came closer, grew brighter, were lamps and torches carried by a squad of men. They came up the street, and the gates opened; they were expected, the house was waiting for them.

Jendre had been waiting for them weeks now. They always came in the earliest morning, that was common knowledge. It was the other reason, the real reason why she slept so badly. Not the unfamiliar bed, nor familiar Sidië within it; not the heat nor the rain, not the shine of the bridge breaking in unwelcome through the shutters. She blamed them all, but in truth she was wakeful because she was waiting. Now at last they had come, and she was terrified, not ready, not at all relieved.

She listened, and heard the slow rhythm of her father's voice at the foot of the stairs. Dismissing the guard, no doubt. This tower was outside the women's quarters, and her father was no fool; she and her sister were rarely unwatched, never unprotected. Except now, when they most needed protection.

She heard footsteps rising, and not her father's. Unfamiliar men: they would have to explain themselves, or let their uniforms explain them. Her father would stay below, to witness as they left.

They were at the door. She ought at least to pull a robe on over her sleeping silks; she did not, could not move.

They came inside, heavy-footed, heavy-breathed. The lamplight would wake Sidië; she should have thought of that, and gone out to meet them on the landing.

Too late now. She heard her sister stir, sit up, cry out in grizzling wonder to find the bedroom filled with men, grim-faced and silent.

Jendre tried to go to her, but she was not allowed even so much time or kindness.

They were the High Guard, the Sultan's own janizars, and they would give their lives for any lord of Maras or any man of rank. Or for his family, for his children, for Sidië, for Jendre. Except that they had this duty too, that they must take one child from every man of rank and give that child over to the bridge.

Jendre knew that she was destined for this. Why else had her father never married her away, in all these years? He was keeping her dispensable, to be invested later. In their previous house, in his previous rank, he had been a man of fame but little influence: too junior, too poor. Now he was a general, and he must give his hostage to the Sultan. She wished that she thought he would be sorry.

They came in the earliest morning to catch the child sleepy, ill prepared. Jendre had been preparing for months, for years; she was not ready, but at least she was not surprised. She wondered if that was an advantage.

I wish you had come sooner. She wanted to say that, but her lips were dry and her throat was choked; she could not frame the words. She could barely stand, though she did that much at least, she came to her feet and stood there, even nodded faintly in response to the young officer's silent salute, finger touched to his brow.

She was awake, she was the sacrifice, she understood; she had always understood. She had forgiven her father long since for all his ambition, all his inexorable rise. Of course he must be more than a simple soldier, of course he must be a great man at the court; of course there was a price that must be paid, and she must pay it. That was the way of their world. If a man had daughters, he must use them as he could, to buy wealth or alliance or prestige. If the cost of a place at the Sultan's side was a child, boy or girl, who must be lost to dreaming, then of course let it be a girl; in this family, now, let it be her.

Which was why it was so wrong, so cruelly wrong when the men of the High Guard left her standing in all her unready courage and took her sister Sidië instead.

Chapter Three

ISSEL was still huddled in the belly of the boat as the Shine faded, as the sun came up. He didn't know, he wasn't looking. Enough of courage, too much already. He was all the way down in the slim and the stink, where there was always a finger's depth of foul water; he had squirmed beneath the folded nets, for what poor added shelter they could give. He lay with one side soaking heedlessly in the bilge, prickling all over. His head was wrapped in his arms, and his shapeless greasecloth gaberdine was pulled over to make it oh so abundantly clear that he could see nothing, the demons of the Shine could parade themselves and all their congregation and it wouldn't matter, he still wasn't looking.

He didn't see the dawn. He didn't watch how the fireworm glow of the Shine was beaten back by sunlight, like salt water yielding to fresh where the river ran into the Insea. If he heard voices, footsteps crunching along the strand, all the sounds of men coming to their boats, he didn't stir in response.

It was a kick that shifted him at last. He'd felt the boat shift under a man's weight, and still he hadn't moved. He'd known the kick must come, and still he hadn't moved; and he was usually so quick to see a bruise on its way, so swift to dodge . . .

When it did come, it came with a curse. Then he had to scramble, not to find himself more cursed than he was already.

"Up, hound! What manner of dog are you, to lie sleeping in the sun while honest men are at their work? Is my boat your kennel, pup . . . ?"

And so on, and on; and Issel was tangling the nets in his struggles to avoid, to avert, to deny the names he was given, and that made the boat's master angrier still. Hard boots and harder words: it was pure relief to tumble over the side onto dew-damp shingle, and see his urn and his little things thrown after. For a moment it was just relief, nothing but that.

Then it was something more, relief and worry mixed. He'd lost his sleeping place, his shelter. The man would find another boy to guard his boat, he made that clear: a boy of his own blood, not a beggar's brat, a dogtooth scavenger too fine to fish . . .

That was unfair, untrue. Issel would have been a fisher's boy and glad of it. He had tried. He'd spent one full day in the boat, working the oar and hauling the nets and gutting the little fish there in the bilge before the sun could turn them. All the day, he had thought that he would die. By the day's end, he was almost wishing to.

It wasn't the work, the sweat and the ache and the weary weight of the day; work was survival, work defined his life. It wasn't the man, with his casually brutal hands; Issel was more than used to blows and bruises, they had seasoned every day's work he'd ever done, which meant every day he could remember. It wasn't even the mingled smells of slimy net and river-weed and fish guts allied to the strange uprooted rocking of the boat, bringing him a sickness. He did feel sick all day, but it wasn't that.

It was simply the water, so much water and himself so small, so precariously poised above it. He had always stood in awe of the river, never felt comfortable coming close although he could never keep away. To crouch in a frailty of wood and pegs and rope, to feel the surge and suck of tide and current, to wonder how far the river reached below his feet, how dark and strange the waters ran—it

was a day of constant terror that the work, the beatings, even the smells and sickness could not disperse. He had begged his nights in the boat regardless—"I cannot fish for you, but let me be your eyes at night, your guard"—and every night he felt the river's rush disturb his dreams.

And now he was a waterseller and even that, even the urn's weight on his back could drag at his mind, like a constant hissing in the shadows. Even the quick spurt of water from the spigot was like a blade in his belly, a sudden whipping chill across his mind.

THE river seethed and bubbled on the pebbles of the strand. He couldn't fill his urn, though, not from this. Those who bought water would never buy what rose in the Shine or ran under the long arch of the bridge. He tried not to drink it himself.

His eyes lifted to the bridge, where it lay like a bar across the white of the sky, dark and perilous. His tongue ran across his teeth, to find how sharp and strong they were. Sharper than yesterday, stronger than last month, last year . . . ? He couldn't tell. He knew someone who might tell him, but he didn't trust her word.

He gathered up his little things, wrapped them all in his gaberdine and tied it with a length of rope. With that awkward packet tucked inside his shirt, he slipped his arms through the straps of the urn and hoisted it empty to his shoulders, turned his back on the river and set out to walk thirsty to the public fountains, the broken heart of Sund.

Hungry he was used to; thirsty was always hard, especially where he must walk away from water. That was a wrench that he felt in his bones, as if they were poured full of lodestone and had to be hauled against the pull of north. He had never told this to anyone. He knew someone who would understand it, but he thought she surely shouldn't know, unless she knew already.

ON the bank above the strand, the upturned hulls of bigger boats made huts for fisherfolk. Those boats had been the pride of Sund, in days before the bridge. Marasi governance forbade them now. Those now swiftly gutted and cut apart for housing had been burned; some few of their great spines still lay black and half-buried in the shingle.

Issel picked his way between the hulls, conscious this morning of how twenty years out of water had barely touched them. No sign of rot, no worm: old blessings still held good, it seemed, even in wind and sunshine, even without the rip of current and the bite of salt.

He was watched every step, every morning, to be sure he stole nothing that could be eaten or sold. Time was, when he would have done. Never in the Shine, but mornings when the mist was thick he used to sneak among the patchy gardens, taking what nimble fingers found, a little here and a little there. Of course he did; what else should a hungry boy do?

They knew. He'd been seen and chased, caught and beaten, seen and chased again. What they didn't know, these silent and suspicious folk, he'd sooner go hungry than eat their produce now. He couldn't sell it anywhere in Sund, he wouldn't feed it to the rats. Rooted in the shadow of the bridge, grown in the Shine—no. He wouldn't. He'd rather starve and die. His tongue touched his teeth again, and he hurried barefoot over paths of mud and stone. Somewhere in the huts, a dog was barking. Didn't these people *know*? He wanted to burn their crops, stone their dogs and drown the puppies, drive them from the river's edge entirely.

But of course they knew. Many of them knew nothing else; even the oldest had lived half their lives beneath the bridge. The worse half, to be sure, but what could they do? There was nowhere safe their little boats could take them. They fished in poisoned waters and grew crops in poisoned soil, sold wh

they could where they could and ate the rest regardless.

BEYOND the fishermen's huts, a road was all the city had for border. Once there had been a wall, high and strong, not strong enough. After the bridge came, after the Marasi had marched across the river, they had obliged their new subjects to demolish it. Soldiers and citizens, councillors and elders wielding bars and hammers while the tavern bands played in the streets. It was unification, the governor said, not conquest; what did Sund need of walls, against its brother Maras? If Maras kept its own walls, that was only sense, for the better safety of all; but there should be no more quarrels in the family. They were one people now, one city, Maras-Sund.

In Issel's childhood there had been mounds of rubble where the old wall had fallen. Other children had played on them, while he broke his nails digging out insects from the cracks. Highborn young ladies paid money for those in the markets, live food for their singing birds; stallholders would give him broken copper coin for a bottleful.

These days even his slender fingers would have been too broad for the work, but the mounds were long gone anyway, robbed out for building stone. There was only the road to show where the wall had run. Issel crossed the road and walked into shadow, into the lanes and alleys of the poorest quarter of the city.

NO dogs here, in the dubious margins of the Shine. Here the people were more equivocal, or simply more afraid. Kittens played in an open doorway, hissing and pouncing and darting back; one great scarred tom crossed his path, luck to the lucky, not to him.

Other eyes were less neutral than the cats'. He was Issel, he was known, not everywhere for selling water. Never here in the river quarter, Daries; here women walked to the public fountains to fetch their own. They knew him, though. A few looked on him with favour, more not, but they all looked.

Some unseen girl chirruped at him from a half-shuttered window. He flashed a dishonest smile into the shadows of the room and sent a scathing insult rolling after. That was all habit, heedless; it still drew a burst of giggles in response, like a cloud of butterflies rising from a bush that's shaken by a stone that's thrown.

A voice came at him from across the alley, low but carrying: "Hold that tongue, little *saka*, little waterseller, if you want to keep it. Let the young ones be, they're not fit for you to play with."

"And who is fit, then, is it you? Old mother?"

She was, perhaps, old enough to be his mother. She sat crouched by the doorway of her house, her hard, gnarled hands dipping into a mortar of pounded chickpeas to make balls of the paste, which she rolled in a spiced flour after.

She clucked a time or two and showed her bad teeth in a mock polite-ness. Issel kept his mouth closed, for fear of what she might see.

"Well. Better me than those simpering virgins. Why pick corn in the green, where there are golden kernels to be gleaning?"

"Why do either, when you can beg your breakfast of a woman as gentle in her heart as she is ripe in her body? Just a handful of your tamasseh, there, for a man with a hard day's work before him . . ."

"A boy with a day of idleness and thieving," she snorted. "But aye, start now, why not? You'll not steal my heart, so you may as well steal my food instead."

"Beg your food, with your blessing, mother."

"And offer blessings back, and lie and flatter and lie again; it is thievery, with you it always has been. I know you, Issel. I always have known you." It was true, she always had; he knew how hard

those hands were. But she was using them now to pat half a dozen of her small cakes flat for easy carrying, spreading a fingerful of fiery harissa on each one as she went.

This was all instinct, it was almost the theft she called it; he took her cakes and left her nothing but words as heart-hollow as they sounded. He was heart-hollow himself, and good rich warm tamasseh could do nothing to fill that void. He munched as he walked, and eating seemed as meaningless as the banter of his begging. He had lingered too long in the Shine. Corruption was in his blood, and the dogs were hunting.

One dogtooth had been not hunting but selling water. In the Shine, and by the water's edge . . .

AND he was a waterseller himself, and he needed to remember that. He needed money. He might have begged a breakfast, old habit with an oily tongue; it would be harder to beg a bed. Beneath a roof, out of the Shine—that kind of generosity came at a price. Pickings were good here in Daries, where the people were as poor as himself, but Daries lay dangerously close to the bridge. Further into the city, where the merchants and the craftsmen congregated, they knotted their purse strings tighter.

A stable would do, a hayloft would be grand, but horse boys were notoriously jealous of their privacy. There were few horses left, in any case, and still small chance of finding a stable empty. Nothing was wasted, nothing went unused in Sund.

Nothing was wasted, not even time, but he was wasting that. Already he could hear distant cries in the still air, "Suuu-uu!" as if birds called to each other across the city. Others in Issel's trade were so far ahead of him this morning, they had been to the fountains and filled their urns and carried their water far enough to be selling it already.

He scowled, and hurried forward. Swift feet on a hard road, shrill whistles and soft calls that made him dawdle not at all, bullock carts and peddlers to be dodged around as the ways grew wider until at last he came to the constant babble and press around the public fountains.

ONCE it had been the fountains themselves that had babbled in their gardens. So he'd been told, at least, by men who had been old in his trade before ever the bridge had come and the Marasi over it. Old themselves now, bent and toothless, strong; they held their place with sticks and curses and with guile. And talked, of course, as old men will, of how things were before: how green the gardens and how sweet the water, how it leaped in jets as high as the city wall, no, higher, and fell again to flow like living crystal in streams and rills from the central basin to every corner of this broad parade. Paths and lawns surrounded it, trees overhung it; bridges spanned it, cut from the same veined marble as the channels where the water ran, but it was always the water that held eye and heart. It seemed to be veined itself, shot through with gold and silver. It gleamed even after it was drawn into urn or jug or bucket, it shimmered even in the tin cups of the *sakalar*. So they said, at least, the old men who had drawn it, borne it, sold it then.

No longer. There was no power now, to make water leap and sing. The Marasi had forbidden it. The jets were stopped with leaden plugs, the bridges broken, the channels blocked by rubble, clogged with the slime of years. The trees had been felled, and the lawns ran reckless with weeds and wild grasses. This was a place of fear, a display of raw power, Marasi might triumphant over defiant, defeated Sund.

The public gardens where the fountains played, here had been the living heart of the city; here had been the gleam, gold in the water, the affirmation of Sundain strength and soul; here was—of course—where the Marasi had brought their bridge to ground.

It looked like a bridge in mist, in the soft monochrome shadows of first dawn, when there would be

light but no sun yet. It steamed, or smoked perhaps, lending an acrid tang to the air. It seemed to be no work of man, no honest build. It lacked a parapet; it had no piers, no trusses to support it. It might have been poured of molten stone, if stone could melt like glass and be cooled like glass and look so insubstantial. It defeated the mind and the imagination; it defeated the eye altogether, rising through its own fog to overleap where the walls had stood, rising higher and stretching further, overleaping all the width of the river beyond, the great and unbridgeable river of the world.

It looked like a legend, a picture from some ancient tale; it should have been a legend and nothing more, a thing impossible. The wrath of Maras had fallen upon Sund in a single night, half the population of the city swore it, all those who had lived through and survived that night and the morning, the many mornings, the days and months and years that followed. They had gone to bed secure, because Sund ruled the river and so the Sultan could never come at them; they had woken to find the river bridged and the armies of Maras already within their walls.

The armies of Maras were with them still. There was always a squad on guard at the foot of the bridge; there were always troops coming and going across it, during the hours of daylight. Never at night. Even the Marasi would not treat their own men that unkindly. At night it gleamed like a rainbow sickly twisted out of true. Its light fell through the mists of its own making, brighter than moonlight beneath its arch, seeming to make the air itself glow. That was the Shine, which cut a swathe of terror nightly from the dead gardens here to the strand below. After twenty years, the Sundain were still learning how slow its poison was, how deep it ran. Only fools disregarded the dangers of the Shine. Fools and boys, and Issel was both; fools and boys and watersellers, seemingly, after last night, and Issel was all three. Small wonder that he worried about his teeth.

ISSEL had heard how strange it was to cross the bridge, that strangest of bridges, even in daylight; but he'd heard it from people who couldn't possibly know. What he'd seen for himself was Marasi troops fresh off the bridge and staggering, sweating, dizzy, confused. Some sank to the ground despite their sergeants' screaming, others pushed straight through to the fountains and drank, or dipped their heads in the water and came up gasping. Some vomited, before or after; some were crude enough, debased enough to vomit into the water. Deliberately, sometimes. There were Marasi who could never taint enough of Sundain water; they must piss or spit into every pool, every basin, every wellhead.

The great central basin was all that was left whole among the fountains. Hot lead had destroyed the jets, but not choked off the water; it came bubbling up still, clean and pure. Half the city fetched its water from here, now that every source below the bridge was tainted.

Once, long ago, the watersellers had filled their urns at spouts, a line of gushing lion-masks set in a wall of marble at the gardens' eastern gate. Now that wall was gone, and the gate too. The pipes that took the water there were shattered and dry; watersellers must jostle with the women and slaves at the basin's rim, and give swift way to any Marasi trooper.

Elbows and knees and a sharp chin, a hard head for butting: Issel used them all this morning, squeezing through a pack of bodies, blessing those men who would let themselves be bullied out of their places and cursing those who would not. The women were easier to offend, swifter to retaliate; he offered them honeyed words in whispers, eyes and smiles, and still yelped at their pinching fingers as he slithered past.

He carried the bulky, awkward urn like a child in his arms, the stopper already between his teeth, so that when he reached the basin's rim he could thrust it immediately hard under the water's surface. Best not to linger, not to anticipate . . .

A slow tingle in his fingers, in his arms, starting where they were under the water but rising higher, running all through his body, fizzing in his spine. It was always like this, building to a cold clean ache like a blade in his bones, in every one of his bones. He'd been a dirty child, because washing frightened him; he'd never learned to swim.

Bubbles rose as the urn filled. As they burst, he felt the same thing happening inside, all his fear and confusion squeezed out of him by the rising touch of water, the deep possessive feel of it that was so nearly pain, so nearly pleasure and yet neither one of those. This was why he sold water, why he lingered near water, why he had slept on the strand. Even the slimy rankness of the boat's bilge had offered him this, last night in his terror.

This morning as every morning he was overcome, stilled and chilled by the wonder and insignificance of himself against this simple potency. He stood and felt nothing of the world around him, felt everything inside his skin, the pulse and flow of everything that was wet and living and bound by his own name.

The urn was full, he was full and overflowing, shivering, fit to scream. He didn't scream. He hoisted the urn out of the basin, knocked in the stopper, thrust his arms through the straps, let the weight of it swing him around—

—AND found himself alone, all that press of people gone from behind him, from beside him. They might have touched him as they went, tugged at him, whispered or shouted or shrieked; he had not noticed.

So they had left him, and here came a booted Marasi sergeant with a swaying, muttering troop of men behind, fresh off the bridge and craving water, and he was standing in their way.

Men had died for less. Too late to dive aside; the sergeant's hand was on his sword hilt, and Issel couldn't move fast with all this water on his back.

All he could do was stumble forward, towards the soldiers, already reaching to his hip for cup and spigot: "Sir, sir, I have drawn you water, sir, to save you having to stoop and drink like animals, like we do from our hands, sir, you can drink from my cup; save you getting mud on your boots, sir, and your men slipping in the wet of it . . ."

The sword hand lifted and the sword with it, a hand's span from the sheath; then it slammed back and the man grunted, scowling beneath his tarboush. His moustache seemed to purse as his mouth pursed, and he said, "Well, boy. Are you so keen? Serve me water, then, serve the men and be quick about it . . ."

Dry-lipped, sweating but still sharp, still scintillant, Issel served water to the Marasi as though he poured it from his bones. Leathery veteran though he was, the sergeant drank three cups without drawing breath between; then he glanced at his men, grunted and thrust the cup back for another refill. This one he sipped, watching his troop over the rim. It was discipline, nothing more. He drank what he did not need, while they were desperate and must wait. It had never been a surprise that these soldiers were brutal in their turn, when they had the chance to be.

At length, the sergeant let the cup fall on its chain. To Issel's eye he looked invigorated, brightened like a snake in its new skin. Issel had seen this often and often, where a simple cup of water bought from him could slough off all the drag of a weary day. A bucket of well water would not do as much, his clients said that again and again. They thought there was some virtue remaining in the fountains, residue of what had sparkled once. He never claimed that, he made no claims at all.

Something else that he had seen often and often, right here in the gardens, at the bridgehead: Mara

soldiers in trouble, sick and unsteady. That was one reason why there were always guards, why a battalion was garrisoned around the square, why so often a riot would flare just here. Hot-heads saw men weak and vulnerable, the chance to strike a blow for Sund; they never saw the consequences, the counterstrike. Mostly they did not live to see it.

Day after day Issel had seen these men or their brother soldiers swaying, kneeling, puking. He'd never seen them close at hand, like this: never smelled the acid in their sweat and in their vomit, never felt the tremble in their fingers or the fever on their skin. They snatched at his cup, struggled for it until the chain snapped; then they crouched below the open spigot, gulping like frogs, thrusting their faces into the thin stream of water and gasping for more. So much for the sergeant's discipline; so much for not having to drink like animals, they made animals of themselves. Issel could have walked away and they'd have followed him on hands and knees, anywhere he led, so long as he would give them water.

Anywhere but back across the bridge. These were raw boys, recruits, bought in fresh; they were bruised all over, but their eyes were darker with the terror of what they'd done in this last march, or what had been done to them.

He could almost feel sorry for them. They were still Marasi soldiers, though, and he was Sundain. As the flow from the spigot faltered, one of them reached out to snare his ankle. A swift, sharp tug, and he was falling. The weight of the urn pulled him backwards; he heard it crack as he hit, and even through the arching pain of that he felt the touch of chilly fizzing wetness.

Then, for the second time in an hour, he was being kicked. Hard to curl, with the rigid urn still strapped to his back; impossible to roll away and stupid to retaliate. He managed not to be stupid, despite the pins and needles in his skin. He only lay passive under the boy-soldier's boot and waited for whatever would come next.

"Filth, were you smirking at us? Dog? Teach you to stand above your betters, show you where your place is, gutter boy . . ."

A fisherman's boots were harder and his legs were stronger, but these soft toes sought softer targets. Issel was past sobbing for the pain of it, sobbing only for breath before he heard anything above the boy's monotonous cursing. At last it came, the hiss and crack of the sergeant's whip, the yelp in response and then the snapped commands, "Stand up, what are you, soldiers of the Sultan or a mewling pack of puppies? On your feet and follow . . ."

One final kick to the gut, and Issel was left alone. Altogether alone, there in the sticky trampled mud around the basin, and better so. It meant he could pick himself up slowly, which he did; straighten himself with caution, to find where hurt the most, what damage he was carrying; bend over to retrieve his cup and then unsling the urn while his feet took him unsteadily to the water.

Cupped hands made a bowl, a little gathered pool between his fingers made a mirror. Scrapes and scratches, nothing worse, no great run of blood from nose or scalp. He ducked his face into his hands and felt the tingling shock of water, more than cold and wet together. A quick rub to shift the worst of the dirt, not to foul the fountain, and then he leaned over the rim and plunged his whole head beneath the ever-stirring surface.

And came up swiftly, shivering, gasping, shaken. After a long moment, he ran his hands over chest and belly: muck and aching soreness everywhere, bruises to come but no deeper hurt. He thought this was his life, to be brutally unlucky and to come out better than he might. Like his city, he thought, clinging to the edge of disaster but never quite slipping over, always surprising, always surviving somehow.

The urn was in worse shape than himself. It was no great work of craft, sheets of hammered tin

shaped into a rude cylinder. One of the long, soldered seams had split; he slid wet hands down wet metal, pressing the open edges together and working the lead seal with his thumbs until it was warm and pliable, willing to grip again.

That was easily done, but the least of the damage. The spigot had been crushed out of all shape by the stamp of a soldier's boot; he couldn't fix that with wet fingers. And the cup was buckled also, and the chain broken. He needed a tinsmith, a man with an anvil, tools and skill.

And had no money to pay one, no way to earn money without the urn, a reputation across the city as a thief and trickster. It was well deserved, but it could trip him up today. Women he could charm, sometimes, some of them; men were harder.

Well, if they couldn't be paid and wouldn't be charmed, they would only have to be cozened. That was another use for wet fingers and a wetter tongue; and this was Sund, where nothing useful ever went to waste.

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