

Naheshi stood on the platform of a temple at twilight—whether at daybreak or sunset, he could not say. It was a temple such as he had known in his childhood—a *ziggurat*, a man-made mountain where the goddess might be pleased to dwell on earth—but taller than any building he had ever seen before. Far below him, a bird floated lazily past. Even below that was a market square filled with tiny worshipers, their remote, doll-like faces raised to the platform in expectation. Over his head was only the sky. An unearthly, luminous golden-rose around the horizon shifted to green then to indigo at the height of the heavens. The gods were above that sky, and their ears were bent toward him.

He stood poised for a minute, as if to catch the note struck by an invisible string. He could see himself from the outside—a skinny eight-year-old boy—and yet he was inside himself as well. A note was making its way up his throat, swelling: a sunrise, a life that was more than his own, the song of the gods themselves, the song that created the heavens and the earth. And then the moment came, and he opened his mouth, and the music poured out like that made by the stars as they passed: a celestial, throbbing, melancholy arc of song that was at the same time supremely joyous. His lungs swelled and his throat pulsed with the physicality of the music, but the sound seemed not to be his own but, rather, descended from above and wrapped around him like an embrace. The voice was not a mere child's but held within it all the sorrow of conquered peoples, fallen cities, and abandoned altars. Nonetheless, it was a song of joy. Tears starred his lashes, yet his heart was bursting with unbearable ecstasy.

The dream faded, and Naheshi's eyelids fluttered reluctantly open.

His mouth was pasty and his face slick with sweat. He slitted his eyes against the glare from the outside. The bumping of the wagon had lulled him to sleep. Under the tented cover, held up into a long half cylinder by wooden hoops, the air was breathlessly hot, but there was a beautiful golden light sifting through the linen canvas. The maids were drowsing, too, their pretty heads lolling. No stream of girlish chatter broke the quiet.

Naheshi grasped in vain at the fleeting shreds of music that echoed in his ears as the dream faded. He could not quite reach it, could not quite make that melody come back to life in his waking mind. Ever since he had left home, which had to have been thirty years before—*Dear gods, can I really be thirty-eight years old?*—the dream had haunted him, unutterably sweet in its promise yet somehow bitter, because he always awoke before it finished. It left him feeling as if he were on the edge of something wonderful and important, a deep and marvelous revelation that would make him truly happy, as he had not ever been. He would willingly have plunged into this dream and never returned... which was far from true for most of his dreams, troubling as they were. The priests said the gods sometimes sent dreams to instruct men. He didn't know, after all these years, whether kindly gods or cruel had sent this one. The disappointment of its abrupt ending made waking life almost physically painful.

Naheshi consoled himself with a dried date slipped from the small bag in his purse. As he chewed and savored the syrupy fruit, he ran over lists in his mind. He had double-checked everything. Nothing was missing, no one left behind. No one hurt, no fights, no illnesses. The one exception was his manservant, Pilsiya, who had disappeared—run away, no doubt, or killed in a brawl in the port. He'd been a decent servant, but though Naheshi was embarrassed to admit it, he hadn't liked the fellow very well. Pilsiya had been silent and efficient, keeping the

apartment and his master's clothes immaculate. He had produced excellent meals. He'd been, in short, irreproachable... except that everything he did had seemed sauced with a sort of veiled insolence. Naheshi still smarted from the aggrieved sigh Pilsiya had heaved the night before his disappearance, when Naheshi—the master—had dared to ask his servant's opinion on something quite harmless.

*Well, good riddance.* The feeling that he constantly had to impress his slave had been tiring. On the other hand, he had to fend for himself until he could find a replacement. As the queen's chamberlain, he could hardly be expected to take his linen down to the washerwomen and do his own shopping forever. Even if he was a slave, he had a certain amount of dignity to maintain. His pauper's style of living did not reflect well on the queen.