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Opening extract from

The Wind Singer

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Long ago

At the time the strangers came, the Manth people were still living in the low mat-walled shelters that they had carried with them in their hunting days. The domed huts were clustered around the salt mine that was to become the source of their wealth. This was long before they had built the great city that stands above the salt caverns today. One high summer afternoon, a band of travellers came striding out of the desert plains, and made camp nearby. They wore their hair long and loose, men and women alike, and moved slowly and spoke quietly, when they spoke at all. They traded a little with the Manth, buying bread and meat and salt, paying with small silver ornaments that they themselves had made. They caused no trouble, but their near presence was somehow uncomfortable. Who were they? Where had they come from? Where were they going? Direct questions produced no answers: only a smile, a shrug, a shake of the head.

Then the strangers were seen to be at work, building a tower. Slowly a wooden structure took shape, a platform higher than a man, on which they constructed a second narrower tower, out of timber beams and metal pipes. These pipes were all of different sizes, and bundled together, like the pipes of an organ. At their base, they opened out into a ring of metal horns. At their upper end, they funnelled together to form a single cylinder, like a neck, and then fanned out again to end in a ring of large leather scoops. When the wind blew, the scoops caught it and the entire upper structure rotated, swinging round to face the strongest gusts. The swirling air was funnelled through the neck to the ranked pipes, to emerge from the horns as a series of meaningless sounds.

The tower had no obvious purpose of any kind. For a while it was a curiosity, and the people would stare at it as it creaked this way and that. When the wind blew hard, it made a mournful moaning that was comical at first, but soon became tiresome.

The silent travellers offered no explanation. It seemed they had come to the settlement with the sole purpose of building this odd structure, because when it was done, they rolled up their tents and prepared to move on.

Before leaving, their leader took out a small silver object, and climbed the tower, and inserted it into a slot in the structure's neck. It was a tranquil summer dawn, the day the travellers departed, and the air was still. The

metal pipes and horns were silent as they strode away across the desert plains. The Manth people were left as baffled as when they had arrived, staring at the overgrown scarecrow they had left behind.

That night, as they slept, the wind began to blow, and a new sound entered their lives. They heard it in their sleep, and woke smiling, without knowing why. They gathered in the warm night air, and listened in joy and wonder.

The wind singer was singing.

1

Baby Pinpin makes her mark

'Sagahog! Pompaprune! Saga-saga-HOG!'

Bowman Hath lay in bed listening to the muffled sounds of his mother oathing in the bathroom next door. From far away across the roofs of the city floated the golden boom of the bell in the tower of the Imperial Palace: *mmnang! mmnang!* It was sounding the sixth hour, the time when all Aramanth awoke. Bowman opened his eyes and lay gazing at the daylight glowing in the tangerine curtains. He realised that he was feeling sad. What is it this time? he thought to himself. He looked ahead to the coming day in school, and his stomach tightened, the way it always did; but this was a different feeling. A kind of sorrowing, as if for something lost. But what?

His twin sister Kestrel was still asleep in the bed next to him, within reach of his outstretched arm. He listened to her snuffly sleep-breathing for a few moments, then sent her a wake-up thought. He waited till he heard her

grumpy answering groan. Then he counted silently to five, and rolled out of bed.

Crossing the hall on the way to the bathroom, he stopped to greet his baby sister Pinpin. She was standing up in her cot in her fuzzy night-suit, sucking her thumb. Pinpin slept in the hall because there was no room for a cot in either of the two bedrooms. The apartments in Orange District were really too small for a family of five.

'Hallo, Pinpin,' he said.

Pinpin took her thumb out of her mouth and her round face lit up with a happy smile.

'Kiss,' she said.

Bowman kissed her.

'Hug,' she said.

Bowman hugged her. As he cuddled her soft round body, he remembered. Today was the day of Pinpin's first test. She was only two years old, too little to mind how well or badly she did, but from now till the day she died she would have a rating. That was what was making him sad.

Tears started to push into Bowman's eyes. He cried too easily, everyone told him so, but what was he to do? He felt everything too much. He didn't mean to, but when he looked at somebody else, anybody else, he found he knew what they were feeling, and all too often it was a fear or a sadness. And then he would understand what it was they were afraid of or sad about, and he

would feel it too, and he would start to cry. It was all very awkward.

This morning what made him sad wasn't what Pinpin was feeling now, but what he knew she would feel one day. Now there were no worries in her sunny little heart. Yet from today, she would begin, at first only dimly, but later with sharp anxiety, to fear the future. For in Aramanth, life was measured out in tests. Every test brought with it the possibility of failure, and every test successfully passed led to the next, with its renewed possibility of failure. There was no escape from it, and no end. Just thinking about it made his heart almost burst with love for his little sister. He hugged her tight as tight, and kissed and kissed her merry cheeks.

'Love Pinpin,' he said.

'Love Bo,' said Pinpin.

A sharp rending sound came from the bathroom, followed by yet another explosion of oaths.

'Sagahog! Bangaplop!'

And then the familiar wailing lament:

'O, unhappy people!'

This had been the cry of the great prophet Ira Manth, from whom his mother was directly, though distantly, descended. The name had been passed down the family ever since, and his mother too was called Ira. When she flew into one of her rages, his father would wink at the children and say, 'Here comes the prophetess.'

The bathroom door now burst open, and Ira Hath herself appeared, looking flustered. Unable to find the sleeve-holes of her dressing-gown, she had fought her way into the garment by sheer fury. The sleeves hung empty on either side, and her arms stuck out through burst seams.

'It's Pinpin's test today,' said Bo.

'It's what?'

Ira Hath stared for a moment. Then she took Pinpin from Bowman and in her turn held her close in her arms, as if someone was trying to take her away.

'My baby,' she said. 'My baby.'

At breakfast there was no reference to the test until near the end. Then their father put away his book and got up from table a little earlier than usual and said, as if to no one in particular,

'I suppose we'd better get ready.'

Kestrel looked up, her eyes bright with determination.

'I'm not coming,' she said.

Hanno Hath sighed, and rubbed his wrinkly cheeks with one hand.

'I know, darling. I know.'

'It's not fair,' said Kestrel, as if her father was making her go. And so in a way he was. Hanno Hath was so kind to his children, and understood so exactly what they felt, that they found it almost impossible to go against his wishes.

A familiar smoky smell rose from the stove.

'Oh, sagahog!' exclaimed his wife.

She had burned the toast again.

The morning sun was low in the sky, and the high city walls cast a shadow over all Orange District, as the Hath family walked down the street to the Community Hall. Mr and Mrs Hath went in front, and Bowman and Kestrel came behind, with Pinpin between them holding a hand each. Other families with two-year-olds were making their way in the same direction, past the neat terraces of orange-painted houses. The Blesh family was ahead of them, and could be heard coaching their little boy as they went along.

'One, two, three, four, who's that at the door? Five, six, seven, eight, who's that at the gate?'

As they came into the main square, Mrs Blesh turned and saw them. She gave the little wave she always gave, as if she was their special friend, and waited for Mrs Hath to catch her up.

'Can you keep a secret?' she said in a whisper. 'If our little one does well enough today, we'll move up to Scarlet.'

Mrs Hath thought for a moment.

'Very bright, scarlet,' she said.

'And did you hear? Our Rufy was second in his class yesterday afternoon.'

Mr Blesh called back,

'Second? Second? Why not first? That's what I want to know.'

'Oh, you men!' said Mrs Blesh. And to Mrs Hath, in her special-friend voice, 'They can't help it, can they? They have to win.'

As she spoke these words, her slightly poppy-out eyes rested for a moment on Hanno Hath. Everyone knew that poor Hanno Hath hadn't been promoted for three years now, though of course his wife never admitted how disappointed she must feel. Kestrel caught her pitying look, and it made her want to stick knives into Mrs Blesh's body. But more than that, it made her want to hug her father, and cover his wrinkly-sad face with kisses. To relieve her feelings, she bombarded Mrs Blesh's broad back with rude thoughts.

Pocksicker! Pompaprune! Sagahog!

At the entrance to the Community Hall, a lady Assistant Examiner sat checking names against a list. The Bleshes went first.

'Is the little one clean?' asked the Assistant Examiner. 'Has he learned to control his bladder?'

'Oh, yes,' said Mrs Blesh. 'He's unusually advanced for his age.'

When it was Pinpin's turn, the Assistant Examiner asked the same question.

'Is she clean? Has she learned to control her bladder?'

Mr Hath looked at Mrs Hath. Bowman looked at Kestrel. Through their minds floated pictures of Pinpin's puddles on the kitchen floor. But this was followed by a

kind of convulsion of family pride, which they all felt at the same time.

'Control her bladder, madam?' said Mrs Hath with a bright smile. 'My daughter can widdle in time to the National Anthem.'

The Assistant Examiner looked surprised, then checked the box marked CLEAN on her list.

'Desk twenty-three,' she said.

The Community Hall was buzzing with activity. A great chalkboard at one end listed the names of the examinees, all ninety-seven of them, in alphabetical order. There was Pinpin's name, looking unfamiliar in its full form: PINTO HATH. The Hath family formed a protective huddle round desk twenty-three while Mrs Hath removed Pinpin's nappy. Now that she was down as clean it would be counted as cheating to leave her in a nappy. Pinpin herself was delighted. She liked to feel cool air on her bottom.

A bell rang, and the big room fell quiet for the entrance of the Examiners. Ninety-seven desks, at each of which sat a two-year-old; behind each one, on benches, their parents and siblings. The sudden silence awed the little ones, and there wasn't so much as a cry.

The Examiners swept in, their scarlet gowns billowing, and stood on the podium in a single line of terrible magnificence. There were ten of them. At the centre was the tall figure of the Chief Examiner, Maslo

Inch, the only one in the hall to wear the simple shining white garments of the highest rating.

'Stand for the Oath of Dedication!'

Everyone stood, parents lifting little ones to their feet. Together they chanted the words all knew by heart.

'I vow to strive harder, to reach higher, and in every way to seek to make tomorrow better than today. For love of my Emperor and for the glory of Aramanth!'

Then they all sat down again, and the Chief Examiner made a short speech. Maslo Inch, still only in his mid-forties, had been recently elevated to the highest level: but so tall and powerful was his appearance, and so deep his voice, that he looked and acted as if he had been wearing white all his life. Hanno Hath, who had known Maslo Inch a long time, saw this with quiet amusement.

'My friends,' intoned the Chief Examiner, 'what a special day this is, the first test day of your beloved child. How proud you must be to know that from today, your little son or daughter will have his or her own personal rating. How proud they will be, as they come to understand that by their own efforts they can contribute to your family rating.' Here he raised a hand in friendly warning, and gave them all a grave look. 'But never forget that the rating itself means nothing. All that matters is how you improve your rating. Better today than yesterday. Better tomorrow than today. That is the spirit that has made our city great.'

The scarlet-gowned Examiners then fanned out across the front row of desks and began working their way down the lines. Maslo Inch, as Chief Examiner, remained on the podium like a tower, overseeing all. Inevitably his scanning gaze fell in time on Hanno Hath. A twinkle of recognition glowed for a moment in the corner of one eye, and then faded again as his gaze moved on. Hanno Hath shrugged to himself. He and Maslo Inch were exact contemporaries. They had been in the same class at school. But that was all long ago now.

The tests were marked as they were completed, and the marks conveyed to the big chalkboard at the front. Quite soon, a ranking began to emerge among the infants. The Blesh child was close to the top, with 23 points out of a possible 30, a rating of 7.6. Because B came earlier than H, the Blesh family were finished before the Haths had begun, and Mrs Blesh came down the aisle with her triumphant infant in her arms to pass on the benefit of their experience.

'The silly fellow left out number five,' she explained. 'One, two, three, four, six.' She wagged a mock-angry finger at the child. 'Four, *five*, six, you silly! You know that! I'm sure Pinto does.'

'Actually, Pinpin can count to a million,' said Kestrel.

'I think we're telling tiny stories,' said Mrs Blesh, patting Kestrel on the head. 'He got cow, and book, and cup,' she went on. 'He didn't get banana. But 7.6 is a

good start. Rufy's first rating was 7.8, I remember, and look at him now. Never below 9. Not that I care for ratings as such, of course.'

The Examiner was now ready for Pinpin. He approached the desk, his eyes on his papers.

'Pinto Hath,' he said. And then raising his eyes, his face took on an all-embracing smile. Pinpin met this look with instinctive suspicion.

'And what are we to call you, my little fellow?'

'By her name,' said Mrs Hath.

'Well then, Pinto,' said the Examiner, still beaming. 'I've got some pretty pictures here. Let's see if you can tell me what they are.'

He presented Pinpin with a sheet of coloured images. Pinpin looked, but said nothing. The Examiner pointed with his finger to a dog.

'What's this?'

Not a sound from Pinpin.

'What's this, then?'

Silence.

'Does he have a hearing problem?'

'No,' said Mrs Hath. 'She can hear you.'

'But he doesn't speak.'

'I suppose there's nothing much she wants to say.'

Bowman and Kestrel held their breath. The Examiner frowned and looked grave, and made a note on his papers. Then he returned to the pictures.

'Well now, Pinto. Show me a doggy. Where's a doggy?'

Pinpin gazed back at him, and neither spoke nor pointed.

'A house, then. Show me a little house.'

Nothing. And so it went on, until at last the Examiner put his pictures away, looking graver still.

'Let's try some counting, shall we, little chap?'

He started counting, meaning Pinpin to follow him, but all she would do was stare. He made another note.

'The last part of the test,' he said to Mrs Hath, 'is designed to assess the child's level of communication skills. Listening, understanding, and responding. We find the child is usually more at his ease when held in the arms.'

'You want her in your arms?'

'If you have no objection.'

'Are you sure?'

'I have done this before, Mrs Hath. The little fellow will be quite safe with me.'

Ira Hath looked down at the ground, and her nose twitched just a little. Bowman saw this, and sent an instant thought to Kestrel.

Mama's going to crack.

But all she did was lift Pinpin from her seat and give her into the Examiner's waiting arms. Bowman and Kestrel watched with keen interest. Their father sat with his eyes closed, knowing it was all going as wrong as it possibly could, and there was nothing he could do about it.

'Well, Pinto, you're a fine fellow, aren't you?' The Examiner tickled Pinpin under the chin, and pressed her nose. 'What's this, then? Is this your nosey?'

Pinpin remained silent. The Examiner pulled out the large gold medal which hung round his neck on a chain, and dangled it in front of Pinpin's eyes. It shone in the morning light.

'Pretty, pretty. Do you want to hold it?'

Pinpin said nothing. The Examiner looked up at Mrs Hath in exasperation.

'I'm not sure you realise,' he said. 'As matters stand at this moment, I shall have to give your child a zero rating.'

'Is it as bad as that?' said Mrs Hath, her eyes glittering.

'I can get nothing out of him, you see.'

'Nothing at all?'

'Is there some rhyme or word game he likes to play?'

'Let me think.' Mrs Hath proceeded, rather ostentatiously, to mime the act of thinking, lips pursed, finger stroking brow.

Bowman sent a thought to Kestrel.

She's cracking.

'Yes,' said Mrs Hath. 'There is a game she likes to play. Try saying to her, wiss wiss wiss.'

'Wiss wiss wiss?'

'She'll like that.'

Bowman and Kestrel sent the same thought at the same time.

She's cracked!

'Wiss wiss wiss,' said the Examiner to Pinpin. 'Wiss wiss wiss, little fellow.'

Pinpin looked at the Examiner in surprise, and wriggled a little in his arms, as if to settle herself more comfortably. Mrs Hath watched, her nose now twitching uncontrollably. Bowman and Kestrel watched, their hearts thumping.

Any minute now, they thought to each other.

'Wiss wiss wiss,' said the Examiner.

'Any minute now,' said Mrs Hath.

Now, Pinpin, now, willed Bowman and Kestrel. *Do it now.*

Mr Hath opened his eyes and saw the looks on their faces. Suddenly realising what was going on, he rose from the bench and reached out his arms.

'Let me take her – '

Too late.

Hubba hubba Pinpin! exulted Bo and Kess in the joyous silence of their thoughts. *Hubba hubba hubba Pinpin*!

A faraway look of contentment on her round face, Pinpin was emptying her bladder in a long and steady stream down the Examiner's arms. The Examiner felt the spread of the gentle warmth without at first understanding what was happening. Then seeing the look of rapt attention on the faces of Mrs Hath and her children, he dropped his gaze downward. The stain was seeping into his scarlet cloak. In utter silence, he held

Pinpin out for Mr Hath to take, and turned and walked gravely back up the aisle.

Mrs Hath took Pinpin from her husband, and smothered her with kisses. Bowman and Kestrel dropped to the floor and rolled about there, quaking with silent laughter. Hanno Hath watched the Examiner report the incident to Maslo Inch, and he gave a small private sigh. He knew what his wife and children did not, which was that they had needed a good rating this morning. Now, with no points at all, they would probably have to leave their house in Orange District and make do in humbler quarters. Two rooms if they were lucky; more likely one room, with the use of a kitchen and bathroom on a communal landing. Hanno Hath was not a vain man. He cared very little what others thought of him. But he loved his family dearly, and the thought of failing them hurt him deep inside.

Ira Hath cuddled Pinpin tight and refused to think about the future.

'Wiss wiss wiss,' murmured Pinpin happily.

2

Kestrel makes a horrible friend

On getting to school, Bowman and Kestrel found they had forgotten to bring their homework.

'Forgot?' roared Dr Batch. 'You forgot?'

The twins stood side by side at the front of the long classroom, facing their teacher. Dr Batch smoothed his hands over his substantial stomach, and ran the tip of his tongue over his substantial lips, and proceeded to make an example of them. Dr Batch liked making an example of his pupils. He considered it part of his job as a teacher.

'Let's begin at the beginning. Why did you forget?'

'Our little sister had her first test this morning,' said Bowman. 'We left the house early, and we just forgot.'

'You just forgot? Well, well, well.'

Dr Batch liked lame excuses.

'Hands up,' he said to the class, 'hands up who

else attended an infant test this morning.'

A dozen hands went up among the serried ranks of desks, including the hand of Rufy Blesh.

'And hands up who else forgot their homework.'

All the hands went down again. Dr Batch turned to Bowman, his eyes popping out with friendly attention.

'It seems you are the only ones.'

'Yes, sir.'

Throughout this proceeding, Kestrel remained silent. But Bowman could hear the seething of her angry thoughts, and knew she was in one of her wild moods. Dr Batch, unaware of this, began to waddle up and down in front of them, conducting a ritual exchange with the class.

'Class! What happens if you don't work?'

Back came the familiar response from fifty-one young mouths.

'No work, no progress.'

'And what happens if you make no progress?'

'No progress, no points.'

'And what happens if you get no points?'

'No points ends up last.'

'Last.' Dr Batch relished the word. 'Last! La-a-ast!'

The whole class shivered. Last! Like Mumpo, the stupidest boy in the school. Some eyes turned furtively to look at him, as he sat glowering and shivering right at the back, in the seat of shame. Mad Mumpo, whose upper lip was always shiny with nose-dribble, because

he had no mother to tell him to wipe it. Smelly Mumpo, who stank so badly that no one would ever go near him, because he had no father to tell him to wash.

Dr Batch waddled over to the class ratings board, on which every pupil's name was written in class order. Every day, at the end of the day, the new points were calculated, and the new class order written up.

'I shall deduct five points each,' said Dr Batch. And there and then, he recalculated the class order. Bowman and Kestrel dropped two places, to twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth respectively, while the class watched.

'Slipping, slipping, slipping,' said Dr Batch as he made the changes. 'What do we do when we find ourselves slipping down?'

The class chanted the response.

'We strive harder, and reach higher, to make tomorrow better than today.'

'Harder. Higher. Better.' He turned back to Bowman and Kestrel. 'You will not, I trust, forget your homework again. Take up your places.'

As they walked back down the rows of desks, Bowman could feel Kestrel seething with hatred, for Dr Batch, and the big ratings board, and the school, and all Aramanth.

It doesn't matter, he thought to her. *We'll catch up.*

I don't want to, she replied. *I don't care.*

Bowman came to a stop at the desk where they were now to sit, two places behind their old desks. But Kestrel

went on, all the way to the back, where Mumpo sat. Beside Mumpo there was an empty place, because he was always bottom of the class. Here Kestrel sat down.

Dr Batch stared in astonishment. So did Mumpo.

'Hallo-o,' he said, breathing his stinky breath all over her.

Kestrel turned away, covering her face.

'Do you like me?' said Mumpo, leaning closer.

'Get away from me,' said Kestrel. 'You stink.'

Dr Batch called sharply from the other end of the room.

'Kestrel Hath! Go to your correct place at once!'

'No,' said Kestrel.

The whole class froze.

'No?' said Dr Batch. 'Did you say no?'

'Yes,' said Kestrel.

'Do you wish me to deduct five more points for disobedience?'

'You can if you want,' said Kestrel. 'I don't care.'

'You don't care?' Dr Batch went a bright red. 'Then I shall teach you to care. You'll do as you're told, or – '

'Or what?' said Kestrel.

Dr Batch stared back, lost for words.

'I'm already at the bottom of the class,' said Kestrel. 'What more can you do to me?'

For a moment longer, Dr Batch struggled with himself in silence, searching for the best way to respond. During this moment, in which the whole class held its

breath, Mumpo shuffled closer still to Kestrel, and Kestrel twisted further away from him, screwing up her face in disgust. Dr Batch saw this, and the look of bewilderment on his face was replaced by a vindictive smile. He set off at a slow pace down the room.

'Class,' he said, his voice smoothly under control once more. 'Class, turn and look at Kestrel Hath.'

All eyes turned.

'Kestrel has found a new friend. As you see, Kestrel's new friend is our very own Mumpo. Kestrel and Mumpo, side by side. What do you think of your new friend, Mumpo?'

Mumpo nodded and smiled. 'I like Kess,' he said.

'He likes you, Kestrel,' said Dr Batch. 'Why don't you sit closer? You could put your arm round him. You could hug him. He's your new friend. Who knows, maybe in later years you'll marry each other, and you can be Mrs Mumpo, and have lots of little Mumpo babies. Would you like that? Three or four little Mumpo babies to wash and wipe?'

The class tittered at that. Dr Batch was pleased. He felt he had regained the upper hand. Kestrel sat stiff as a rod and burned with shame and anger, and said nothing.

'But perhaps I'm making a mistake. Perhaps Kestrel is making a mistake. Perhaps she simply sat down in the wrong seat, by mistake.'

He was close to Kestrel now, standing gazing at her in

silence. Kestrel knew that he was offering her a deal: her obedience in exchange for her pride.

'Perhaps Kestrel is going to get up, and go back to her correct place.'

Kestrel trembled, but she didn't move. Dr Batch waited a moment longer, then hissed at her:

'Well, well. Kestrel and Mumpo. What a sweet couple.'

All that morning, he kept up the attack. In the grammar lesson, he wrote up on the board:

NAME THE TENSES
Kestrel loves Mumpo
Kestrel is loved by Mumpo
Kestrel will love Mumpo
Kestrel has loved Mumpo
Kestrel shall have loved Mumpo

In the arithmetic lesson, he wrote on the board:

If Kestrel gives Mumpo 392 kisses and
98 hugs, and half the hugs are
accompanied by kisses, and one-eighth
of the kisses are slobbery, how many
slobbery kisses with hugs could
Kestrel give Mumpo?

And so it went on, and the class snickered away, as

Dr Batch intended. Bowman looked back at Kestrel many times, but she just sat there, doing her work, not saying a word.

When time came for the lunch-break, he joined her as she walked quietly out of the room. To his annoyance, he found the dribbling Mumpo was coming with Kestrel, sticking close to her side.

'Get lost, Mumpo,' said Kestrel.

But Mumpo wouldn't get lost. He simply trotted along beside Kestrel, his eyes never leaving her face. From time to time, unprompted, he would murmur, 'I like Kess', and then wipe his nose-dribble on to his shirt sleeve.

Kestrel was heading for the way out.

'Where are you going, Kess?'

'Out,' said Kestrel. 'I hate school.'

'Yes, but Kess – ' Bowman didn't know what to say. Of course she hated school. Everyone hated school. But you had to go.

'What about the family rating?'

'I don't know,' said Kestrel. And walking faster now, she began to cry. Mumpo saw this, and was devastated. He skipped around her, reaching out his grubby hands to paw her, and uttered small cries designed to give her comfort.

'Don't cry, Kess. I'll be your friend, Kess. Don't cry.'

Kestrel brushed him away angrily.

'Get lost, Mumpo. You stink.'

'Yes, I know,' said Mumpo humbly.

'Kess,' said Bowman, 'come back to school, sit in your proper place, and Batch will leave you alone.'

'I'm never going back,' said Kestrel.

'But you must.'

'I'm going to tell pa. He'll understand.'

'And I will,' said Mumpo.

'Go away, Mumpo!' shouted Kestrel, right in his face. 'Go away or I'll bash you!'

She raised a threatening fist. Mumpo dropped whimpering to his knees.

'Hurt me if you want. I don't mind.'

Kestrel's fist remained suspended in mid-air. She stared at Mumpo. Bowman too was watching Mumpo. Suddenly he was caught unawares by the feeling of what it was like to be Mumpo. A dull cold terror rolled over him, and a penetrating loneliness. He almost cried out loud, so intense was the hunger for kindness.

'She doesn't mean it,' he said. 'She won't hit you.'

'She can if she wants.'

His face gazed adoringly up at her, his eyes now as shiny as his upper lip.

'Tell him you won't hit him, Kess.'

'I won't hit you,' said Kestrel, dropping her fist. 'You're too stinky to touch.'

She turned and walked fast down the street, Bowman at her side. Mumpo followed a few paces behind. So that

he wouldn't hear, Kestrel talked to Bowman in her head.

I can't go on like this, I can't.

What else can we do?

I don't know, she said. *Something. Something soon, or I'll explode.*