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Tyrant

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Corinth, 342 BC

The man arrived a little after dusk when the shadows were beginning to lengthen over the city and over the harbour. He walked at a quick pace with a satchel over his shoulder, glancing around him with a certain apprehension. He stopped near a shrine and the lamp burning before the image of the goddess Persephone lit up his face: the greying hair of a man past middle age, his straight nose and thin lips, high cheekbones and hollow cheeks bristly with a dark beard. His nervous, troubled gaze still held a trace of dignity and reserve that contrasted with his worn clothing and shabby appearance and hinted at a high-born provenance.

He turned down the road that led to the western port and walked towards the docks, crowded with taverns and inns frequented by sailors, merchants, longshoremen and soldiers from the fleet. Times were prosperous in Corinth and both of her ports were thronging with vessels carrying wares to and from all the countries on the internal sea and on the Pontus Eusinus. Here in the southern district where the wheat storehouses were located, every variety of Sicilian rang out around him: the colourful accents of Acragas, Catane, Gela, Syracuse . . .

Syracuse. Sometimes he thought he'd forgotten, but then a little nothing would send him back to the days of his childhood and his youth, swamping him in the lights and colours of a world long transfigured by nostalgia, but above all by the bitterness of a life inexorably marked by defeat.

He'd reached his tavern and went in, after taking a last look around.

The place was beginning to fill up with regulars who had come for a bowl of hot soup and a glass of strong wine, swilled straight as only barbarians and poor wretches were wont to do.

When the weather was fine, people would sit outside under the trellis to take in the two seas, one dark already, prey to the night, the other red with the last gleam of dusk, and the ships hurrying to harbour before the night set in. But when the winter wind of Boreas descended from the mountains to chill men's limbs, they crammed inside in an atmosphere dense with smoke and stifling odours.

The tavern keeper poked at the fire in the hearth, then took a bowl of soup and set it down in front of him on the table. 'Dinner, maestro.'

'Maestro . . .' he mumbled back, with a faint grimace.

The spoon was on the table, tied with a string so it wouldn't be carried off. He picked it up and began to eat, slowly, savouring the simple, tasty broth that warmed his aching bones.

The girls were arriving as the customers, dinner over, continued to drink or were already drunk, with the excuse that it was cold and that wine was what they needed to keep them warm.

Chloe was not especially beautiful, but her eyes were deep black and her proud expression was so absurd for a young prostitute that she reminded him of the women in Sicily. Perhaps she was Sicilian after all.

Yes, perhaps she reminded him of someone, a woman he had loved in his youth in his native land. That was why he glanced at her now and then, and smiled at her; she smiled back without knowing why. Her eyes were wide and a bit mocking.

He suddenly found her at his side; he was surprised at first, but then gestured at the keeper to bring over another bowl of soup. He pushed it over to her, putting a few coins on the table as well.

'Not enough to fuck with, maestro,' she said, with a glance at the money.

'No, I know that,' he said calmly. 'I only wanted to offer you something to eat. You're thin, and if you get any thinner they won't be keeping you around for the customers any more; they'll send you to the millstone. But . . . why did you call me that?'

'Maestro?'

The man nodded and continued to eat his soup.

The girl shrugged. 'That's what everyone calls you. They say that people pay you to teach them to read and write. I don't think anyone knows your real name. You have a name, surely?'

'Just like everyone else.'

'And you won't tell me what it is?'

The man shook his head, dipping his spoon back into the soup. 'Eat while it's hot,' he said.

Chloe brought the bowl to her lips and noisily gulped down the broth. She wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her tunic. 'Why won't you tell me?'

'Because I can't,' said the man.

The girl looked across at the satchel slung over the back of his chair. 'What's in there?'

'Nothing that concerns you. Eat, your customers are here.'

The keeper approached. 'Get over to the room,' he said, pointing at a door at one end of the tavern. 'Those two bold men of the sea are looking for a good time. They've already paid me. Make sure they leave happy.'

The girl took another swallow of soup, and whispered into his ear as she was getting up: 'Careful, that bag is bound to attract attention. People want to know what's in it. You didn't hear that from me.' Loudly, she added, 'Thank you for the soup, maestro. It warmed my heart.'

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Chloe had been turned over to a couple of foreigners already reeling from their drink. Big, strapping, filthy. The kind who had

to hurt a girl to get their thrills. The man heard her scream. He got up and moved towards the door at the end of the tavern; the keeper spotted him and shouted: 'Where do you think you're going? Stop, blast you, stop!'

But he'd already thrown open the door and was lunging into the small dark room, yelling: 'Leave her alone! Let go of her, you bastards!'

Pandemonium ensued. The two of them grabbed him and shoved him back out into the tavern, but he managed to seize a chair and waved it around wildly as the tavern-goers crowded around the brawlers, goading them on in loud voices. A third man crept up from behind and tried to slip off with his satchel, but he knocked him over the head with the chair and then backed up, panting, shoulders to the wall.

He was surrounded. Distressed at his own daring, he was dripping sweat and trembling as his adversaries closed in threateningly.

One of them lurched at him and punched him in the stomach, hard, and then in the face. As the other was about to jump in, three brutes that no one had ever seen before burst into the room and knocked the two men senseless, laying them out on the ground with blood spouting from their noses and mouths. Their aggressors vanished just as suddenly as they had appeared.

The maestro made sure that he still had his satchel and wove his way then through the awestruck crowd and out the door.

A gust of cold wind blasted him and sent shivers down his spine. He felt the effects of the blows he'd taken all at once as the tension that had propelled him began to wash away. He staggered, put his hands to his temples as if to ward off the dizziness that was pulling the ground from under his feet, groped around for a support that wasn't there, and tumbled into the middle of the road.

He did not come to his senses until much later, when it started to rain and the icy water dribbled down his face and back. After a little while, he felt someone dragging him to the side of the road under a shed where some asses were tethered.

He opened his eyes, and the light pouring out of the tavern window revealed the face of an old, bald-headed beggar without a tooth in his mouth.

'Who are you?' he muttered.

'Who are you, that's what I want to know. I've never seen anything like it! Three monsters show up out of nowhere, beat those creeps to a pulp . . . and then disappear! That's a lot of fuss over a tramp, I say.'

'I'm not a tramp.'

'Damned if you aren't.' The old man pulled him up a little against the wall and covered him with a few handfuls of straw. 'Hold on, big man,' he said, 'maybe I've got a little wine left. It's my pay for watching these asses all night. Here, drink some of this, it'll warm you up.'

He watched him as he gulped down a few swallows of wine.

'If you're not a tramp, what are you then?'

'I earn a living teaching people to read and write, but I . . .'

'You what?'

His mouth twisted into a grimace that might have been a smile. 'I was the lord of the wealthiest and most powerful city of all the earth . . .'

'Yeah, sure. Right. And I'm the great king of Persia.'

'And my father was the greatest man of our times . . . Give me a little more wine.'

'Are you going to get on with this story, then? And what have you got in that satchel that you're always clutching so tight?'

He took another couple of long draughts, then cleaned his mouth with his sleeve. 'Nothing that's worth stealing. It's his story . . . my father's story. The story of a man who became the lord of almost all of Sicily and much of Italy. He defeated the barbarians in countless battles, invented machines of war the likes of which had never been seen, deported entire populations, erected the greatest fortress in the world in just three months, founded colonies in the Tyrrhenian and Adriatic seas, married two women on the same day. There's never been anyone like him among all the Greeks.'

The old man reached over with the flask of wine again, and then sat down next to him, leaning up against the wall. 'By all the gods! And just who is this phenomenon, this . . .'

A flash of lightning brightly lit up the rain-spattered road and the maestro's swollen face. Thunder pealed through the sky but he did not move. He clasped the sack to his chest and said, emphasizing each word, 'His name was Dionysius. Dionysius of Syracuse. But the entire world called him . . . the tyrant!'

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SYRACUSE 409 BC

A HORSEMAN APPROACHED at breakneck speed, lifting a storm of white dust on the road from Camarina, directed towards the city's western gate. The officer on duty ordered him to stop. 'Halt!' he shouted. 'Make yourself known!'

His order proved unnecessary. The horse collapsed to the ground suddenly at less than two hundred feet from the walls, sending his rider rolling in the dust.

'Open the gate!' ordered the officer. 'Hurry, go see who it is and bring him in.'

Four guards ran out and reached the horseman, who was sprawled out in the dirt. The horse lay panting in agony.

The man screamed out in pain when they tried to turn him over. His face was disfigured from the strain, sullied with dust and with blood.

'Who are you?' asked one of the soldiers.

'I've come from Selinus . . . take me to your commander! Hurry, I implore you.'

The soldiers looked each other in the eye, then put together a litter with their spears and shields, lifted him on to it and carried him inside. One of them hung back to put the horse out of his misery; he gave a last shudder and expired.

The little group soon reached the guardhouse. Their officer approached, carrying a torch, and the messenger looked up at him: a handsome, sturdy youth with pitch-black, wavy hair, black eyes and full lips.

'My name is Dionysius,' he said. 'I'm the commander of the guards. What has happened? Speak, for the gods' sake!'

'I must report to the authorities. It's a question of life or death. The Carthaginians are laying siege to Selinus. There are thousands and thousands of them, they are attacking us with huge, incredible machines. We cannot hold out alone . . . we need your help! Now, in the name of the gods, you must leave now!' Then, in a lower voice, 'Give me water, please, I'm dying of thirst.'

Dionysius handed him his own flask and barked out quick orders to his men: 'You, find Diocles and tell him to meet us at the prytaneum; tell him it's a matter of the utmost urgency.'

'But he'll be sleeping at this hour . . .' objected the guard.

'Get him out of his bed, by Heracles, move! And the rest of you,' he said, turning to the others, 'go wake up the members of the Council and have them gather at the prytaneum. They must listen to this man. You,' he said to the last, 'go call a surgeon and tell him it's urgent.'

The men hurried off to do as they had been ordered. Dionysius had his second-in-command, a friend named Iolaus, replace him on guard duty, and he escorted the soldiers carrying the litter through the dark streets of the city, lighting their way with the torch he held in his hand. He'd glance back every now and then at the man stretched out on that rough litter, his features twisted into a grimace of pain at every jerk and jolt. He must have broken bones when he was thrown to the ground.

When they reached their destination, the council members had already begun to show up. Half asleep and in a foul humour, they were accompanied by their lantern-carrying slaves. Diocles, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, arrived nearly immediately, but scowled when he saw Dionysius. 'What is all this rush? Is this any way to—'

Dionysius raised his hand sharply to cut off the complaining. He was only twenty-two years old, but he was the strongest warrior in the city: no one could match him in the use of arms; his resistance to fatigue, hardship and pain had already become

legendary. He was fearless and had no tolerance for discipline. He had no respect for those who were not worthy of it, be they gods or men. He despised those who preferred talk over action. He believed that only a man who was willing to put his own life on the line deserved to command, and that a commander had to prove his nerve and his courage on the battlefield. And he always looked a man in the eye before he killed him.

'This messenger has done in his horse and shattered his bones to get here,' he said, 'and I say we need to listen to him immediately.'

'Let him talk, then,' snapped Diocles impatiently.

Dionysius drew close and helped the man into a sitting position. The messenger began to speak. 'They attacked us suddenly, arriving from the north, from where we would have least expected a raid. And they got all the way to our walls! We have been doing all we can to withstand their attacks, but they've been battering our walls day and night. They've got moving towers, fitted with swinging rams. Huge trunks of wood with solid iron heads! Archers posted at the tops of those tall towers are picking off our defenders on the battlements.

'Their commander is called Hannibal, son of Gisco. He's obsessed; they say he descends from that Hamilcar who died immolating himself on the altar of Himera seventy years ago, when you Syracusans wiped out the Carthaginian army with the help of the Acragantines. He has sworn to vindicate his forefather, they say, and he will stop at nothing to get revenge.

'We've managed to hold out for three days running, but the only thing that is keeping us in the fight is the hope of seeing you show up with reinforcements. Why have you done nothing? The city cannot resist much longer; we are short of food and water and we've lost a great many men. We've had to put sixteen-year-old boys and sixty-year-old men on the front lines. Our women are fighting at their sides! Help us in the name of the gods, I beg of you . . . help us!'

Diocles looked away from the anguished Selinuntian messen-

ger and turned around to examine the faces of the councillors sitting in the hemicycle. 'Have you heard him? What do you decide?'

'I say we leave immediately,' said Dionysius.

'Your opinion has no importance here,' Diocles hissed. 'You are merely a low-ranking officer.'

'But those people need us, by Heracles!' snapped back Dionysius. 'They're dying; they'll be butchered if we don't get there in time.'

'That's enough!' said Diocles. 'Or I'll have you expelled.'

'The fact is,' spoke up an elderly councillor named Heloris, 'that we can make no decision before tomorrow, when a legal number of councilmen can be summoned. Why don't you let Dionysius go in the meantime?'

'Alone?' asked Diocles sarcastically.

'Give me an order,' said Dionysius, 'and before dawn I'll have five hundred men ready in fighting order. And if you give me a couple of ships I'll be inside the walls of Selinus in two days' time.'

The messenger listened anxiously to their debate: every passing moment could be decisive in his city's being saved or annihilated.

'Five hundred men,' said Diocles. 'Now you'll tell me where you're going to get five hundred men.'

'The Company,' replied Dionysius.

'The Company? I'm in charge here, not the Company!' Diocles shouted.

'Then you get them for me,' replied Dionysius coldly.

Heloris broke in again. 'I don't think it matters much where he gets them, as long as they can set off as soon as possible. Is there anyone against it?'

The councillors, who could not wait to crawl back under their covers, unanimously approved the expedition, but without allowing him to take the ships; they would be needed to transport the bulk of the troops later.

The surgeon arrived at that moment with his instruments in hand.

'Take care of this man,' said Dionysius, and left without

waiting for Diocles's orders. He soon reached his friend Iolaus at the guardhouse. 'We're leaving,' he said.

'When? Where for?' asked the youth, alarmed.

'At dawn, for Selinus. We're the vanguard. The others will arrive with the fleet. I need five hundred men and they must all be members of the Company. Spread the word, immediately. I want them here, fully armed, with enough rations for five days. And an extra horse every three men. Within two hours, at the most.'

'We'll never pull that off! You know the Company holds you in great esteem, but . . .'

'You tell them that now is the time to prove it. Move.'

'As you wish,' replied Iolaus. He whistled, and was answered by whinnying and the pounding of hooves. Iolaus jumped on to his horse and sped off into the darkness.

*

On the fourth day, one of the battering rams managed to open a breach in the walls of Selinus. The Campanian mercenaries hired by the Carthaginians rushed through the gap, driven by the desire to stand out in their commander's eyes, but above all by their greed, since he had promised them the sack of the city.

The Selinuntians crowded around the breach to defend it, walling out the attackers with their shields and their chests. They succeeded in driving back their assailants and slew a great number of them; the rest of the barbarian troops made a disorderly retreat, trampling the bodies of their fellow soldiers.

The next day, Hannibal gave orders to remove the rubble and had protective roofing built so that his men could work to clear a passage. From up high on the assault towers, his archers continued to keep the defenders in their marks, forcing them away from the breach.

On the sixth day, the passage was clear; the rams further widened the gap, opening the way for the assault infantry of Libyan, Iberian and Campanian mercenaries, who poured into the city, howling fearsome war cries.

The Selinuntians were expecting them; they had worked all night to erect barricades at the entrances to each of their streets, isolating the districts behind them. From these shelters they counter-attacked ceaselessly, pushing back the enemy and killing off as many as they could. But although their valour was beyond any imagining, their strength was waning with every passing hour. The strain of building the barricades, their lack of sleep and the exertion of endless battle made them a poor match for the fresh hordes of rested enemy troops.

On the seventh day, the rams opened a second breach at another point of the walls, and the attackers flooded through, raising cries so loud that the city's defenders felt the blood freeze in their veins. The second wave surged over the barricades like a river in full destroys a fragile bank. The obstacles were overrun and the Selinuntian warriors were forced back towards the market square, where they regrouped shoulder to shoulder in a last, desperate attempt to resist.

The bravery of their women was extraordinary. They climbed to the rooftops and threw everything they could get their hands on at the enemy: roof tiles, bricks and wooden beams. Even the children realized what fate they were in for, and did the same.

In this way, the Selinuntians managed to prolong the agony of their city for one more day, in the hopes that every hour won was an hour gained. The night before, light signals had been seen on the inland mountains, and they were convinced that their rescuers would soon appear. But the next day, their last attempts at resistance were overwhelmed. Exhausted by the strain of long days of combat, the men disbanded and the battle broke up into thousands of individual clashes. Many found themselves defending the doors of their own homes, and the shrieks of terror of their sons and daughters managed incredibly to squeeze a final spasm of energy from their worn bodies. But their obstinate resistance only served to increase the rage of the barbarians who, having finally gained the upper hand, abandoned themselves to the bloodiest massacre ever seen in the history of man. They mercilessly killed even the smallest children, slashed the throats of

infants in their cradles. By that evening, many of them were proudly displaying dozens of severed hands, strung together as trophies, and spikes topped with the heads of their dead enemies.

Horror reigned. The cries and screams of the wounded and dying echoed everywhere.

But it was not over.

For two days and two nights the city was at the mercy of its pillagers. Women, girls and young boys were deliberately given over by Hannibal as prey to the violence and raping of the mobs of soldiers. What those wretches suffered was indescribable; the few who survived and were able to talk about what they had seen said that there was no prisoner who did not envy the fate of those who had died honourably with their swords in hand. There is nothing worse for a human being than to fall into the hands of another.

Selinus was destroyed two hundred and forty-two years after her founding.

Sixteen thousand people were killed.

Six thousand, nearly all women and children, were sold into slavery.

Two thousand six hundred survived by escaping through the eastern gate, because the barbarians were so glutted by their pillaging that they were oblivious of their flight.

Dionysius, at the head of a squad of fifty horsemen, met up with the straggling column in the dead of night. He was about an hour ahead of the rest of his contingent, while the bulk of the Syracusan troops would be landing at the mouth of the Hypsas river the following day.

Too late.

At the sight of the horsemen, the surviving warriors warily circled around the women and children, fearing that they had fallen into an ambush and that death had spared them only to reserve an even more bitter end. But when they heard them speaking Greek, they dropped their shields to the ground and fell to their knees sobbing. They had marched that far driven on by the sheer force of despair and now, finally saved, they were

overcome by their memories of the disaster. The butchery, assaults and atrocities they had seen washed over them like the waves of a stormy sea.

Dionysius dismounted and inspected those sorry warriors. In the light of his torch, he could see that their shields and helmets were badly dented. The men were spattered with blood, dirt and sweat, their eyes were bloodshot with weeping and fatigue. They all wore the same haunted expression; more ghosts than men. 'Which of you is the most highly ranked officer?' he asked.

A man of about forty stepped forward. 'Me. I am a battalion commander, my name is Eupites. Who are you?'

'We are Syracusans,' was the reply.

'What took you so long? Our city has been destroyed—'

Dionysius raised his hand to interrupt him. 'If it had been up to me, our army would have arrived two days ago. But a people's assembly had to be called in Syracuse, and once they had come to a decision, our commanders had to discuss what line of action to take. I left alone, with this vanguard, as soon as your messenger reached us with the news that the city was about to fall. You're not out of danger yet; we must get you to Acragas before the barbarians set off in pursuit. Bring forth your wounded now; I'll have litters prepared for those who can't walk. Line up the women and children in the middle, the warriors at the fore and rear. We'll guard the sides.'

'Wait,' said Eupites.

'What is it?'

'Your name.'

'Dionysius.'

'Listen to me, Dionysius. We are grateful to you for being the first to come to our aid. We are humiliated and ashamed of the state we are in, but there is something I must tell you.'

As he spoke, the other Selinuntian warriors had picked up their shields and were crowding around him, their shoulders stiff and their hands gripping their spears.

'As soon as we have garnered our strength, we will return to rebuild our houses and our city, and if anyone, whoever he may

be, should ever want to wage war against the Carthaginians, we will be ready to march with him. Revenge is our only reason for living.'

Dionysius raised his torch to illuminate the man's face and his eyes. He saw more hate there than he had ever seen in the expression of any human being. He passed the torch under the faces of the others; in each one of them he saw the same fierce determination. 'I'll remember that,' he said.

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Dionysius sent a couple of men to signal to the rest of his contingent that they should turn back, for there was nothing more to be done for Selinus. They then resumed their march and walked the whole night long until they came upon a group of villages where they found some food. As the exhausted refugees stretched out under the trees of an olive grove, Dionysius rode back some distance to make sure they weren't being followed. It was then that his attention was attracted by a splash of white in the middle of a field. He spurred on his horse and went closer. A girl was lying there, apparently lifeless, on the grass. Dionysius dismounted, raised her head and brought his flask to her lips. She seemed no older than sixteen. Her face was so smoke-blackened that he could barely make out her features. Except for her eyes: when she opened them, they shone with an amber light. She must have collapsed during the night-time march without anyone noticing. Who could say how many of those poor wretches had yielded to fatigue?

'What's your name?' he asked.

The girl took a sip of water and said: 'You think I tell my name to just anyone who happens to come along?'

'Just anyone; me! You dolt, I'm the one who's saved your life. The mongrels would have started in on you in no time. Come on, get up. I'll take you back to the others.'

The girl struggled to her feet. 'Get on that horse with you? I wouldn't dream of it.'

'Stay here then. And when the Campanian mercenaries catch

up with you, they'll make you wish you'd been a little less stubborn.'

'My name is Arete. Help me up.'

Dionysius helped her on to his horse and jumped on behind her, spurring him into a trot. 'Do you have family among the refugees?'

'No,' replied Arete. 'My family are all . . . gone.' She spoke in an absent tone, as if she were referring to someone she didn't know.

Dionysius fell silent. He handed her his flask again. She drank, then spilled a little water on to her hands and washed her face, drying it with the hem of her dress.

A youth on horseback rode by at a clip, then pulled up short. Light eyes, balding at the temples. His receding hairline and well-trimmed beard made him look older than his years. He gave the girl a look over and then turned to Dionysius. 'So here you are!' he exclaimed. 'You could have said something. We thought you'd vanished into thin air.'

'Everything's all right, Philistus,' replied Dionysius. 'I found this girl who had fallen by the wayside. Go back to the village and fetch some food for her. She probably hasn't eaten anything for days. She's skin and bones.'

The girl glared at him and Dionysius was struck by the beauty of her dirt-streaked face and her lovely amber eyes, framed by long dark lashes. The horrors she had lived through had left her weary and bewildered, but she was still quite graceful, her fingers were long and slender and her hair preserved its violet highlights and its scent. After a while, Dionysius felt her adolescent's body shaking with sobs. She was weeping in silence.

'Cry,' he said. 'It will help you to get over the memories. But try not to dwell on them. Your pain will not bring the loved ones you've lost back to life.'

She said nothing, but Dionysius felt her leaning her head back on to his shoulder in a kind of grievous abandon.

Arete started as they came into view of the villages where the other refugees were eating and resting.

Dionysius slipped his hands under her arms and lifted her, setting her down effortlessly as if she were a feather. 'They are giving out food down there,' he said. 'Go now, before it's all gone.' But the girl did not move, and he gestured to Philistus to bring her something as he had asked.

He arrived with a piece of bread and a slice of sheep's cheese and handed them to the girl, who began to eat. She must have been starving.

And yet, as soon as she had swallowed a mouthful, her attention was drawn to a child who sat alone crying under an olive tree. She went over and offered him the bread. 'Are you hungry?' she asked. 'Have some of this.'

But the little boy shook his head and continued to weep his heart out. He covered his face with his hands as if he could not bear to see such a horrible world.

A group of refugees who had lagged behind the others appeared. One of them particularly struck Arete: a young warrior struggled forward under the weight of an emaciated old man who must have been his father; with his other hand he pulled along a child of seven or eight who stumbled behind him, whimpering.

Arete drew closer to the little boy under the olive tree and pointed to the group of three. 'Look at them, over there. Don't you think they look like Aeneas with his father Anchises and his little son Iulus?'

The boy stopped crying to take a look at the youth, the old man and the child who were just then walking in front of him.

'Do you know the story of Aeneas? Have something to eat, come on, I'll tell you the story . . .' she began. 'Aeneas, the Trojan prince, remained alone to defend the walls of his city after the death of Hector. But Troy fell as he slept, just like all the others. He had no choice but to go into exile. Someone must have taken note of him just then, as he was leaving his city, and we shall always remember him thus: leading a child by the hand and carrying an old man, paralysed, on his back. A defeated man forced to flee with the only treasure left to him: his hope.

'And so Aeneas has come to symbolize the refugee, for

thousands, millions of people who have shared in his fate, under every sky, in every land, among peoples whose existence he could have never even imagined . . .'

The little boy seemed to calm as he listened to her words, and he began reluctantly to chew a bit of bread. Arete continued her story, as though she were thinking out loud: 'Camped out in the dust, or in the mud, fleeing on their carts, with their asses and oxen, refugees like these are the very image of Aeneas, who lives still and will live in eternity. Troy burns, burns now and for ever . . .'

'Heavy going for such a little boy, wouldn't you say?' Dionysius's voice rang behind her.

'You're right,' replied Arete without turning. 'I guess I was talking to myself. I'm so tired I don't know what I'm saying.'

'What you said was beautiful,' replied Dionysius. 'Heartbreaking. I cannot resign myself to this disgrace. I can't bear it. I'm ashamed of my fellow citizens, who lost precious time in useless discussions, in endless tirades, while you were fighting against such cruel enemies and trusting in our help until the very end. Seventy years ago, when Himera was besieged by the Carthaginians, just one man was in charge in Syracuse. Our army marched to Himera in three days and three nights and defeated the enemy in a memorable battle. That same day the Athenians defeated the Persians at Salamina.'

'That man was a tyrant,' objected Arete.

'That man was a man!' roared Dionysius. 'And he did what had to be done.'

He strode off, and Arete watched as he stopped to give orders to his comrades. He mustered the Selinuntian warriors and urged them not to lose heart and to continue their march.

The refugees hadn't rested for more than an hour when they rose to their feet, collected their things and resumed their procession. Many of them had lost their sandals and they stumbled over the stones on their path, leaving bloody footsteps in their wake. What kept them going? Dionysius knew, and that was why he had convinced them to persevere in their journey: he knew that

no one is stronger than a man who no longer has anything to lose.

They went on for hours, stopping only to drink when they found a spring, or to pick some green fruit along the road to calm their hunger pangs. The children no longer even had the strength to cry, but they gave a show of incredible courage; they took example from their parents and companions and trudged along, desperate not to cut a sorry figure.

It wasn't until evening of the next day that aid arrived: carts drawn by oxen, donkeys and mules, loaded down with abundant provisions. The old and the invalid, the women and the children were helped to climb on to the carts, and the warriors were able to unburden themselves of their shields.

After three more days of journeying, they arrived within sight of Acragas as dusk was descending.

The magnificent city, illuminated by the setting sun, seemed a vision of wonder. Built up high on a hill, circled by a mighty ring of walls ten stadia long, she proudly displayed multicoloured temples, statues and monuments. Acragas's city sanctuary stood up at the very top of the acropolis, its gilded acroteria shining like gems.

A trumpet blared loud and long through the valley and the gates opened. The refugees filed between the monuments of the necropolis and made their way towards the western gate. They entered the city amidst a stunned, silent throng. The signs of the disaster they had survived were evident: thin and wasted they were, with wounds, bruises and burns covering their bodies, filthy, ripped clothing, bleeding feet, hair clotted with blood and dust. As they proceeded through the most beautiful city that had ever been built in the West, emotion coursed through the surrounding crowd and many of them could not hold back their tears at such a miserable sight. Those unfortunates were the living proof of the vicious cruelty of their enemies.

Aware of the devastating effect that the sight of the refugees had had on the townspeople, the city authorities ordered that they

be brought to the market square, near the big artificial pond, so their wounds could be seen to. There they were given food, water and clean clothing; lots were drawn using shards of pottery with numbers scratched on to them so each of the survivors would be assigned a family with which to stay until homes could be found.

Dionysius approached Arete and said: 'You'll be safe here. This city is rich and powerful; her walls are the strongest of all Sicily. I have a small house here myself, with an almond grove and a vegetable garden. I would be honoured if you and the boy accepted my hospitality.'

'Don't you want to wait until the lots have been drawn?' asked Arete.

'I never wait,' replied Dionysius. 'Destiny is blind, but I never close my eyes completely, not even when I'm sleeping. Will you accept?'

Arete smiled. 'Which way is it?' she asked.

'This way. Follow me.' Dionysius set off, leading his horse by its reins. But just then they heard a shout: '*Krisse!*' A woman ran towards them, calling out that name.

The child raised his head, shook free of Arete's hand and ran towards that voice, shouting 'Mama!' They embraced in the middle of the square, under the moved gazes of the onlookers.

'He's not the first,' said Dionysius. 'Other children have found fathers or mothers who they had imagined dead. Husbands have found their wives, brothers their sisters. Their joy is so great it wipes out the thought of all they have lost.'

'I'm a little sorry,' said Arete. 'I was growing so fond of him. So now you want me in your house alone? I don't know if I can trust you.'

'Of course you can trust me,' replied Dionysius. 'You're too skinny for my teeth.'

Arete shot a peeved look at him, but Dionysius's teasing smile dispelled any feelings of irritation. She'd been charmed, all right, as much by his looks as by his personality: he was taller than average, with dark hair and eyes as black and shiny as the sea at night. His sun-bronzed skin was stretched over the powerful

muscles of a fighter, shot through with turgid blue veins on his arms and the backs of his hands.

He had led her fellow townspeople to salvation; he'd been the first to come to their aid and perhaps Selinus would not have fallen had he had his way.

Selinus . . . the name sounded sweet even in the extreme bitterness of her exile, in the loss of everything she had imagined belonged to her and could not be taken away: her home, her family, the childhood games she had so recently set aside, the girlfriends with whom she would go to the temples on the acropolis, bringing gifts to the gods for the prosperity of her city and her people. She remembered the big market square full of people and of goods to sell, the processions, the walks through the fields, the river bank where she'd go with her friends to do the washing and hang the linens in the sun so they'd absorb the scent of the wind, fragrant with poppies and wheat.

'What could smell sweeter than a field of wheat in flower?' she mused as they climbed upwards towards the high part of the city.

'That's silly,' replied Dionysius. 'Wheat doesn't flower.'

'Of course it does, when it's still green, in May. The flowers are really tiny, a milky white colour, inside the head. But their scent is so sweet that it mixes in with the smell of spring itself. You know when people say "it smells like spring" but the roses haven't bloomed yet, and the violets have withered? That's what wheat blossoms smell like . . .'

Dionysius looked at her closely, with a touch of tenderness. 'You know a lot of things, girl . . .'

'You can call me Arete.'

'Arete . . . where did you learn them?'

'Looking around. I've never as now understood the value of the treasures that surround us and that we don't notice. Like the wheat flowers . . . understand?'

'I think so. Are you tired?'

'I could lie down on these cobblestones and fall into the deepest sleep.'

'Better go inside, then. That's my house down there.'

Dionysius tied his horse to a ring on the wall, opened a wooden gate and entered a little courtyard shaded by an almond tree and a blooming pomegranate. He took a key from under a stone and opened the door. It was very simple and plain inside: a table with a couple of chairs, a bench along one wall, a sink and a clay water jug on the other. At the end of the room, opposite the entrance, was a wooden stair that led to a second floor. She lay down in the only bedroom and he covered her with a light blanket. Arete fell asleep almost instantly and Dionysius stayed to watch her for a little while. A neighing startled him and he went back downstairs to take care of his horse.