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Opening extract from

Slaves of the Mastery

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Prologue: Sirene

On a clear day the island can be seen from the mainland, the long ridge of its tree-ringed hill breaking the horizon to the south. Fishing fleets sometimes pass its rocky shores, and the fishermen stare at the stark outline of the great ruin that tops the hill, but they don't stop. The island has nothing for them. Little grows on its bare sides, only tufts of dusty grass, and the circle of ancient olive trees round the roofless hall. Also there are stories about the island, of wizards who can summon storms, of talking animals, of men who fly. Such matters are best left alone.

The island is called Sirene. Long ago a band of travellers settled here, and built the high stone walls on the top of the hill, and planted the olive trees for shade. The building has no floor, other than the grass and rock that was there before. It has no roof. Its tall windows have no glass, its wide doorways no doors. But it's not a ruin: this is how the people who built it meant it to be. No timbers to rot, no tiles to slip and fall. No glass to break, and no doors to close. Just a long light space swept by sun and wind and rain, a house that is not a house, a place to meet and sing and then to leave again.

Now after many years the sound of footsteps is heard again on Sirene. A woman is following the long rising path from the shore. No boat lies moored in the cove, and yet she is here. She wears a plain faded woollen robe, and is barefoot. Her grey hair is cut short. Her face is weathered, lined, brown. How old is she? Impossible to say. She has the face of a grandmother, but the clear eyes and agile body of a young woman. She barely pauses for breath as she makes her way up the hillside.

There is a freshwater spring where the hill levels off, and here she stops and drinks. Then she goes on, and passes between the twisted trunks of the olive trees, touching their jagged bark lightly with one hand. She steps through the doorless doorway into the roofless hall, and stands there, gazing, remembering. She remembers how this hall was once full of people, and how they sang together, and how she was filled by the song and wanted it never to end. But there is a time for singing and a time for waiting. Now it is all to begin again.

She walks slowly down the centre of the hall, looking out through the high windows on either side at the ocean beyond. A lizard, unaccustomed to human intruders, rattles away into a crack in the stonework. A cloud sails across the sun, and its shadow slides over her.

She is the first. The others will join her, soon now. The time of cruelty has come.

1

Sunset over Aramanth

Marius Semeon Ortiz crested the brow of the low hill at a gallop, and drew his panting horse to a halt. There below him lay the broad coastal plain, and the ocean: and not so far away, no more than an hour's march, his goal, his prize, his gateway to glory, the city of Aramanth. Ortiz stood up in the saddle, and holding himself steady, breathing rapid breaths, fixed his keen young eyes on the distant city. The walls were long gone, as his scouts had reported. There were no signs of any defences. Aramanth lay before him in the fading evening light as fat and as helpless as a mother hen.

His line captains clattered up beside him, and they too smiled to see the end of their long journey. The food wagons were almost empty, and for the last three days the men had been marching on short rations. Now Aramanth would feed them. The wagons would sit low on their axles when the lines turned for home.

Ortiz twisted round in the saddle, and saw with silent approval the orderly approach of the raiding force. Close on a thousand men, three hundred and twenty of them mounted chasseurs, were making their way up the rising land. Behind them rolled the horse-drawn wagons which carried the tents, the cages, the rations for the men and

the provisions for the horses: sixty wagons, and twice that number of teams to haul them, for horses could not be asked to bear great weights for long without resting. Young as he was, Ortiz was a commander who left nothing to risk. No lame horse would slow his lines on the long march.

He raised one hand. The silent signal flashed from squad to squad, and men and horses shuddered gratefully to a stop. Today was their nineteenth day on the march. They were tired, far from home, and uncertain of success. It was his will alone that had sustained them: his certainty that this, the longest raid in the history of the Mastery so far, would yield its greatest prize. For years now travellers had told tales of the prosperous and peaceful city on the plains. It was young Ortiz who had sent out scouts to confirm the reports. Aramanth was rich, and it was undefended. 'How rich?' he had asked. The scouts had made their best guess. 'Ten thousand. At the very least.' Ten thousand! No commander had ever delivered so much, nor half so much, to the Mastery. Just twenty-one years of age, and he now held within his grasp such glory, such honour, that the greatest prize of all would surely follow. One day soon the Master would make his choice of successor, his adopted son; and Marius Semeon Ortiz dared to dream that it would be he who knelt and said, 'Master! Father!'

But first the wealth of Aramanth must be harvested, and brought safely home. He turned back to look once again at the distant city, where dusk was gathering and the lights were beginning to be lit. Let them sleep in peace for one more night, he thought to himself. At first light I will give the command, and my men will do their duty. Aramanth will burn, and ten thousand men, women and children will become slaves of the Mastery.

* * *

Kestrel Hath stood with the rest of her family towards the back of the crowd of guests. Her young sister Pinto, seven years old and jumpy as a sparrow, twisted and fidgeted beside her. The betrothal ceremony was taking place in the centre of the city's arena, where the old wind singer stood. The base of the structure had been dressed with candles for the occasion. The light breeze kept blowing the candles out, and the bride's mother, Mrs Greeth, who hated anything to be out of place, kept creeping forward to relight them. The wind caused the wind singer to hum and coo, in its sweet everlasting way. Kestrel was not interested in betrothals, and so she listened instead to the voice of the wind singer, and as always, she was soothed.

Pia Greeth, the bride, was fifteen years old, the same age as Kestrel herself. Pia looked lovely by candlelight. The boy she was marrying, Tanner Amos, seemed overwhelmed by the ceremony. Why is Pia marrying him, Kestrel thought? How can she know she'll love him for ever? He looked so uncertain; so timid, and so young. But he too was just fifteen, the age when young people became marriageable; and this was the start of the marriage season.

Kestrel frowned and shook her head, and turned her eyes away from the young couple by the wind singer. At once she met the eyes of Pia's older brother Farlo, and realised he had been staring at her. This irritated her. He had taken to following her around in the last few weeks, and looking at her in a hopeless yearning way, as if he wanted to speak to her, but was waiting for her to speak first. Why must she speak to him? She had nothing particular to say. Why must everybody suddenly start

pairing up? She had liked Farlo well enough until he had begun gazing at her in that goggly fashion.

So she looked away again, and there was her twin brother Bowman gazing into the distance. She felt into his mind, and realised his attention too was not on the ceremony. He was sensing something else: something that troubled him.

What is it, Bo?

I don't know.

Now the young couple were saying the vow of betrothal.

'Today begins my walk with you.' The boy spoke in a shy hesitant voice. The vow came from the old days, when the Manth people had been a nomadic tribe, forever travelling over the barren land. Many of the guests moved their lips with the familiar words, unaware that they were doing so.

'Where you go, I go. Where you stay, I stay.'

Now Bowman was moving quietly away. Kestrel saw Pinto follow him with her eyes, desperate to go too. She saw her speak low to their mother, who nodded, knowing her youngest child simply couldn't stand still and stay silent for long. Then Pinto too slipped away.

'When you sleep, I will sleep. When you rise, I will rise.'

Kestrel did not follow Bowman. More and more these days, he chose to be alone. She didn't understand it, and it hurt her, but it was what he wanted, and she loved him too much to complain.

She listened to the ending of the vows.

'I will pass my days within the sound of your voice, and my nights within the reach of your hand, and none shall come between us. This I vow.'

The boy then held out his hand, and the girl took it.

Kestrel saw her mother feel for her father's hand and squeeze it, and knew she was remembering the time of her own betrothal. A sudden sadness came over Kestrel, a new and unfamiliar feeling. She dug the nail of one forefinger into the palm of her hand until it hurt, to stop the tears that were rising in her throat. Why should I be sad, she asked herself? Because ma and pa love each other? Because I never want to be married? But it wasn't that. It was something else.

Now the guests were crowding round to congratulate the young couple. Mrs Greeth was blowing out the candles and putting them away in a box, to be used again later. Kestrel's mother and father were making their way up the nine stone tiers of the arena, hurrying a little, because there was a city meeting that evening, and the ceremony had gone on longer than expected. Bowman and Pinto were gone.

That was when Kestrel found the right name for the feeling of sadness that had come over her. It wasn't loneliness. While her twin brother lived, she could never be lonely. It was a glimpse of something more terrible: a premonition of loss. One day she would lose him, and she didn't know how she could go on living after that.

We go together.

The words, an echo from the past, meant to her that when the time came to die, as one day it must, they would die together. But this new feeling told her otherwise. One would die, and one would live on.

Let me be the one who dies first.

At once she was ashamed of herself. The one who died first would be the lucky one. Why should she wish the misery of survival on her beloved brother? She was stronger than him. She must bear it.

This was the feeling that made her want to cry: not loneliness, not yet, but the certainty that the day was coming when she would be alone.

Mumpo Inch sat on the tumble of stones that had once been part of the city walls, and gazed out towards the dark ocean. If he looked long enough he could make out the crests of the bigger waves, rolling in under the moonless sky. He let out a long sad sigh. Another day gone, and he had still not spoken the words he had so carefully prepared and memorised. It was now eleven weeks and two days since he had passed his fifteenth birthday, and four weeks and four days since Kestrel Hath had done the same. Mumpo adored Kestrel more than life itself, and had done for five long years. He couldn't bear to think she might marry anyone but him. And yet, if he were to ask her, he knew she would say no. He was sure of it. They were too young. He felt it himself. Neither of them was ready to be married. But what if someone else asked her first? And what if she said yes?

He heard sounds behind him, and turning, saw Pinto hopping over the stones. Pinto was small for her age, skinny and lithe and sharp as a blade of grass. Because she was so much younger, Mumpo always felt easy with her. She never criticised him, or smiled at the things he said, as others did. She only ever got cross when he called her Pinpin, which had been her baby name. She was not a baby any more, she would tell him fiercely, staring at him with those bright hurt eyes that seemed always to be about to cry, but never did.

'I knew you'd be here.' She dropped to her knees behind him, and twined her arms round his neck.

'I come here to be alone,' said Mumpo.

'You can be alone with me.'

It was perfectly true: she was no intrusion. He reached one arm behind him and pinched her bony leg.

'What have you done with Kess?'

'Oh, I've killed her,' said Pinto, wriggling happily. 'I got fed up with you always asking me about her, so I killed her.'

'Where did you leave her body?'

'At the Greeths' betrothal.'

Mumpo rose to his feet, dropping the girl to the ground with a gentle shake. He was tall and well-built, like his father, but unlike his father in his prime, he had no air of authority about him. He was too easy-going to impose his will on anyone; too simple, some said. As for Pinto, she thought he was the dearest person in the entire wide world.

'There's something I have to ask Kess,' he said, more to convince himself than to inform the girl.

'I shouldn't bother,' said Pinto. 'She'll say no.'

Mumpo blushed a deep red.

'You don't know what I'm talking about.'

'Yes, I do. You want her to marry you. Well, she won't. I asked her, and she said no.'

'You never did!'

As it happens, Pinto had not asked her big sister this vast and frightening question. She had wanted to many times, but she had not dared. However, she was quite sure that if she were to ask it, the answer would be as she declared.

'You're an evil interfering rat-girl. I shall never talk to you again.'

He was angry and ashamed. Pinto repented at once.

'I didn't ask her, Mumpo. I just made that up.'

'Do you swear?'

'I swear. But she will say no.'

'How do you know that?'

Pinto wanted to say, I know because you belong to me. Instead she said,

'She doesn't want to marry anyone.'

'She will,' said Mumpo gloomily. 'They all do in the end.'

It was quite dark now, so they held hands as they made their way back over the uneven piles of rubble. Pinto felt how his strong dry hand held hers, so light and yet so sure, and twice she pretended to stumble just to feel his fingers close tight round hers, and his muscular arm hold her from falling. In reality she was as nimble as a goat, and could find her way by starlight or by no light; but she was playing a secret game that they were betrothed, and in her head she was saying to him the familiar words of the betrothal, 'I will pass my days within the sound of your voice, and my nights within the reach of your hand.'

They passed the abandoned buildings of the old Grey District, now used only by gangs of unruly children for their secret games, and entered the lamp-lit streets of Maroon District. The old names were still used, though few of the houses retained their old colour. After the changes, the citizens of Aramanth had been seized with a rage for house painting, and all over the city a rainbow of bright colours had sprung up, on doors and window frames, walls and even roofs. But five years of sun and wind and rain had worn away the hastily applied paint, and the old municipal colours were beginning to show through once more.

They found the main plaza full of people and noise. It turned out the meeting had ended almost as soon as it had begun, following a dispute about procedure. Everyone was streaming out of the city hall and making their way home, arguing eagerly. Mumpo never attended the city meetings. All that happened, it seemed to him, was that everyone talked at the same time as everyone else, and nobody listened, and so they all went out at the end with the same opinions they'd come in with.

His searching eyes soon located Kestrel at the centre of a group of young people, all talking with passionate conviction. Mumpo came to a stop at the fringe of the group, and wouldn't join them, even though Pinto pulled at his hand.

'They're just going on about nothing,' Pinto said. 'Like they always do.'

Mumpo wasn't listening. He was watching Kestrel. In common with many of the younger set, she cropped her hair short and ragged, and wore faded black robes in reaction against the multi-coloured look favoured by the older people. Her face was odd and bony and wide-mouthed, not beautiful in the usual way: but there was about her a restless intensity that drew and held the attention. To Mumpo, she was entirely beautiful. More than beautiful: she was so alive that sometimes he felt her to be life itself, or the source of life. When those eager black eyes met his, he felt the jolt of her vitality, and everything around him seemed brighter and more sharp-edged.

'Why weren't you at the meeting, Mumpo?'

With a start, he realised she was talking to him.

'Oh, that sort of thing's not for me.'

'Why not? You live here, don't you?'

'Yes,' he said.

'Then don't you care about the city that's your home?'

Mumpo said the first thing that came into his head, as he usually did.

'It doesn't feel like my home.'

Kestrel stared at him, and said nothing for a long moment. Then she turned back to the others, made some abrupt goodnights, and walked away.

Mumpo and Pinto followed more slowly. Mumpo's rooms, where he lived with his father, were close by the Hath family's quarters, in the heart of the city.

'I always say the wrong thing,' he told Pinto sadly. 'And I never know why.'

Bowman had not been at the meeting. He had walked the streets of the city, trying to locate the source of the danger he had felt at the betrothal. It was as elusive as a smell. Sometimes he thought he had it, then he lost it again. He turned his face to the wind and sniffed the air, hoping this would guide him. But it wasn't a smell, or a sound: it was a feeling. Bowman could feel the presence of fear a mile off, and could sense the joy that bursts out as laughter before the smile was even begun. But feelings were hard to trace. They came as often from inside himself as from the outside world.

Now it was gone again. Maybe he was making it all up. Maybe it was hunger. He decided to go home.

When the rest of the family returned, they found him standing on their little balcony looking out at the night. The stove was almost out. Hanno Hath bent down to coax it back into life.

'You've let the fire go out, Bo.'

'Have I?'

He sounded surprised, so Hanno Hath said no more about it. People said Bowman was a dreamer, or more unkindly, that he went about half-asleep, but his father understood him. Bowman was as awake as any of them; more so, perhaps. But he was attending to different things.

'That was a waste of time as usual,' said Kestrel, coming into the room. 'The only person who said anything worth hearing was Mumpo, and he's the biggest fool of all.'

'He's not a fool!' protested Pinto, entering after her.

'Oh yes, we all know Mumpo's your pet.'

Pinto flew at Kestrel, fists tight-clenched and flailing, hot tears springing up in her eyes. Kestrel struck back at once, hitting her on the nose. Pinto fell sobbing to the floor.

'Kestrel!' said her father sharply.

'She started it!'

Ira Hath picked Pinto up and soothed her. Pinto's nose was bleeding. When Pinto discovered this, she was secretly elated, and stopped crying.

'Blood!' she said. 'Kess made me bleed!'

'It's not much, darling,' said her mother.

'But she made me bleed!' Pinto was triumphant. The one who draws blood is always in the wrong. 'Tell her off!'

'You made yourself bleed,' said Kestrel. 'You hit my hand with your nose.'

'Oh!' said Pinto. 'Oh! You lying witch!'

'All right, that's enough.' Hanno Hath's mild voice had the effect of calming everyone down, as always. 'So Mumpo said something interesting, did he, Kess?'

'I was going to tell you, only Pinpin –'

'*Don't call me Pinpin*!'

'Am I allowed to speak?'

'I don't care. Say what you like.'

Actually Pinto was interested, because it was about Mumpo.

'He said Aramanth doesn't feel like his home.'

'Oh, that poor boy.'

'Yes, but it made me think. It doesn't feel like my home, either.'

Hanno Hath threw a glance towards his wife.

'So where is your home, my Kess?'

'I don't know.'

'Well, you may be right. All the old books say this was only ever meant to be a way station on the journey to the homeland.'

'The homeland!' His wife snorted crossly. 'What is this homeland? Where is it? I'll tell you where it is. It's somewhere else. That's where it is. Wherever you live in the real world you find troubles and discontents, so you make up a somewhere else that's better. That's all your precious homeland is. So we might as well make the most of where we are now.'

'You may be right, my dear.'

'But ma,' said Kestrel, 'don't you feel it too? We don't fit in here.'

'Oh well, as to that, I'm just one of those odd-shaped people who doesn't fit in anywhere.'

'We're an odd-shaped family,' said Pinto. The notion pleased her.

'There is a homeland,' Kestrel persisted. 'Don't your books tell you where it is, pa?'

'No, darling. If they did, I'd have gone there long ago.'

'Why?'

'Oh, I'm an old dreamer.'

'Well, I'm going to go.'

'Wait until you're married,' said her mother. 'You'll find things will look different then.'

'I don't want to be married.'

Ira Hath looked up and met her husband's eyes. He gave a small shrug, and his eyes turned towards Bowman.

'We'd never make you marry against your will,' her mother began gently. 'But darling –'

'I know I'll end up lonely when I'm old,' said Kestrel, to show she didn't have to be told. 'But I don't care.'

'Kess'll never be lonely,' said Pinto enviously. 'She's got Bo.'

Their mother shook her head and said no more. Hanno Hath went out on to the balcony to stand beside Bowman. He didn't speak, because he was feeling for the right words with which to begin. But Bowman knew well enough what he was thinking.

'I really am trying, pa.'

'I know you are.'

'It's not easy.'

Hanno Hath sighed. He hated asking this of his son. But Ira was right, now that the twins were growing up they must learn to be a little more apart.

'Do you still share thoughts?'

'Not as much as we used to. But yes.'

'She has to make a life of her own, Bo. So do you.'

'Yes, pa.'

Bowman wanted to say to his father, we're not like everyone else, we're not to have a life like other people, we're marked out for something quite different. But since he didn't know what, or even why he felt it, he said nothing.

'I'm not asking you to stop loving each other. Just to have other friends as well.'

'Yes, pa.'

Hanno put one arm lightly round his son's shoulders. Bowman let it rest there for a moment. Then he said,

'I think I'll go out.'

As he headed for the door, Kestrel looked up and met his eyes.

Shall I come with you?

Better not.

Kestrel knew as well as he did that their parents wanted them to spend more time apart. But she also knew there was something else.

Tell me what it is.

I will. Later.

Then he was gone: down the steep stairs, and out into the night street. He had no destination, he needed only to be away from other people, away from his family. He would have walked away from himself if he had known how. He was sure now that the sense of danger that hadn't left him all day was coming from the fear buried deep inside himself. He needed a place of stillness to understand it better, and to know why it had awoken after all these years. So he headed south, towards the ocean.

Once past the city boundary the streetlights gave out, and he made his way by starlight. It was a cool autumn night, and he shivered a little as he walked. His eyes adjusted to the darkness, and soon he could make out the shoreline far ahead, and the line of low hills that formed the horizon to the east. When at last he stopped, it was not because he had reached anywhere in particular, but because he judged he was far enough from the

bustle of the city. Here, alone in the night, he stood still and closed his eyes. He felt for the sensation of fear, and found it at once, shockingly close. It was powerful, and cruel. He spoke to the memory of power within him.

I don't want you. I never wanted you.

But it wasn't true. He had wanted the power once. All those years ago, in that time that ever since had felt like a dream, he had wanted it. He had let himself be filled by that intoxicating spirit. And now the Morah was in him, and he would never be free.

He walked a little way eastward, up the rising land, feeling the fear all around him. He came to a stop, seeing only the black line of the hilltops, and the grey blur of the sea. He turned, and there lay Aramanth, twinkling softly in the night. There lay everyone he loved, everyone who loved him, in all the world. How could he tell them he was a source of danger to them? A traitor who carried the living spirit of the Morah into their safest home? How could he tell his sister, his half-self, that she must not come too close, lest the Morah possess her too?

The evil is in me. I must carry it alone.

It was so strong, so all-pervading: it filled the night air round him like a dark cloud. Suddenly he felt he could no longer breathe. He turned and walked fast back towards the city, unaware that had he continued for a few minutes more up the hill, he would have seen the army of the Mastery encamped on the farther side, burning no fires or lamps, their horses' harness muffled, waiting soundlessly for dawn.

2

Terror at dawn

That night, Ira Hath had a dream that was so intense it woke her before her usual time. She sat up in bed, and found that she was sobbing. She was unable to stop herself. She tried to smother the sobs with the hem of the blanket, but this produced a snuffling noise that was even worse, so she got out of bed to get herself a drink of water. Once up she found she couldn't stand properly, and she had to sit down again rather suddenly on the bed. That woke Hanno. He saw the streaks of tears on her cheeks and became alarmed. So she told him her dream.

She had been walking along a snow-covered road, together with all the rest of the family and many others besides, and the road led to a pass between steep hills. On either side of the road, the slopes rose high up, white and smooth, while the road itself climbed to a summit, and then fell away on the far side. They were going west, it seemed, because directly ahead, in the great V formed by the hills on either side, the sun was setting. Though all round her the winter air was cold, she felt a warmth on her face that seemed to come from the sunset ahead.

She walked in the lead, in front of everyone else. So she was the first to reach the summit of the road, and

stand within the V looking over the brow. As she reached this point, a flurry of flakes of new snow began to fall around her, and ahead the setting sun turned the western sky a deep red. Through the falling snow, by the light of the sunset sky, she found herself looking down on a broad plain, where two rivers flowed into an unknown sea.

Then in her dream, as she gazed down at the land framed by the V of hills, with the snow falling and the warmth on her cheeks and the wide red horizon beyond, she felt a sudden rush of happiness that was so intense it brought tears to her eyes. Faint with joy, she turned to Hanno and her children, and saw from their faces, knew in an instant, that they could not follow where she was going. She had found the greatest happiness she had ever known, and in the same moment knew she must lose everyone she had ever loved. In her dream she had wept for her joy and her loss, and sobbing, she had awoken.

Hanno dried her tears and held her in his arms, and told her it was only a dream. Slowly the shock of it passed, and Ira became her old self again, and said that it was all his fault for indulging in foolish talk about the homeland.

'Why did you fall over?' he asked her.

'I didn't fall over. I sat down.'

'Why?'

'I felt wobbly.'

He didn't say anything more, but she knew what he was thinking. Her distant ancestor Ira Manth had been a seer, the first prophet of the Manth people. *Every time I touch the future*, he had written, *I grow weaker. My gift is my disease. I shall die of prophecy.*

'It was only a dream, Hanno. Nothing more.'

'I expect so, my dear.'

'You're not to go putting ideas into the children's heads. They're full of enough muddle as it is.'

'I won't say anything.'

Ira stood up once more, stronger this time, and went to the window. She drew the curtains, and saw outside the first light of the new day spreading over the eastern horizon.

'Nearly morning.'

Hanno Hath joined her at the window, putting his arms around her.

'I do love you so much,' he said softly.

She turned her head and kissed his cheek. They stood like this, very quiet, for a long moment.

Then Hanno said, 'Do you hear it?'

'What?'

'The wind singer.'

She listened.

'No.'

The wind singer had stopped singing.

Marius Semeon Ortiz sat in the saddle on the brow of the hill, his chasseurs lined up behind him. A breeze from the ocean carried the hiss of waves and the tang of salt on the dawn air. Ortiz was watching the city below, where his raiding parties were already at work. Halfway down the hill on his left flank crouched the attack squads, waiting on his command. He sensed the nervousness of the ranks of horses behind him, straining at the bit. His own mount shifted her weight, flared her nostrils, and let out a soft whinny.

'Easy,' he said. 'Easy.'

A flaming arrow arched up from the city high into the silent sky: the signal that the warehouses were breached.

'Provisioners!' said Ortiz. 'Firing squads!' He had no need to speak loudly. His men were alert to his slightest word.

The provision wagons rolled down the hill on padded wheels, accompanied by their bands of silent raiders. They moved fast, knowing they had very little time to do their vital work. Ahead of them, loping at speed, ran the firing squads, each man carrying on his back a bundle of oil-soaked kindling. Ortiz raised one hand, and the remainder of his force of foot-soldiers rose up and ran in a long curving path to the seaward side of the city. After them, more slowly, rolled the empty cages known as monkey wagons.

There came a shout from the city. A watchman had encountered the provisioners. Now others began to wake, and lights were flickering on. But already a greater light was burning, in one of the abandoned apartment blocks of Grey District, and the breeze was fanning the flames. Another sprang up, and a third: a line of fires, along the northern and windward side of the city.

Ortiz felt his horse shudder beneath him. She had smelt the sting of smoke, and knew her moment was near. There were shouts and screams coming from the city now, and the rattle of running feet. Ortiz could picture the scene, which he had witnessed so many times before: the people, waking to find their streets ablaze, pouring out of their houses, half-dressed, confused, frightened.

Slowly, he drew his sword. Behind him, the lines of his chasseurs followed suit, and he heard the shivering hiss of three hundred blades leaving their scabbards. He

released the bit, and his horse took a step forward. Behind him, the chasseurs swayed and moved. He spurred his horse to a trot, and then to a canter. Behind him, the drumbeat of following hooves. His eyes fixed on the burning city ahead, he held the chasseurs at a canter, covering the stony ground. This was the moment on which all depended. If the blow fell with speed, surprise, and terror, then a force of a thousand men could overwhelm a city, and take captive ten times their own number. It was the horror of that first attack that would turn free men into slaves.

He glanced to his left as he rode, and saw that his foot-soldiers were in place. Behind him, the first rays of the rising sun were reaching over the black line of hills. This is it, he thought, the moment of no turning back, the all or nothing: and rising in the saddle, he was swept by a sensation of pure joy. Eyes bright, lips parted in a smile, he raised his sword as he rode, spurred his mount into the gallop, and cried,

'Charge!'

The wind singer was burning fiercely. Hanno Hath trained the nozzle of a fire hose on the flames, while Bowman and Kestrel, one at each end of the handle, pumped with all their might. Already the tiered arena was alive with running figures. The cry of 'Fire!' spread through the city. Ira Hath and Pinto were racing down the streets, banging on doors to wake the sleeping people. From all sides families in nightclothes came streaming into the arena. Kestrel wept as she pumped, saying, 'No! No! No!' with each downward stroke. Bowman didn't turn to look at the smoking wind singer for fear he too would cry.

Hanno's fire hose succeeded at last in dousing the flames, leaving the tower half-destroyed, charred and hissing.

'Keep pumping!' he cried, turning the hose on a burning building. But Kestrel had already left the pump and was swinging herself up onto the smoking ruin.

'Be careful, Kess –'

Her father's voice was cut short by a terrible screaming. A great rush of men, women and children burst into the arena. With a thunder of galloping hooves, the chasseurs of the Mastery crashed through the pillared arcade, swords flashing, and the people of Aramanth ran before them. Those that fell or turned back were cut down by the long swords, so that as the lines of horsemen advanced, their horses rode over the bodies of the wounded and the dead. Behind the chasseurs came foot-soldiers with short spears, with which they stabbed the bodies lying bleeding on the ground. Terrified, the people of the city fled before this savage killing machine, across the arena, down burning streets, out of the city, towards the ocean shore.

Kestrel clung to the burnt-out wind singer, and in her black clothing she wasn't noticed by the invaders. The scorched wood hurt her arms and legs, but she dared not move; and unmoving, she watched the slaughter. She saw her father and brother forced back with the rest. She heard the piteous cries of the wounded, and the brisk blows of the spearmen. She watched the leader of the invaders ride by on his horse, saw him clearly in the light of the rising sun, his handsome young face framed in a cascade of tawny hair, his eyes cruel as a hawk hunting vermin. She stared as long as she could, printing the image deep in her memory.

I won't forget you, my enemy.

As the last soldier passed out of sight, an unearthly silence fell. Kestrel reached up for the slot in the wind singer that held its silver voice. The metal throat was almost too hot to touch, but she made her fingers feel into the slot, and quickly, before she knew she was burned, she snatched out the voice. It fell to the flagstones below. She followed it, dropping swiftly down the tower, feeling the skin tear on the fingertips of her right hand. She found the voice on the ground, already cool enough to handle, and with her left hand slipped it into her pocket.

All round her now she heard the sound of flames, and felt the heat in the air. The great circular arena was built of stone, and there was little there to burn. But beyond the ring of pillars there rose a wall of fire. There was nowhere for her to go.

Outside the city, the fleeing people now found themselves penned in a broad space between the fire and the ocean. Here the foot-soldiers of the Mastery were waiting for them. The soldiers made no move to attack. They stood in menacing clusters, swords drawn, while the thousands of helpless townspeople milled about, dazed and frightened, looking for members of their families, crying and sobbing, unable to take in what had happened. There was no leadership, no organisation. The blow had fallen too suddenly.

Marius Semeon Ortiz rode up and saw the stunned looks all around him, and was satisfied. His provisioning parties were withdrawing from the torched city, their wagons full. It was time to calm the prisoners, and teach them obedience.

'You will not be harmed! Do as you are ordered, and you will not be harmed!'

Mounted officers rode through the crowd repeating the cry.

'Remain where you are! You will not be harmed!'

Ortiz now ordered the monkey wagons to be brought forward. Teams of horses hauled the high-wheeled cages into the heart of the crowd, where the horses were unharnessed and led away. Ortiz looked round for a suitable victim among the conquered people, to demonstrate why the cage had acquired its name.

Hanno Hath had succeeded in reuniting all his family except Kestrel. The way back into the city was barred by armed men, but even had they been able to slip past the cordon, the fire was raging too fiercely. They could only hope that somehow Kestrel had found a means to escape the inferno. Meanwhile, here and now, too many people were wounded. The first priority was to survive, and to help others to survive.

A mounted officer clattered past, crying, 'Do as you are ordered, and you will not be harmed!'

'Are you all right? Pinto, you're bleeding.'

'I'm all right, pa,' said Pinto, her voice trembling. 'It's not my blood.'

'Did anyone see what happened to Kess?'

Ira Hath looked at Bowman. He had his eyes shut, his mind reaching out for his twin.

Kess! Can you feel me?

He shook his head.

'Would you know if she was –?'

'Yes. I think so.'

Pinto caught sight of Mumpo, with his father Maslo Inch.

'There's Mumpo! He's all right!'

Marius Semeon Ortiz, high on his handsome charger,

was looking in the same direction, his eyes drawn by the tall man in the white robes. Maslo Inch, once the all-powerful Chief Examiner of Aramanth, had no pride any more. Ever since the changes, he had grown increasingly confused, and in recent years he had come to depend entirely on his only son. All that was left of his former glory was the white robe, the old sign of the highest rating, and his dignified bearing. His heart was broken, his mind bewildered, but his body, through force of long habit, walked tall. It was this that singled him out.

Ortiz pointed, and his men pushed through the crowd and seized Maslo Inch by either arm. Mumpo tried to stop them, but they brushed him aside, and a mounted officer shook his sword at him. His father, only half-understanding what was happening, smiled for him as he was led off.

'Let them be, son. What does it matter?'

Mumpo followed, as did many others, including Hanno Hath. They saw Maslo Inch pushed into the high cage, and the barred door locked after him.

Mumpo turned to Hanno Hath in distress.

'What will they do to him?'

Hanno shook his head, afraid to speak.

'My orders will be obeyed!' Ortiz cried out, his horse wheeling round and round. 'Without question! Without delay! The first sign of disobedience –' he pointed to the cage, 'and this man will die!'

Ortiz looked round and heard the rushing murmur of voices. His words were being repeated all across the great crowd of prisoners. This was good: fear made them attentive. They must learn that he did not make empty threats. As the Master himself had taught, a

single act of brutality could control an entire city, so long as it was carried out without hesitation, and without mercy. Ortiz had his victim. Now all he needed was a pretext.

Mumpo knew nothing of this. All he knew was that the father he had come to love had fallen into an unexplained danger. The horseman with the sword had frightened him, but he had now ridden away, and Mumpo was angry. He possessed the courage of the uncalculating soul: wishing to save his father, he thought nothing of the risks he might himself face. So marching forward to the cage, he rattled its blackened bars and shouted,

'Let him go!'

Ortiz swung round on his horse. He pointed his sword at Mumpo.

'Stand back!'

'He's my father,' said Mumpo, saying not what was needed, but what he felt. 'Let him go!'

Maslo Inch reached his hand through the bars and stroked Mumpo's cheek.

'My son,' he said proudly.

Ortiz saw with grim satisfaction that his order had been disobeyed.

'You were warned. Now the price will be paid.'

He gave a sign, and one of his men stepped forward with a burning torch. Beneath the cage there was an iron tray, in which lay a deep bed of firewood topped by oil-soaked kindling. Above the kindling, the floor of the cage was an open iron grid. As the kindling caught fire, and the smoke began to rise, the people nearest to the cage realised with horror that Maslo Inch had no way of escaping the flames. He was about to be burned alive.

'You will be silent!' commanded Ortiz. 'For each person

who speaks, I will take one more from among you, and they will die in the same way.'

A terrible silence fell over the people of Aramanth. How could they think of disobeying? Even the bravest of them, even those willing to risk death, dared not bring about the death of others. So they made no noise at all, as the fire spread in the deep tray beneath the cage, and the poor lost man inside tried to climb the bars to escape the heat.

Ortiz watched, as he had watched before. It was unpleasant, but it was necessary. All new slaves must witness a death in the cage before entering the provinces controlled by the Mastery. It was the Master's order.

Maslo Inch didn't make much of a monkey for the watching soldiers. After his first desperate efforts, he fell limp, and his white robes caught fire. He then folded noiselessly to the cage floor, without so much as a scream, which was unusual. But the sound of the burning was sufficient. Ortiz could see from the drawn white faces of his prisoners that the lesson was well learned.

There came a low cry, and a thud. The young man who had disobeyed him had fallen to the ground. The people around dared not stoop to help him, and so he lay there, apparently in a faint. Ortiz decided to overlook the incident. It was time to prepare for the long march home.

'People of Aramanth,' he called to the shocked and silent crowd. 'Your city is destroyed. Your freedom is at an end. You are now slaves of the Mastery.'

Bowman stood utterly still, his eyes fixed on the burning

city, searching with all his senses for Kestrel. He heard the flames and smelt the smoke. Here and there he found pockets of buried pain among the ashes, which burst like bubbles against the touch of his mind, releasing the last cries of those who lay there, dead but still warm. So much sadness rose from the smoking ruins, so much hurt and loss. He flinched as he felt it, but made himself search on. Then a soldier pulled roughly at his sleeve, and turning, no longer searching, he caught a fugitive touch of her, no more than a flash of a figure seen through scorched pillars, through heat-distorted air: but he knew her. She was there. She was alive. It was enough.

Already the soldiers were forming the new slaves into lines. He let himself be pulled and commanded. He didn't care. She was alive, and the future now had a shape. In parting him from his sister, his half-self, his enemy had drawn taut the cord that linked them, shivering taut, like the bowstring on an archer's bow. They would find each other again. The drawn string would be loosed. Then the hunter would become the hunted, and the arrow would fly.

3

The wind is rising

Kestrel remained by the burnt-out wind singer all that day, while the fire raged through the city. As night fell and the air grew cold, the flames began to die down at last, and slowly, fearfully, she climbed the nine tiers of the arena to see if anyone else was left alive.

Aramanth was gone. In its place, by the orange glow of the burning houses, she saw ruined streets littered with bodies over which carrion birds screeched. She called out as she went, at first low and afraid; but hearing nothing, she called louder and louder. No one answered.

The statue of Creoth, the first Emperor of Aramanth, still stood, the white stone now blackened by smoke. The fountain no longer flowed, but there was water in its basin. She cleared the ash floating on the water's surface and drank deep. The water tasted bitter, but she forced herself to drink until she could drink no more.

She made her way back to the building in which her family had lived, and found it roofless and still burning. The stairs had caved in. There was no way she could reach their apartment, even if she had dared to brave the fire. Looking up, she made out the space that had once been her room, now a skeleton of black beams against the night sky.