

Part 1. The Golden Eye



Chapter 1 – A Shadow in the Night



The howling of the wolves broke the silence of the night.

Yarim awoke with a start. He pushed off the sheepskin and blindly grabbed his spear. Silently, he crept to the entrance of the hut and pulled the reed curtain aside. A pale moonlight shone down upon the dry plain. Again, there was the raw howling of the wolves, closer this time. Yarim shivered. He heard the whisper of sheep's hoofs scurrying across the ground. With a rustling sound, they ran to the darkest corner of the pen. The flock fearfully huddled together under the date palms. A quiet bleating, and then everything was silent once more.

Yarim waited. The drought had been going on for so long now that predators were coming ever closer to the houses in search of prey. Wolves roamed in packs. During the daytime, they followed the flocks, pouncing as soon as an animal strayed. And, more and more often, they preyed on the places where the sheep spent the night.

Could he see something moving over there? Were there dark shadows slinking across the sand?

Yarim clutched his spear more tightly. He peered out over the fields. The canals and rivers normally protected the people. But now they were filled with a layer of brownish-yellow mud, so predators could walk straight into the village. There was nothing to stop them.

Yarim closed his hand around the amulet that hung on a cord around his neck. His fingers followed the lines of the eagle. He felt its sharp claws, its powerful wings. If I could fly, he thought, I'd let the wind carry me, and I'd circle around until I saw the killers. Like an arrow, I'd fall from the sky, bury my claws in the scruff of a wolf's neck and fly with it, up and away. Higher and higher. The beast would howl in fear as I flew over the fields to the Euphrates. Above the muddy riverbed, I'd pull out my claws and send that wailing wolf tumbling to its death, as a sacrifice to the river god. Maybe then the water will finally rise.

Maybe my sacrifice is what it will take to make the river burst its banks, as it has in other years, and cover the plain.

Yarim heard something moving inside the hut. He turned around.

‘Have the wolves come back?’ his mother asked.

Yarim nodded. He leaned against the palm-wood doorpost. The red paint protected the hut’s occupants from the evil spirits that roamed at night. The wolves howled again, the eerie sound echoing across the plain like an ill omen. Yarim felt his mother’s hand clasp his wrist. Her grip tightened when a deep voice called: ‘Yarim, are you out of bed?’

‘Quick! Answer him,’ Yarim’s mother whispered.

‘Yes, Father,’ said Yarim.

He heard muttered curses in the darkness, and then a large shadow loomed over him. A heavy hand fell on his shoulder. Yarim flinched.

‘Why are the two of you standing here?’

‘I heard a wolf howling,’ said Yarim. ‘It sounded nearby.’

‘Do you have your spear?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then what are you still doing here?’

Yarim stared at his father in disbelief. Was Yarim supposed to go outside while wolves were on the prowl? Was that really what he meant? ‘It’s night time,’ he gulped. ‘And I...’

‘Who is the shepherd of this flock?’

‘I am.’

‘Then what are you waiting for?’

Yarim realised there was no point objecting. He looked at his mother for help, but she turned her head away. She did not dare to stand up for him. She was just a slave, and there was nothing she could do for her son.

‘The night is so black...’ Yarim tried one last time. But his father silenced him.

‘You’re not afraid of the dark, are you? You even dared to challenge the gods. Weren’t you the one who was bold enough to spit in the river god’s holy water? Well, then!’

Yarim sighed hopelessly – his father seemed to have pinned all the blame for the drought in Sumer and Akkad on him. Every day, his father hurled this accusation at him, ever since his friend Zakir had told on him after the two of them had fallen out. That little snake, thought Yarim. Zakir didn’t mention that he spat into the holy water too. Maybe he’s the one

the gods are really angry with. Maybe they won't give back the water until Zakir admits what he did too and asks for forgiveness.

Stooping, Yarim ran across the yard. He carefully crept to where the sheep were standing. A shiver ran through the flock, but the animals did not dart away. Yarim swiftly shinned up the rough trunk of a tree. I'll be safe up here, he thought when he had reached a good distance above the ground.

Suddenly the sheep started to move, running along the crumbling bank of earth. Yarim saw five dark shadows slinking across the field. Wolves. Slowly they drew closer. Without making a sound, Yarim grabbed the spear that was hanging from his shoulder. Why don't the sheep stay in the shadow of the trees? That's the safest place. Are there more wolves out there? Have they surrounded the flock? Or are there spirits creeping around?

One of the wolves gave a piercing howl. Yarim shivered and climbed higher into the tree. Now he could clearly see the leader of the pack. It was a big, scrawny beast that kept darting forward a short distance across the sand before pressing itself motionless to the ground.

Fifty long paces away from the bank of earth, the wolves stopped. Ready to attack. Were they going to jump in among the sheep? Yarim braced his legs against the trunk of the palm tree, but the wolves did not come any closer. They seemed to be hesitating. They raised their muzzles into the wind and howled plaintively.

Rather than standing still or fleeing to the far corner of the pen, the sheep were shifting restlessly back and forth. It made no sense to Yarim. His eyes scanned the area. And then, among the shadows of the palm trees, he saw a dark shadow creeping low across the ground. His breath caught in his throat. At that moment, the wolves leaped up, ran back to the embankment along the canal and disappeared.

The silence of the night loomed over the land.

Yarim was terrified. He heard his heart thumping. He was too scared to drop down from the tree and run home.

What was out there among the trees? Was it an evil spirit? The ghost of a dead man who had not been buried, his body lying open and exposed in the desert sands? It had to be something terrible if even a pack of hungry wolves ran away from it.

Yarim's legs shivered, and he broke out in a sweat. He saw something moving once again. As he peered into the darkness below, he smiled with relief. It was not a ghost, but a lion.

When the beast leaped over the bank of earth, the flock scattered. But one of the lambs was too late. The lion landed on the lamb's back, its claws digging into the tender skin. The desperate bleating fell silent as the powerful jaws clamped shut.

The lion furiously shook the lamb through the air, and Yarim heard its neck break.

Triumphantly, the lion looked around. It opened its mouth wide and growled. The sheep huddled together. Yarim watched, unable to breathe. Was the beast going to attack again?

Then he heard his father's voice: 'Yarim, are you there? What just happened?'

Yarim could not speak a word. His eyes followed the lion. The beast walked calmly to the bank of earth and smoothly leaped over it with the lamb in its mouth.

Thank goodness, thought Yarim. It's leaving. But the lion walked back to the palm trees. Near to the tree where Yarim had hidden, it dropped its prey onto the sand. Yarim smelled the sweet scent of fresh blood. A shiver ran down his spine. If I fall, I'm dead, he thought.

'Yarim.'

Without making a sound, Yarim turned his head. His father's shadow broke away from the wall. Slowly, slowly, he crept across the yard, spear in one hand, whip in the other.

'Where are you, boy? Answer me.'

His father had reached the sheep pen and was looking cautiously around. The lion watched his every move, its tail flicking silently from left to right.

Yarim looked for a way to warn his father. If he called out, he would attract the lion's attention, and that was the last thing he wanted. He was getting cramp in one foot, but he did not dare to move it. As his father drew even closer, the lion slowly stood up. On velvet paws, it slipped through the darkness, stopping directly beneath Yarim, muscles tensed, tail now motionless.

Yarim saw what was about to happen. He had to prevent it. There was no time to lose. From where he was sitting, the lion did not even look that big. And in a flash it came to him – he knew how to stop the animal. Without hesitating, he grasped his spear with both hands and plunged down from the tree like an eagle. His feet kicked the lion's back legs out from under it. Using all his strength, he drove the flint tip of the spear between the shoulders of the muscular body.

A wild roar filled the night. Caught by surprise, the lion flailed about. Yarim rolled through the sand, away from those claws, sharp as knives. The lion gazed around with bloodshot eyes. Staggering, it came after Yarim. Its back legs dragged across the ground.

With one last effort, the animal raised itself up and launched itself forward with a gurgling roar.

Yarim went to jump aside, but he reacted too late. A sharp, burning pain shot through his left arm as the lion fell upon him – and then everything went black.

When Yarim opened his eyes, he saw patches of light shooting to and fro. He had no idea where he was.

Hearing a movement, he turned his head to one side. The hazy image slowly became clearer. He recognised the face of his father, who was leaning over him, and he groaned softly.

‘You’re alive,’ his father whispered. ‘Yarim, it’s a miracle. You’re alive!’

Yarim wanted to move, but there was something heavy pressing down on his chest. A sickly, sweet smell filled his nose. Carefully, he lifted his head a little. He was looking straight into the dead eyes of the lion, which was half lying on him, its muzzle covered with blood. Yarim’s head sank back into the sand. He stared at the stars. Image by image, his memories returned to him. Flying through the air and striking hard. The spear penetrating deep into the brown body and vibrating as it stood there. He had taken the lion completely unawares.

‘It worked,’ Yarim mumbled. ‘I killed it.’ He began to laugh, louder and louder, and then screamed out: ‘It’s dead. It’s dead!’

His wild laughter turned into tears. His mother dropped down onto the sand beside him. Taking hold of his head with both hands, she showered him with kisses.

‘You don’t need to be afraid anymore,’ she whispered. ‘Just you cry. It’s alright. I’m here.’

She stroked his cheeks and kept talking until Yarim calmed down. Meanwhile, his father rolled the lion off him. Finally he could breathe again.

When Yarim tried to stand up, a sharp pain shot through his left arm. He noticed now that his forearm was twisted at a strange angle. It looked as if the elbow was pointing the wrong way. Yarim groaned.

His mother’s fingers gently slid over his elbow. ‘I can feel a bump,’ she said. ‘Something’s probably broken. Is it really painful?’

‘Not if I lie still.’

‘The bone isn’t sticking through the skin. So that’s lucky...’

‘Lucky?’ Yarim’s father growled, ‘that’s putting it mildly. It’s a miracle. The gods protected us. We could have both died. That animal was about to pounce on me, but Yarim saved my life.’

He swallowed, his mouth moving as if he wanted to say something else but could not find the right words. Then Yarim felt a rough hand stroke his hair. For the first time in weeks.



The blind man Sab Gal woke with a start at the lion’s death cry and leaped out of bed. With his stick and his leather whip in his hands, he walked to the entrance of the hut. Breathing in the night air, he turned his head left and right until he caught another sound. Soft voices were coming from the direction of the canal.

Sab Gal wrapped a sheepskin around his shoulders and set off. He had no fear of the darkness, but he was on his guard. At the edge of the village, he stopped and leaned against a wall of clay and straw. His ears scanned his surroundings, and then he heard someone groaning. ‘What’s going on?’ he called out in his creaking voice.

‘Sab Gal, is that you?’ Yarim’s father replied.

‘Yes, I heard a lion roaring. Where are you?’

‘The sheep pen.’

‘And the lion?’

‘Here. It’s dead.’

Sab Gal walked over to the palm trees. The thin stick that he used to feel the space in front of him hit a tree trunk a couple of times. Just before he reached Yarim, he stopped and took a deep breath. ‘I can smell blood.’

‘My son killed a lion.’

‘Yarim?’ asked Sab Gal, his voice full of concern. ‘Yarim, are you hurt?’

‘My arm’s broken.’

‘But otherwise you’re fine?’ Sab Gal whistled through his teeth and ran his stick over the lion’s dead body. ‘How did you manage that?’

‘I ran it through with my spear,’ Yarim said proudly. He started to move, but his face twisted in pain.

‘Someone needs to take a look at his arm,’ said Yarim’s mother. ‘We should fetch Kalla.’

‘You’d be better off with a doctor,’ said Sab Gal, ‘a doctor knows more about broken arms than a priest does – and it’s cheaper too. Let Damu take care of Yarim’s arm.’

‘Yarim’s father stood up and looked over the plain. ‘Maybe we should wait until it gets light,’ he mumbled. ‘It’s a long way to Damu’s house. You never know what dangers might be lurking out there in the night.’

Yarim groaned quietly.

‘You need to go and get him now,’ his mother said.

‘Sab Gal, will you come with me?’ Yarim’s father asked. ‘Two men see more than one.’

Sab Gal burst out laughing. ‘You overestimate me,’ he rasped, ‘but I won’t disappoint you. I’m not afraid of ghosts and spirits. I’ve been walking through the darkness for forty years, and no harm has come to me yet.’

‘Hush,’ whispered Yarim’s father. ‘You’re challenging the gods with such talk. Haven’t we been punished enough?’

Sab Gal shrugged and spat on the ground. ‘Fear,’ he said. ‘Fear holds everyone captive.’

He turned around and made his way back through the date palms. Yarim’s father quickly fetched a blanket from the hut, covered Yarim and ran after Sab Gal.

Yarim stared up at the sky. His forearm lay numb on the sand. He drowsed off and dreamed that a man was sitting beside him.

‘Damu will be here soon,’ the man whispered, ‘but it doesn’t really hurt. You’ll barely feel it.’

‘Feel what?’

‘When he cuts off your arm. It happens so quickly.’ The man pulled up his loincloth. Yarim saw two short stumps sticking out – the man had no legs.

‘You can get used to anything,’ the man said with a grin, rocking back and forth like a coconut.

‘Go away,’ dreamed Yarim. ‘Leave me alone.’ And he jumped over the bank of earth. I’ll be safe in here, he thought. But the man placed his arms in front of himself on the ground, pushed himself up, and his body swung forward. At lightning speed, he came after him. Yarim backed away and ran through the sheep. The man followed, slowly but surely coming closer. Yarim heard him panting – and then there was a sudden tug on his arm. Stumbling, Yarim fell sprawling into the dust. Quickly, he tried to scramble to his feet, but for some

reason he kept falling over. When he was finally standing, he saw the man without legs lurching across the bare plain, his body swinging to and fro. At the canal, he turned back and waved. That's strange, thought Yarim, he has three arms, two of his own and one of...

'My arm,' he screamed. 'My arm!'

He felt a hand on his forehead. 'Calm down,' his mother said. 'Damu will be here soon to take a look at your arm. Everything's going to be fine. What were you dreaming about?'

Yarim clamped his lips together. If he told her the dream, he would breathe life into the words – and they might become reality.

'Was what you saw that bad?' his mother asked with a look of concern on her face. 'I hope they're here soon.'

I don't, thought Yarim. The idea of losing his arm made him feel sick. Luckily, the bone was not sticking through the skin. So there was still hope.

'You're shivering. Do you want me to fetch my blanket for you?'

Yarim did not want his mother to leave him on his own. He lay on the sand, perfectly still. The stars faded and a blue-grey light heralded the beginning of the day.

Mattia came outside. She skipped over to the pen when Yarim's mother beckoned her, and then stopped and stared in amazement.

'Is that a real lion?' asked the little girl.

She tiptoed over to the beast and touched it with one finger. 'Is it asleep?'

'It'll never wake up again,' said Yarim's mother. 'The lion's dead.'

'Is *he* dead too?' Mattia said, pointing at Yarim.

'Fortunately not. Would you fetch some water? I'm so thirsty.'

'You won't go away, will you?'

'No, we'll wait for you to come back.'

The first rays of sunshine were now lighting up the whitewashed houses.

Mattia raced across the sand, little clouds of dust swirling around her bare feet. 'A lion!' she shouted. 'A lion!'

Suddenly there was a commotion. Villagers came running from every house, all wide awake now.

'Where? Where?'

'Daddy, you have to come and see,' Mattia shouted. 'There's a dead lion.'

'Is it a big one?'

‘Yes.’

Mattia pointed at the palm trees and ran back there, followed by her father and some other men carrying spears and bows. A circle of people formed around Yarim. Little children pushed their way forward through people’s legs so as not to miss anything. They gaped at the sight. For a moment, there was complete silence, and then everyone began to whisper excitedly.

‘Yarim killed a lion.’

‘Just look at those sharp teeth.’

‘Get out of the way. I can’t see anything.’

‘What’s wrong with your arm?’

‘Do you want something to drink? Fetch a jug of milk, Zakir!’

‘No boy of twelve has ever killed a lion before.’

‘Mattia, stop stroking it!’

‘Zakir, hurry up. Fetch some milk!’

Yarim smiled to himself because it was Zakir of all people who was sent for milk. Everyone was gazing at Yarim in admiration, and nodding appreciatively. Yarim glowed with pride. He felt like a hero. He wanted to jump up and dance. With Mattia, with his mother, even with Zakir. He was so relieved. This night had proved that the gods favoured him. Or he would never have survived and he would have been well on his way to the realm of the dead by now. He even wanted to dance with Sekne. He really did not care about anything anymore. But where was she? His eyes looked around the circle of people for Sekne, his father’s first wife. He could not see her. Didn’t she want to know how he was? Was she only interested in her own child now? Since the baby had been born, she had stopped paying attention to Yarim.

‘Here. Drink.’

Yarim’s mother held a clay bowl to his mouth. Carefully he took a few sips – the cool goat’s milk had never tasted so good. He quickly drank the bowl dry. Then he saw Zakir standing with a jug in his hands.

‘Thank you,’ Yarim whispered, winking at him.



The sun was blazing in the sky. A warm westerly wind blew across the thirsty fields. Under the date palms, everyone stood waiting for Damu to arrive. The farmers had not gone out onto

the land that day; the shepherds had not taken the sheep and goats from the stables. There was not much grass to be found anyway, and Damu, the doctor, who lived in a village further to the north along the Euphrates, seldom came their way.

Yarim was exhausted. His eyes were stinging and almost falling shut, but he did not dare to sleep after that scary dream. Luckily, Mattia's high-pitched voice helped him to stay awake. She had all kinds of stories to tell him, and she fed him pieces of freshly baked bread.

'Here they come,' someone shouted. 'I can see three dots in the distance.'

Some of the children ran to meet the men.

Yarim was happy that the wait was coming to an end, but he still did not feel entirely at ease. Why had the god of dreams made him meet the man without legs? Why had the terrifying man run off with Yarim's arm? Was the prediction going to come true now?

Old Damu walked through the crowd with dignity. He leaned on his stick, the handle of which was adorned with a silver snake's head.

Yarim looked into his wrinkled face. 'Trust me,' those friendly eyes seemed to be saying. 'Everything is going to be fine.'

Someone had already been sent to fetch a bowl of water. Damu washed his hands and sprinkled the rest of the water on the ground around Yarim as he mumbled a prayer. Then he kneeled to examine Yarim's arm. His skilful fingers ran over the swollen bump, which had turned blue. 'The bone at the back of the elbow is broken. Can you feel this?'

Yarim shook his head.

Damu frowned.

'I need to do something quickly. Your forearm is cold, so the veins are pinched. This is going to hurt, boy, but I'll give you something for the pain, and I'll make sure it's over quickly.'

Yarim looked at Damu with fearful eyes. Sweat beaded on his forehead. 'M- My arm,' he stuttered. 'Are you going to...'

'No,' Damu reassured him, as if he could read his mind. 'I won't need to use my knives.'

Yarim heaved a sigh of relief.

'I'm going to twist your arm back into place, so the blood can flow through the forearm again. Otherwise...'

'Otherwise what?'

Damu looked at Yarim for a moment and then said: ‘Trust me. I’ll do what I can. If you can defeat a lion, you’ll survive this too.’ He took a bag of powder from his leather satchel, dissolved it in a bowl of barley beer and gave it to Yarim to drink.

Everyone watched in fascination.

The beer burned in Yarim’s throat. A warm tingle rippled through his body. He suddenly felt beautifully light, as if he were a palm branch rocked by the wind.

Damu raised his arms and called upon the help of the gods. Yarim felt the cold silver of the snake’s head being pressed to his cheek. He stared at the clear blue sky. The palm trees spun around him. Or were they standing still and was he spinning? He blinked. Above him, Damu swayed from left to right. Yarim could not keep the image still. I’m swinging, he thought sleepily, I’m swinging...

He heard a croaky voice far away. Through a thin mist he saw Sab Gal’s face. The old man was pressing Yarim’s shoulders to the ground, while someone else was holding his legs. Yarim felt a dull, tearing pain as Damu twisted his arm back, and he heard the bone crack. He jerked upward and screamed – and he lost consciousness for the second time.



Yarim was lying on his bed in one of the side rooms of the hut. His splinted arm weighed heavily on his chest. He touched the pieces of cloth that were wrapped around it.

‘Does it still hurt?’ His mother was sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed.

Yarim looked at her sleepily and shook his head. For days he had seen the world through a haze. He felt so light, so dizzy. That was probably because of the herbs that Damu had made him take in the barley beer.

‘It’s me again,’ said Mattia, skipping into the room. She came to see him about ten times a day. But Zakir, his friend, had still not visited. Yarim had heard him talking to his father a couple of days ago though. They were whispering at the entrance to the hut. Yarim had strained his ears, but he could not make out any words. Then they had gone somewhere else. Zakir probably did not dare to come inside.

‘When are you going to start telling stories again?’ asked Mattia. ‘All the children really want you to.’

‘Maybe tomorrow,’ replied Yarim. ‘When the sling comes off.’

‘Then you’ll be all better, won’t you?’ Mattia cried happily. ‘Zakir’s bringing something for you tomorrow. He’s almost finished making your...’

‘Ssh!’ Yarim’s mother interrupted her. ‘Don’t give it away.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Mattia. ‘It’s a secret. I’m not allowed to say that he’s making you a...’

‘Sshh!’

‘No, tell me,’ said Yarim. ‘Just whisper it in my ear.’ Mattia was about to do exactly that, but then she changed her mind. ‘It really is a secret,’ she said, ‘and I know what it is.’

Yarim tried to sit up. He rolled onto his side and pushed himself up with his good arm. He almost fell, but his mother caught him just in time.

‘Shall we do it outside?’ she asked. ‘The light’s better there.’

‘No, here. I want to see it for myself first.’

Very carefully, Yarim’s mother undid the knots and unwrapped the cloth. The strips of willow bark that had been on the bruise fell to the floor. Yarim ran his hand over the sticks that had been holding his forearm in place. He touched the skin, which was blue and swollen.

‘That’ll soon go,’ his mother said. ‘Damu says it’ll take a couple of weeks. How does it feel?’

‘Itchy.’

‘That’s a good sign.’

Yarim hoped she was right. He was a little doubtful himself. Slowly, he stood up and compared the two arms. There was a big bump on the back of his left elbow. Would it really go away completely? He was startled when his father suddenly entered the hut. ‘Is the sling off?’

‘Hm...’ Yarim quickly grabbed a cloth and laid it over his arm.

‘How does it look?’

‘Hm.’

‘Show me another time. There’s someone here to see you.’

‘Who?’

‘It’s a surprise. Come with me.’

Yarim walked to the entrance of the hut. He blinked in the bright sunlight, and then he saw Zakir standing beside the frame that the lion’s skin was stretched across. Yarim knew that the animal had been skinned. In the evening he had heard his father scraping the skin clean with his knife and removing the last scraps of flesh. But what did Zakir have to do with that?

‘The sling’s off,’ said Mattia, who was standing by her brother. ‘Show us, then.’

‘All in good time,’ said Yarim’s father. ‘Son, Zakir has brought something for you.’

‘Can I give it to him?’ cried Mattia. ‘It’s not a secret anymore.’

But Zakir pushed his sister aside. ‘Yarim,’ he said, with one hand behind his back, ‘I have something for you and I... I, um...’ He did not get any further. He was hopping from one leg to the other and smiling sheepishly.

‘Get on with it,’ said Mattia.

Zakir opened his mouth to say something else, but then he changed his mind. He walked over to Yarim and, without speaking, he placed something in the hand of Yarim’s broken arm.

Yarim stared at it speechlessly. He could hardly believe it. Zakir had made holes in all the lion’s teeth and hung them on a string. It must have taken him days. What a lot of work!

One by one, Yarim let the gleaming teeth slide through his fingers. He felt the sharp points that he had escaped.

‘How long did that take you?’

‘Oh, it wasn’t too bad,’ laughed Zakir. ‘A couple of days. Buzu let me use one of his bronze arrowheads. Do you like it?’

‘It’s beautiful.’

‘How’s your...’

‘It’ll be fine,’ replied Yarim. ‘Now I have two amulets to protect me: an eagle and a necklace of lion’s teeth. What can go wrong now?’ He hung the necklace around his neck.

‘Thank you,’ he whispered to Zakir, taking his hand and spitting on the ground.

‘You’re welcome,’ said Zakir and spat onto the sand too.

‘Why do you two do that?’ Mattia asked curiously.

‘Because we’re friends,’ replied Yarim. ‘We do it all the time.’



Narrow beams of light peeped through the broken straw roof. Particles of dust danced around the hut. They made Yarim’s throat feel dry. He walked to the clay box where the bowls were stored and took one out. Then he wrapped his good arm around the water jug, clutched it to his chest and tried to pour some water into the bowl. Clumsily, he leaned forward. Most of the water splashed over the rim of the bowl, and the jug almost slipped to the floor.

‘Careful,’ shrieked a shrill voice.

Yarim looked up anxiously. Sekne, his father's first wife, was standing in front of him with her crying baby in her arms.

'What are you doing?' she asked. 'You spend all day inside. Are you scared that people will see your crippled arm?'

Yarim bit his lip. What he really wanted to do was to throw the bowl of water into Sekne's face, but he knew his father would punish him severely.

'Do something. Go outside!' Sekne barked at him, pushing him out of the hut.

Yarim heard her whispering sweet words to her baby. Sekne had been without a child for a long time. When she had finally given up hope of having a child herself, she had forced her slave to become her husband's second wife. 'I will have children through you,' Sekne had declared. 'Your children will be my children.'

She had every right to do so. And Yarim's mother had to obey or she would have been thrown into the river to drown.

A year later, Yarim was born, but even as a small child he had felt a great dislike for Sekne. He was afraid of her witch's nose, with two warts on it that stared at you like an extra pair of eyes. Sekne treated him more and more as a common slave. She made him do all kinds of dirty work and snapped at him all the time.

Just over a year before, she had become pregnant after all. Since the birth, she had not had a single good word to say about Yarim.

The villagers had gathered at one of the huts. There was going to be a famine if something did not happen soon. The barley, leeks, pumpkins, cucumbers and all the other vegetables were scorched by the blazing sun. The ground had cracked open. Shamash, the sun god, was merciless this year.

'They might dig a new irrigation canal to the Euphrates,' said Yarim, who was sitting in front of Sab Gal's hut.

'As if that will do any good,' grumbled Sab Gal. 'It won't make the water level rise, and it will take at least a year to complete. But let them do it. They won't call on us to help in any case. What good are a cripple and a blind man to them? We're a fine pair, aren't we?'

Yarim did not reply. He ran his hand over the big lump on his elbow. The bone had fused, and he could no longer straighten his arm. Using a bow and arrow had become impossible after that night two moons ago.

'Why do you keep fiddling with that bump?' asked Sab Gal.

Yarim looked up in surprise. Sometimes it seemed as if the old man were not blind at all. Then his eyes, which were covered with a cloudy blue film, looked at Yarim as if they could see everything.

‘What are you worrying about?’

‘Nothing. I’m fine.’

Sab Gal moved closer to Yarim. ‘That stiff arm is really bothering you, isn’t it? But you have to remember it is only your arm that has changed. Everything else has stayed the same. And you’re the only one in this village with a string of lion’s teeth around his neck.’

‘A lot of good it does me.’

‘Do you know the story about the elephant that wanted to cross the river on a ferry?’

‘No.’

‘When the elephant got to the riverbank, there was already a small swallow waiting there. “Out of the way, you little bunch of feathers,” said the elephant. “Let me go first.” But the swallow did not move aside. “My friend,” she replied, “I was born too, and so I am just as important as you.” Do you understand, Yarim?’

Yarim shrugged. ‘But the elephant was still much stronger than the bird,’ he mumbled.

‘Stronger, yes, but not more important. The gods created us out of blood and clay. Everyone has a touch of the divine, whether they are healthy, crippled or blind. There’s no difference. Besides, there are also advantages when your body doesn’t work quite as it should,’ Sab Gal continued in a conspiratorial tone. ‘In a few weeks’ time, the landlord will be here to collect his payment. No one will be able to pay the agreed amount of grain. The poor farmers will have to sell their wives and children as slaves for a few years. But they’ll let us off the hook. After all, a cripple and a blind man don’t make a profit for anyone.’

‘So we *are* less important,’ said Yarim.

‘Just this once,’ croaked Sab Gal, ‘but, in this case, I don’t mind.’