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Opening extract from

Firesong

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Prologue: Bounce on, Jumper

Albard lay undiscovered among the ruins for three days and nights. All this time he remained in a half sleep, a waking dream, too weak to move or call out. He saw the sun pass overhead, and then the stars. He grew cold, and colder. The flesh dwindled on his great body as he starved. He knew he was dying, and knew there was nothing he could do now to save himself; nor did he wish to. He was only puzzled that it was taking so long, and a little afraid about what would happen in that mysterious final moment when the dying, which is after all a kind of living, came to an end. So at last he composed his mind and prepared himself to sing the song all Singer people sing at the end, for the release of their spirit. Unlike most of the Singer people's songs, this one had words. Albard's lips did not move. No sound came from him. But in his mind, he sang:

Joy of my days, let me go

Days of my life, let me go
Life of my heart, let me go
Let me go, let me go, far away...

His own voice sounded sweet to him, and peaceful, and he thought he would sleep soon. The pain was all gone, and the ruined city around him was silent. He had no idea what time of day it was any more, or what time of year. It was for him the end time.

Heart of my life, let me go
Life of my days, let me go
Days of my joy, let me go
Let me go, let me go, far away...

Then as the song came ever fainter in his fading mind, he heard a new sound: the sound of footsteps approaching. They came in bursts, as if this unseen visitor was hopping and stopping, hopping and stopping. Through the fog of his own dying Albard heard a voice, a shrill chirpy voice that talked to itself.

'Bounce on, Jumper!' the voice said.

Leave me alone, said Albard in his mind. *Leave me to die.*

But it was no use. The newcomer couldn't hear him, and would have paid no attention even if he had. He was getting closer. Any moment now he would stumble right onto Albard's body.

'He's here somewhere, and I'm here, so when his here meets my here, I'll find him. Bounce on, Jumper!'

No! cried Albard, deep within his fading mind. *Not*

him! Not the jolly one! Now, death, now! Come quickly!

It was too late. Though his body was cold and his eyes long closed, stubborn life lingered in his core: and so the one who called himself Jumper found him, and cried out in joy.

'Oh happy day! Albard! My dear companion, I have found you!'

Go away.

'You don't look at all well.'

I'm almost dead, you clot.

'Never mind! We'll soon have you up and smiling, eh?'

Drown yourself, moonface.

'That's the spirit! You know you can do it! Who's let himself get cold? Dear oh dear! Rub-a-dub-dub! We'll soon have you warm again.'

The little fellow set himself hammering over the dying man's great starved wreck of a body, beating heat back into the icy limbs. Albard felt the tiny spark of life within him flicker and grow stronger.

His eyes opened.

'Well, hello, stranger!' beamed Jumper. 'Welcome back to this wonderful world!'

Albard did not speak. He let his great grey eyes stare his outrage and his contempt.

'You don't have to thank me,' said Jumper. 'Making people happy is my reward.'

What a moonface clot it is, thought Albard to himself, as Jumper chafed his limbs. He felt the first painful thrill of returning sensation. And what sort of thing is he anyway? Is he man or woman? Or something else altogether, for which we need a new name?

You're a blob, he decided. *A silly smiling blob.*

The creature was certainly human, though smaller and more short-legged and round-bodied than the usual sort. He was equipped with the standard number of limbs and eyes and ears, and had hair on the top of his round moonish head. But was the hair fair or dark? Long or short? The odd thing about Jumper was you couldn't quite get a fix on any part of him, except perhaps for his ever-cheerful voice. Sometimes he looked like a little middle-aged man, sometimes like a ten-year-old girl. He was known as Jumper not only because of his bouncing, hopping manner of getting about: there was something jumpish about him altogether. No part of him ever came to rest, but was always changing, becoming something else. It was no use asking Jumper himself who or what he was, because he would only reply, with his eager-to-please smile,

'What would you like me to be?'

To children he was an indulgent grandfather, to women he was a playful child, to men a willing friend. To Albard now, he was saviour, servant, and nurse. He scavenged food and drink for him among the ruins, and in the chill night he slept pressed tight to Albard's body, warming him with his own life's heat.

It was hard to complain. Above all, Jumper was so good-tempered. He was relentlessly, unstoppably good-tempered. As Albard returned to strength, he lay and plotted remarks that would offend him, but never with any success.

'Believe me, Jumper, I would rather die than have to endure one more day of your baseless optimism.'

'Oh, would you rather I was gloomy? I can be gloomy if you like.'

He hung his round head and turned down the corners of his mouth and shuffled about sighing to himself,

'Sad and lonely, sad and lonely.'

'And short and ugly,' said Albard.

'Sad and lonely, short and ugly,' echoed Jumper.

'And dull and fat.'

'Sad and lonely, short and ugly, dull and fat,' said Jumper, beating his breast. But then he spoiled it all by looking up with a radiant smile and asking, 'Did you like that? Did I do it right?'

Very much against his will, and due entirely to Jumper's devoted care, Albard recovered.

'Thank you, Jumper,' he said bitterly. 'Thanks to you, my life, which has no purpose left to it, nor any prospect of happiness, will now drag on a little while longer.'

'Oh no,' said Jumper. 'You're entirely wrong. Your life does have a purpose. You're to train the boy.'

'What boy?'

However, Albard knew well enough. There was only one boy who mattered: the boy who was to rule after him. Of course he must be taught. The boy he hated and loved, the boy that was his enemy, his rival who had taken from him all his power, his successor who would be his inheritor. Albard envied him his youth and his future. He hated him for his victory over him. He loved him like the child he never had. He felt a wild pride in him. He longed with a burning desire to see him again, and just once, before the end, to hold him in his arms. So

many emotions, and all so violent: and all because this moonface spoke to him about the boy.

Jumper, apparently knowing none of this, answered simply,

'His name is Bowman Hath.'

'And what am I to train this boy to do?'

'To carry out his new duties.'

'And why am I to do this?'

'Because,' said Jumper, beaming, 'because you're the best of us.'

'I'm the best, eh?'

Albard knew what they said on Sirene. The best and the worst, that's what they said of him. The greatest of all the Singer people ever to have kissed the Prophet's brow, the one in whom the powers had been most perfected, and the only one ever to betray their calling.

'Well, so I am. What of it?'

'So you're to train the boy. You see how it all comes out right in the end?'

'In the end we're all dead.'

'That we are, and how glorious that will be!'

Albard sighed and gave up. There was no denting such wilful contentment.

'Where is he, then? This boy?'

'He's on his way to the mountains, with his people. We must hurry. They've been gone many days, and the wind is rising.'

'The wind is rising, is it? And will you be there at the end, little Jumper? Will you be singing the firesong, with the wind on your back?'

'Oh, yes! Of course I'll be there! How blessed we are to

be the generation that will know the wind on fire!'

'Not me. I made my choice long ago. I've had my day, and now it's over.'

He looked round him at the burned ruins of what had once been the most beautiful city in the world.

They didn't deserve it. I gave them perfection, and they feared it. They loved their mess. Now they have it back.

'Sirene sent you, moonface?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Sirene hates me. Sirene wants me dead.'

'Not at all. You've played your part, like all the rest of us.'

'Played my part!'

Albard let out a big bellowing laugh. That was rich! Albard the rebel, the traitor, the mutineer, had played his part in Sirene's plans! No, he was the breaker of rules, the defier of authority, the one who had split away from the rest and forged his own world, where he alone had been the Master. Singer people never sought power in the world. Only Albard, the best of them, had broken the rule of rules.

'I played no part in any plan of Sirene's, little Jumper. They call me the lost one. I am Sirene's failure.'

He spoke with a certain pride. What else had he left, now that his city was gone and he had not been allowed to die?

'We must go,' said Jumper. 'Are you strong enough?'

'Getting stronger all the time. But not what I was. You should have seen me in my day! I was immense! Now my skin hangs loose about me, and I rattle as I walk. Ah, mortality!'

'But you feel your powers returning?'

'A little. Yes.'

He looked round. There on the ground, near the hole into which he had crawled to die, lay a short sword. It had fallen from the hand of some poor fool who had died doing his will, and now lay beneath a layer of dust and stones. Albard fixed his mind on the hilt of the sword, and with great effort, he caused it to stir beneath the debris. More he could not do.

With a sigh, he stooped down, and scraping away the stones, picked it up with one hand. Jumper beamed his approval.

'There! That's a start, isn't it?'

'And if I were to cut your throat with it, that would be a finish, too.'

'Oh, you won't do that. I'm no use to you dead.'

'You're no use to me, Jumper. There's nothing you can give me I want. There's nothing you can do for me I need.'

He slipped the sword into the rope with which his plain woollen robe was belted, and turned his great beak of a nose northwards.

'But we'll find this boy, and set him on his path, and then what has been begun will be completed. Not because Sirene plans it, you understand, but because I choose it. Sirene has no control over me. I'm the lost one. I'm the one who goes his own way.'

Albard was facing the causeway across the lake, his gaze fixed on the hills to the north, and so he did not catch the look that passed briefly over Jumper's round and foolish face. It was the indulgent smile of the parent who allows his wilful child the last word, knowing the child cannot choose but to obey.

'So you are, if it pleases you,' said the curious young-old creature, hopping along after him. 'Bounce on, Jumper!'

1

The view from the sourgum tree

The column of weary marchers made slow progress. The land was rising, and the day was cold. The two horses pulling the heavily-laden wagon kept their heads down and held to a steady plodding pace, but everyone could see that they were growing thinner every day. The wagon's driver, Seldom Erth, walked beside them to lighten their load. He was the oldest of the marchers, well over sixty years old, but he strode along as determinedly as the younger men, watching the track as he went for stones too big or ruts too deep for the wagon's wheels. The ones who found it hard to keep up the pace were the children. Miller Marish's little girl Jet was only six years old. From time to time Seldom Erth swung her up into the wagon, to sit with the cat on the pile of folded tent-cloth at the back, and rest her little legs.

There were thirty-two people of all ages on the march, as well as the two draft horses, five cows, and the cat. Hanno Hath, the march leader, had ordered that they

must keep within sight of each other at all times, so the column proceeded at the pace of its slowest members. These were dangerous days. There were rumours of bandit gangs that preyed on travellers. Young men with keen eyes and ready swords loped ahead of the straggling column, watching for danger; but Hanno knew his people had little experience of combat, and had been marching for days on reduced rations. When he fixed his eyes on the horizon ahead, it was not only bandits he feared, but the coming of winter. They carried food and firewood in the wagon, but every day the supplies grew smaller, and they were crossing a bleak, barren land.

'Have faith, Hannoka,' said his wife Ira, walking steadily beside him. She used his childhood name to comfort him, as if she was his mother as well as his wife, knowing how great a burden he bore. 'Have faith, Hannoka.'

'I worry about the children. How much farther can they go?'

'If they get tired, we'll carry them.'

'And you?'

'Do I slow you down?'

'No. You march well. You still feel it?'

'I still have the warmth on my face.'

She would not admit it, but he could see how she grew weaker every day, and her pace grew slower. He adjusted the speed of the march so that she would not fall behind, pretending to himself he was doing it for the children. He hated to see her grow thinner, and quieter. She had always been a noisy woman, a woman of quick passions and short temper. Now she was quiet, conserving her energy for the long march.

Have faith, Hannoka.

He understood her well enough. She was telling him to believe they would reach the homeland, that one day they would be safe for ever. But she was not telling him she would join him there.

He shook his head, a quick angry jerk, to send the dark thought skittering away. No good to be had looking that way. His care and his diligence were needed now, today, leading his people over the cold land towards the distant not-yet-seen mountains.

Bowman, his fifteen-year-old son, strode along at the head of the column, with his friend Mumpo by his side. The time was a little short of noon, and the young men knew that soon now the march would be called to a halt, for a rest to weary legs, and a share of the dwindling rations. But Bowman's sharp eyes were fixed on the near horizon, the crest of the rising land ahead. He could make out a straggling fringe of trees.

'Trees!'

'Not many.'

'Could be nuts. Berries. Firewood.'

So little grew on these rocky plains that even a few lone trees gave hope. They quickened their pace, opening up the gap between them and the rest of the march.

'We might see the mountains from there,' said Mumpo.

'We might.'

They were well out of earshot of the rest now, so as they strode up the sloping hillside Mumpo took the chance to say what he had been planning to say all day.

'I talked with the princess again. She asked about you.'

'She's not a princess.'

'She thinks you avoid her. She doesn't know why.'

'I don't avoid her.'

'You do. Everyone sees it.'

'Then let them look aside,' said Bowman angrily. 'What has it to do with them? What has it to do with you?'

'Nothing,' said Mumpo. 'I won't speak of it again.'

They went on in silence, and so reached the trees. Their feet crunched on the stony ground. Bowman stooped to pick up one of the dark-brown husks that littered the earth beneath the trees. He smelled it: a sharp, unpleasant smell. Disappointed, he let it fall again, and followed Mumpo to the crest of the hill.

'Do you see the mountains?'

'No,' said Mumpo.

Bowman felt the weariness close about him like a heavy coat. Standing at Mumpo's side, he looked north and saw how the barren land sloped down, and then rose again, another in the series of endless waves that limited the horizon. They were crossing an ocean of rolling waves, forever denied a sight of the farther shore.

He turned to look back at his people. He saw his father and mother, walking as always side by side. Behind them a straggle of people, in twos and threes, his twin sister Kestrel with the one Mumpo called the princess. The wagon rumbled steadily along after them, drawing Creoth and his five cows in its wake. Behind the cows he could make out the plump shape of Mrs Chirish waddling along, and behind her, holding hands in a chain, his younger sister Pinto and the other small children. At the back came little Scooch and the lanky teacher Pillish; and guarding the rear, Bek and Rollo Shim.

Bowman felt Mumpo's silence, and knew he had been too sharp with him.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'It's just hard to explain.'

'That's all right.'

'I think I'll have to leave you. All of you. Someone will come for me, and I'll have to go.'

'Who will come for you?'

'I don't know who, or when. I only know why. There's a time coming called the wind on fire, which will burn away the cruelty in the world. And I must be part of it, because I'm a child of the prophet.'

He knew as he said the words that they would mean very little to Mumpo. He felt for a different way to explain.

'You know the feeling of not belonging?'

'Yes,' said Mumpo. He knew it well, but he was surprised to hear Bowman speak of it. Bowman had his family. He had Kestrel.

'I think I was born not to belong, so that I can leave you all, and – and not come back.'

Mumpo hung his head in sadness.

'Will Kestrel go too?'

'I don't think so. I don't know. The one who comes for me will say.'

'Perhaps he'll say I'm to go too. Like before. The three friends.'

'No,' said Bowman. 'They need you here. Promise me you'll protect them. My father and mother. My sisters. Everyone I love.'

'I promise, Bo.'

'You're strong. They need you.'

The chain of small children had broken up, as they

raced each other up the slope to the trees. The bigger Mimilith boys were there ahead of them. Before Bowman could stop him, Mo Mimilith had picked up one of the nuts on the ground and started to eat it.

'Yooh!' he cried, spitting it out. 'Yooh! Bitter!'

'Do you see the mountains?' called Hanno.

'No. No mountains.'

A sigh of disappointment ran down the length of the column. Hanno ordered a rest halt among the trees. Pinto came up, panting from running to the top of the hill, and took Bowman's hand.

'How much further do you think we have to go?'

'I don't know,' said Bowman.

'I don't mean I'm tired. I was only wondering.'

Pinto was seven years old, and had to make two steps for every one of Bowman's, but she hated it if anyone took pity on her.

Now Kestrel joined them, beckoning Bowman aside for a word in private. Her companion, the young woman who had once been a princess, met his eyes and immediately looked away. She had always been proud. Now that she had nothing, now that even her beauty had been taken from her, she was still proud, but in a different way. Her great liquid amber eyes now watched the world go by saying, I ask for nothing, I expect nothing. But those scars! Those two soft mauve wounds that ran down her cheeks, two diagonal furrows from the cheekbones to the corners of the mouth, they fascinated Bowman. They changed everything in that once so sweetly pretty face. The man who had cut her had said, 'I kill your beauty!', but in its place had come a

new beauty: harder, older, more remarkable.

Kestrel turned his attention towards their mother, who was just now reaching the resting place.

'Look at her, Bo. She can't go on like this.'

'While she can walk, she'll walk,' said Bowman. 'That's how she wants it.'

'You know what it is that weakens her.'

Of course he knew. The prophet Ira Manth had said, *My gift is my weakness. I shall die of prophecy.* This was the secret that all knew but none spoke. Ira Hath, their own prophetess, was dying of the warmth she felt on her face.

'It's how she wants it,' said Bowman again.

'Well, it's not how I want it.' Kestrel felt trapped and angry. She heard in Bowman's voice the same note of resignation that now softened her mother's words: as if they had both decided to suffer for the good of others, and so refused to do anything to help themselves. 'I'd rather never get to the homeland than have her like this.'

'I don't think any of us have any choice.'

'Then let it happen soon, whatever it is. Let it come soon.'

Dock! Dock! Dock! It was the sound of Tanner Amos's axe ringing out over the cold land. He and Miller Marish were felling one of the trees for firewood.

Kestrel returned to the women by the wagon, where a fire was already burning. Mrs Chirish, rooting among the husks on the ground, picked up one kernel and after a short inspection declared,

'Sourgum. These are sourgum trees. We can eat this.'

Branco Such had already tried.

'Eat them? They're vile! I shouldn't be surprised if they were poisonous!'

'You have to boil them first, don't you? Strip off the husks and boil the kernels. That's how you get the gum.'

'The gum is edible?' said Hanno.

'Certainly it is. A rare treat, too.'

So Hanno set the children to gathering the husks and shelling them, while the biggest cook-pot was half filled with water and put on the fire to boil. The Mimilith boys spotted that here and there in the bare branches of the trees were other husky nuts that had not yet fallen, so they raced each other up the knobbly trunks to pull them down.

'Be careful, boys! Make sure the branches can take your weight!'

'Stand back! She's coming down!'

Tanner Amos's warning cry was followed by a long rending crash, as the tree he had been felling toppled at last. He and Miller Marish and Mumpo then set to work with axes and cleavers to cut up the branches into cord-wood.

Mrs Chirish sat over the pot and stirred the sourgum kernels as the water seethed. Seldom Erth unharnessed the horses and let them join the cows, grazing the sparse wiry grass. A group of women found places round the fire where they could lay out their blankets and their needles and thread, and get on with the making of bed-rolls against the coming cold weather.

Bowman stood apart, looking towards the group of sewing women, telling himself it was better for all of them if he kept his distance from her. The Johdila

Sirharasi of Gang, once a princess, now plain Sisi, sat beside Lunki, the stout woman who had been her servant, and who still, despite the changes, insisted on serving her. Sisi held her back straight, her head bent over her work, and did not speak. Every day Bowman expected her to fail under the hardships of the march, but she proved him wrong. She bore more than her share of the tasks, ate less than her share of the food, and never complained. Bowman reflected on what Mumpo had said, that he seemed to be avoiding her. That was not right.

He crossed over to the women by the fire. For a few moments, as if warming himself by the fire, he stood near Lunki and her mistress. Sisi was stitching the heavy blankets with small tight stitches, working with care and concentration. He could see from the groove the needle made in her fingertip how hard she had to push to drive the point through the stiff fabric. He could also see the smooth curve of her neck, and the rise and fall of her breast as she breathed.

'That's good work,' he said. 'That'll keep out the cold.'

She looked up, her eyes grave, questioning.

'The tailor taught me,' she said. 'I'm doing my best.'

'Hard on the fingers.'

'Is it?' She looked at her needle-finger as if unaware of the pressure she was putting on her soft skin. 'Oh, that doesn't matter.'

Bowman heard the clatter of falling nuts, and looking up saw that Pinto had joined the Mimilith boys in the sourgum trees. They had already stripped the lower branches of nuts, and were now climbing higher, each in an adjoining tree. He could think of nothing more to say

to Sisi, who sat, head bent, steadily sewing, so he moved away once more. As he passed the wagon, Mist the grey cat uncurled himself from his bed on the tent-cloths, and jumped down to rub against his legs.

'Well, boy,' he said. 'Are we nearly there?'

'No, my Mist. First we must reach the mountains.'

The cat did not speak aloud, nor did Bowman answer him aloud. But they understood each other well. The cat asked this question every day, and every day received the same answer. There were never any mountains to be seen, so Mist had come to believe that Bowman chose to conceal their true destination. Mist knew that Bowman had great powers, greater even than his former master, Dogface the hermit, who had been able to fly. If the boy had such powers, he could not possibly be leading all these people with so much effort for so long, without knowing where he was going. Therefore their destination was a secret. So reasoned the cat, clever but not wise.

'And on the other side of the mountains, your homeland.'

'Yes. We believe so.'

'It must be something very wonderful, this homeland.'

'We shall see.'

'Do the cats there know how to fly?'

'I don't know, Mist. I don't know that there are any cats there. But if there are, I doubt if they can fly.'

'I shall teach them.'

Bowman smiled and stroked the cat's head. This annoyed Mist. It had always been his heart's dream to fly, and just once he had made a jump that was so immense that it must have been flying. He had told the boy, and the boy had said he believed him, but the look in his eyes had

shown that this was no more than a polite pretence.

'You don't believe me.'

'If you say you flew, Mist, then I believe you.'

'Well, I did fly.'

The truth was, he couldn't be entirely sure. The time he had flown, it had only been a short distance. A short flight is very like a long jump.

'Take care, Pinto!'

This was Hanno, calling out in warning. Pinto had seen a plump husk on a very high branch, and she reckoned she was light enough to reach it without danger. Looking across to the neighbouring tree, she saw that Mo Mimilith was also climbing, and he saw her. At once, instinctively competitive, they began to race each other.

Mo Mimilith was three years older than Pinto, and much heavier. At first his greater strength enabled him to outclimb her. But then he felt the branches bending beneath him, and realised he was at his limit. Pinto kept on climbing, her skinny little body easily supported by the upper branches; and so was the only one to reach to the very top of the tree.

She looked down and saw the wagon, with the horses among the cows, snuffling out what coarse grazing they could find. She saw the huddle round the fire, where the sourgum was being boiled, and she smelled its strange sharp-sweet smell. She saw her mother, seated on the ground with her father beside her, holding her hands and stroking them, as he so often did. Then she looked across and saw Mo Mimilith on his way down his tree.

I've won! she thought, exulting. I'm the highest one of all!

Only now, turning and looking up and ahead, did she think to take advantage of her high vantage point. There were the rolling hills, receding into the distance. But beyond them, far off, she could clearly discern through hazy low cloud a range of jagged white-capped peaks.

'Mountains!' she cried. 'I can see mountains!'

No one else would be able to climb so high. She must be the eyes for all. She looked and looked, and memorised.

Some way off, the rolling land levelled out and became rocky and craggy: it seemed to be a huge desert of cracked and shivered land, a rubble of boulders and fissures. On the far side of this broken plain, where the cloud lay low over the land, there was a belt of dark forest running from side to side of the visible world. Within this forest gleamed a river; and beyond the river towered the mountains. They rose through the cloud, to rear their bare-toothed peaks all along the white horizon.

Bowman called up to her.

'Can you really see the mountains?'

'Yes! Far, far away!'

People were gathering below, staring up at her.

'Be careful!' That was her father, who could see how the treetop swayed under her weight.

She came scrambling down, a little too fast, showing off, and grazed one arm. She pretended not to notice. The marchers gathered round her, eager to hear what she had seen.

'There's a river,' she told them. 'And a forest. But before that, empty land, for miles and miles, all full of cracks.'

'Cracks? What kind of cracks?'

'Like cracks in dried mud. Only much bigger.'

'Did you see any people? Any houses? There must be people living somewhere.'

'No. I didn't see anyone.'

'How far to the mountains?' asked the teacher, Silman Pillish.

'Miles and miles. Days and days.'

'Days and days!'

'And how far beyond the mountains?'

This question was addressed to Ira Hath. She was the prophetess, the one who knew the way to the homeland; though, as she told them again and again, she would only know it when at last it lay before her. She had seen it in a dream. They would find it on the other side of mountains, at the end of a path rising between steep slopes of land. It would be snowing. Ahead, the sun would be setting. Red sky, falling snow: and framed in the V of the hills, a land where two rivers ran to a distant sea.

'I'll know it when I see it,' she said. 'First we must get there.'

'It's just beyond the mountains,' the people told each other. 'The homeland!'

Even though the mountains Pinto had seen were so far away, this news gave everyone heart. They felt the end of their journey had been sighted. Their task now was to survive the getting there.

While Hanno Hath questioned Pinto more closely about what she had seen, Kestrel went up to Bowman.

'It's only mountains,' she said, very low. 'We don't know the homeland's on the other side. There might be a desert on the other side, or a swamp, and then more mountains, before we get to the sea.'

'There might.'

'So there's nothing to get so excited about.'

'No,' said Bowman. 'But people need hope.'

'I don't. I don't want hope. I want what's real. I won't believe we're getting to the homeland until I see it.'

'You don't really want to get to the homeland at all, do you, Kess?'

'Of course I do.' Kestrel was irritated that Bowman could think this of her. 'I don't want to be wandering about for ever, always tired and hungry. Why would I want that?'

'I don't know. I just feel that you're frightened of the homeland.'

'Oh, you feel. You're always feeling. Why would I be frightened of the homeland? It's the place where we all sit about being happy for the rest of our lives, isn't it?'

Too angry to wait for his reply, she took herself off to the far side of the trees, where Mumpo and Tanner Amos were chopping wood. For a few moments, as she listened to the *dock, dock, dock* of the axe, she thought how maddening her brother could be, with his assumption that he knew her better than she knew herself. Then as she calmed down she realised he was right. She was afraid of getting to the homeland; and not only because of what it meant for ma. There was something else.

She tried to make out the shape of her fear. She could imagine the journey ahead, but when she tried to imagine the end of the journey, all she saw was a blank. It was like a book without the last few pages. All at once there was nothing. That was what she was afraid of: the nothing. But nor did she want the journey to go on for ever.

What is it I want? she thought, shivering. What's wrong with me?

Tanner Amos and Mumpo between them filled the bed of the wagon with firewood. And now Mrs Chirish's sourgum was beginning to set. She dipped a spoon in the sticky froth and drew out a scoop of the amber-coloured gum, and waved it back and forth until it cooled. Then she nibbled at it.

'There it is,' she pronounced. 'Fetch some dishes.'

All the people round the fire had a taste. Some liked it and some didn't. It was odd, both sweet and sour at the same time, and it got stuck in the teeth; but it was edible, no question about it.

Guided by Mrs Chirish, they spread the gum over all the tin dishes they had, and let it cool. It hardened quickly in the cold air. Then when it was hard, they banged the underside of the tin plates with spoons, and the gum cracked off in clear amber fragments. The fragments were then packed in barrels, with layers of flattened husks between them to stop them sticking to each other. By the time they had done, they had filled four barrels, and there were enough crumbs left for everyone to have a snack.

Hanno was quietly grateful to Mrs Chirish. Their supplies of food were running very low. Now he calculated they could survive on a barrel of sourgum a day, which gave them four days to find the next supply of food. Water was another matter. He checked the level in the big water barrel, and made another simple calculation. The people must drink; the horses and cattle too. No doubt they would find a stream soon. But just in

case, it would be wise to save all they could.

'From now until we find water,' he ordered, 'the ration will be two cups a day each. And no washing.'

'No washing!' exclaimed Lunki. 'How is my precious one to keep clean?'

'It won't be for long,' said Sisi. 'We'll find water soon.'

Hanno made his rounds, speaking softly to Creoth about the cows, and to Seldom Erth about the horses, saying nothing new, giving no instructions they would not have carried out for themselves, but showing a care for each person on the march. This was the nature of his leadership: not the shouting of orders, but the letting himself be seen as the link between all of them, the one to whom they all turned their eyes, so that as they went on their way, they went together.

Now he gave the signal to resume the march. The group round the fire put out the flames, stamping out the embers and rescuing the unburned faggots to be used again. Others bent down to lace up boots that had been loosened to ease their weary feet. Bowman moved to the front of the column as it formed, and took up his place as the lead watchman, his eyes alert for danger. So it was he who found the body.

It was not the first body they had passed on their long march. In these lawless times, the robber bands that attacked travellers on lonely roads often left their victims dead or dying; when what knives and clubs had begun was finished by the night cold. The Manth people could do no more than pause on their way, and cover the sad remains with stones, as an act of respect.

This was the body of an old man, lying face down on

the ground, his hands raised as if to cover or protect his face. Bowman knelt down by his side, and gently eased the body over, to satisfy himself that there was no hope of saving him; though the utter stillness of the body told him that life was long gone. The hands remained clutched to the dead face, concealing the features. Bowman let his sensitive probing mind reach gently into that lifeless skull, and as he did so he felt for an instant that something was moving within it; then the moment passed, and all was still. He took hold of the dead man's hands, and drew them away from his face.

The eyes were open, and unseeing. The old cheeks grizzled, unshaven. The dry lips apart, as if calling. But most shocking of all, the skin of his face, from brow to chin, was lacerated: scratched and torn into a hideous wreck, the blood dried black in the dead white skin.

Mumpo now joined him, and stood looking down at the dead man in silence.

'What would do that to him?' said Bowman.

'He did it to himself. Look at his fingernails.'

Mumpo had noticed what Bowman had overlooked: the dead man's fingernails were black with dried blood. For some terrible reason, as he was dying he had torn at his own face.

The rest of the marchers were approaching. Creoth came up to them, and looked.

'Oh, the wretched man!'

'Let's cover him,' said Bowman. 'No need for the others to see.'

He scraped up handfuls of stony earth and began to sprinkle it over the corpse. Mumpo and Creoth did the

same. Bowman hurried to cover up the torn face. He thought again as he let the earth drop over that dead open mouth that something moved: a brief flurry in the air that shivered the falling dust. He thought he heard a faint whine pass close by his head, as of some small flying insect. But then the wagon was rolling near, and with it his father.

'Poor fellow,' said Hanno Hath, kneeling down to help with the roadside burial.

When the body was entirely covered, a dusty mound that would not long resist the wind and the rain, the Manth people stood round the stranger and Hanno Hath rose to his feet to speak the customary funeral words.

'We who are left behind watch you on your way.'

He fell silent for a few moments. No one spoke or moved. Then he went on with the old words in his quiet clear voice.

'The long prison of the years unlocks its iron door. Go free now, into the beautiful land. Forgive us, who suffer in this clouded world. Guide us and wait for us, as we wait for you. We will meet again.'

He bowed his head, and they all repeated,

'We will meet again.'

They could do no more. Hanno gave Bowman a quick sad smile, and turned to his wife. Bowman caught the faint whine he had heard before, and the quick shimmer in the air. He saw his father give a small start, and raise one hand to his throat. Bowman suddenly felt the close presence of danger.

'What is it, pa?'

'Nothing. Some little stinging insect. Nothing to worry about.'

He turned away, a little too quickly.

'Pa, look at me.'

Hanno turned back, frowning with annoyance.

'I'm alright, I tell you. We have to get moving. We've wasted enough time already.'

For the last time Bowman looked down at the long mound by the roadside, and wondered fearfully what would make a man tear at his own face. But now the column was reforming, and it was time to go.