

In the city of Ember, the sky was always dark. The only light came from great flood lamps mounted on the buildings and at the tops of poles in the middle of the larger squares. When the lights were on, they cast a yellowish glow over the streets; people walking by threw long shadows that shortened and then stretched out again. When the lights were off, as they were between nine at night and six in the morning, the city was so dark that people might as well have been wearing blindfolds. Sometimes darkness fell in the middle of the day. The city of Ember was old, and everything in it, including the power lines, was in need of repair. So now and then the lights would flicker and go out. These were terrible moments for the people of Ember. As they came to a halt in the middle of the street or stood stock-still in their houses, afraid to move in the utter blackness, they were reminded of something they preferred not to think about: that someday the lights of the city might go out and never come back on. But most of the time life proceeded as it always had. Grown people did their work, and younger people, until they reached the age of twelve, went to school. On the last day of their final year, which was called Assignment Day, they were given jobs to do. The graduating students occupied Room 8 of the Ember School. On Assignment Day of the year 241, this classroom, usually noisy first thing in the morning, was completely silent. All twenty-four students sat upright and still at the desks they had grown too big for. They were waiting. The desks were arranged in four rows of six, one behind the other. In the last row sat a slender girl named Lina Mayfleet. She was winding a strand of her long, dark hair around her finger, winding and unwinding it again and again. Sometimes she plucked at a thread on her ragged cape or bent over to pull on her socks, which were loose and tended to slide down around her ankles. One of her feet tapped the floor softly. In the second row was a boy named Doon Harrow. He sat with his shoulders hunched, his eyes squeezed shut in concentration, and his hands clasped tightly together. His hair looked rumpled, as if he hadn't combed it for a while. He had dark, thick eyebrows, which made him look serious at the best of times and, when he was anxious or angry, came together to form a straight line across his forehead. His brown corduroy jacket was so old that its ridges had flattened out. Both the girl and the boy were making urgent wishes. Doon's wish was very specific. He repeated it over and over again, his lips moving slightly, as if he could make it come true by saying it a thousand times. Lina was making her wish in pictures rather than in words. In her mind's eye, she saw herself running through the streets of the city in a red jacket. She made this picture as bright and real as she could. Lina looked up and gazed around the schoolroom. She said a silent goodbye to everything that had been familiar for so long. Goodbye to the map of the city of Ember in its scarred wooden frame and the cabinet whose shelves held The Book of Numbers, The Book of Letters, and The Book of the City of Ember. Goodbye to the cabinet drawers labeled "New Paper" and "Old Paper." Goodbye to the three electric lights in the ceiling that seemed always, no matter where you sat, to cast the shadow of your head over the page you were writing on. And goodbye to their teacher, Miss Thorn, who had finished her Last Day of School speech, wishing them luck in the lives they were about to begin. Now, having run out of things to say, she was standing at her desk with her frayed shawl clasped around her shoulders. And still the mayor, the guest of honor, had not arrived. Someone's foot scraped back and forth on the floor. Miss Thorn sighed. Then the door rattled open, and the mayor walked in. He looked annoyed, as though they were the ones who were late. "Welcome, Mayor Cole," said Miss Thorn. She held out her hand to him. The mayor made his mouth into a smile. "Miss Thorn," he said, enfolding her hand. "Greetings. Another year." The mayor was a vast, heavy man, so big in the middle that his arms looked small and dangling. In one hand he held a little cloth bag. He lumbered to the front of the room and faced the students. His gray, drooping face appeared to be made of something stiffer than ordinary skin; it rarely moved except for making the smile that was on it now. "Young people of the Highest Class," the mayor began. He

stopped and scanned the room for several moments; his eyes seemed to look out from far back inside his head. He nodded slowly. "Assignment Day now, isn't it? Yes. First we get our education. Then we serve our city." Again his eyes moved back and forth along the rows of students, and again he nodded, as if someone had confirmed what he'd said. He put the little bag on Miss Thorn's desk and rested his hand on it. "What will that service be, eh? Perhaps you're wondering." He did his smile again, and his heavy cheeks folded like drapes. Lina's hands were cold. She wrapped her cape around her and pressed her hands between her knees. Please hurry, Mr. Mayor, she said silently. Please just let us choose and get it over with. Doon, in his mind, was saying the same thing, only he didn't say please. "Something to remember," the mayor said, holding up one finger. "Job you draw today is for three years. Then, Evaluation. Are you good at your job? Fine. You may keep it. Are you unsatisfactory? Is there a greater need elsewhere? You will be re-assigned. It is extremely important," he said, jabbing his finger at the class, "for all...work...of Ember...to be done. To be properly done." He picked up the bag and pulled open the drawstring. "So. Let us begin. Simple procedure. Come up one at a time. Reach into this bag. Take one slip of paper. Read it out loud." He smiled and nodded. The flesh under his chin bulged in and out. "Who cares to be first?" No one moved. Lina stared down at the top of her desk. There was a long silence. Then Lizzie Bisco, one of Lina's best friends, sprang to her feet. "I would like to be first," she said in her breathless high voice. "Good. Walk forward." Lizzie went to stand before the mayor. Because of her orange hair, she looked like a bright spark next to him. "Now choose." The mayor held out the bag with one hand and put the other behind his back, as if to show he would not interfere. Lizzie reached into the bag and withdrew a tightly folded square of paper. She unfolded it carefully. Lina couldn't see the look on Lizzie's face, but she could hear the disappointment in her voice as she read out loud: "Supply Depot clerk." "Very good," said the mayor. "A vital job." Lizzie trudged back to her desk. Lina smiled at her, but Lizzie made a sour face. Supply Depot clerk wasn't a bad job, but it was a dull one. The Supply Depot clerks sat behind a long counter, took orders from the storekeepers of Ember, and sent the carriers down to bring up what was wanted from the vast network of storerooms beneath Ember's streets. The storerooms held supplies of every kind—canned food, clothes, furniture, blankets, light bulbs, medicine, pots and pans, reams of paper, soap, more light bulbs—everything the people of Ember could possibly need. The clerks sat at their ledger books all day, recording the orders that came in and the goods that went out. Lizzie didn't like to sit still; she would have been better suited to something else, Lina thought—messenger, maybe, the job Lina wanted for herself. Messengers ran through the city all day, going everywhere, seeing everything. "Next," said the mayor. This time two people stood up at once, Orly Gordon and Chet Noam. Orly quickly sat down again, and Chet approached the mayor. "Choose, young man," the mayor said. Chet chose. He unfolded his scrap of paper. "Electrician's helper," he read, and his wide face broke into a smile. Lina heard someone take a quick breath. She looked over to see Doon pressing a hand against his mouth. You never knew, each year, exactly which jobs would be offered. Some years there were several good jobs, like greenhouse helper, timekeeper's assistant, or messenger, and no bad jobs at all. Other years, jobs like Pipeworks laborer, trash sifter, and mold scraper were mixed in. But there would always be at least one or two jobs for electrician's helper. Fixing the electricity was the most important job in Ember, and more people worked at it than at anything else. Orly Gordon was next. She got the job of building repair assistant, which was a good job for Orly. She was a strong girl and liked hard work. Vindie Chance was made a greenhouse helper. She gave Lina a big grin as she went back to her seat. She'll get to work with Clary, Lina thought. Lucky. So far no one had picked a really bad job. Perhaps this time there would be no bad jobs at all. The idea gave her courage. Besides, she had reached the point where the suspense was giving her a stomach ache. So as Vindie sat

down—even before the mayor could say “Next”—she stood up and stepped forward. The little bag was made of faded green material, gathered at the top with a black string. Lina hesitated a moment, then put her hand inside and fingered the bits of paper. Feeling as if she were stepping off a high building, she picked one. She unfolded it. The words were written in black ink, in small careful printing. PIPEWORKS LABORER, they said. She stared at them. “Out loud, please,” the mayor said. “Pipeworks laborer,” Lina said in a choked whisper. “Louder,” said the mayor. “Pipeworks laborer,” Lina said again, her voice loud and cracked. There was a sigh of sympathy from the class. Keeping her eyes on the floor, Lina went back to her desk and sat down. Pipeworks laborers worked below the storerooms in the deep labyrinth of tunnels that contained Ember’s water and sewer pipes. They spent their days stopping up leaks and replacing pipe joints. It was wet, cold work; it could even be dangerous. A swift underground river ran through the Pipeworks, and every now and then someone fell into it and was lost. People were lost occasionally in the tunnels, too, if they strayed too far. Lina stared miserably down at a letter B someone had scratched into her desktop long ago. Almost anything would have been better than Pipeworks laborer. Greenhouse helper had been her second choice. She imagined with longing the warm air and earthy smell of the greenhouse, where she could have worked with Clary, the greenhouse manager, someone she’d known all her life. She would have been content as a doctor’s assistant, too, binding up cuts and bones. Even street-sweeper or cart-puller would have been better. At least then she could have stayed above ground, with space and people around her. She thought going down into the Pipeworks must be like being buried alive. One by one, the other students chose their jobs. None of them got such a wretched job as hers. Finally the last person rose from his chair and walked forward. It was Doon. His dark eyebrows were drawn together in a frown of concentration. His hands, Lina saw, were clenched into fists at his sides. Doon reached into the bag and took out the last scrap of paper. He paused a minute, pressing it tightly in his hand. “Go on,” said the mayor. “Read.” Unfolding the paper, Doon read: “Messenger.” He scowled, crumpled the paper, and dashed it to the floor. Lina gasped; the whole class rustled in surprise. Why would anyone be angry to get the job of messenger? “Bad behavior!” cried the mayor. His eyes bulged and his face darkened. “Go to your seat immediately.” Doon kicked the crumpled paper into a corner. Then he stalked back to his desk and flung himself down. The mayor took a short breath and blinked furiously. “Disgraceful,” he said, glaring at Doon. “A childish display of temper! Students should be glad to work for their city. Ember will prosper if all...citizens...do...their...best.” He held up a stern finger as he said this and moved his eyes slowly from one face to the next. Suddenly Doon spoke up. “But Ember is not prospering!” he cried. “Everything is getting worse and worse!” “Silence!” cried the mayor. “The blackouts!” cried Doon. He jumped from his seat. “The lights go out all the time now! And the shortages, there’s shortages of everything! If no one does anything about it, something terrible is going to happen!” Lina listened with a pounding heart. What was wrong with Doon? Why was he so upset? He was taking things too seriously, as he always did. Miss Thorn strode to Doon and put a hand on his shoulder. “Sit down now,” she said quietly. But Doon remained standing. The mayor glared. For a few moments he said nothing. Then he smiled, showing a neat row of gray teeth. “Miss Thorn,” he said. “Who might this young man be?” “I am Doon Harrow,” said Doon. “I will remember you,” said the mayor. He gave Doon a long look, then turned to the class and smiled his smile again. “Congratulations to all,” he said. “Welcome to Ember’s work force. Miss Thorn. Class. Thank you.” The mayor shook hands with Miss Thorn and departed. The students gathered their coats and caps and filed out of the classroom. Lina walked down the Wide Hallway with Lizzie, who said, “Poor you! I thought I picked a bad one, but you got the worst. I feel lucky compared to you.” Once they were out the door, Lizzie said goodbye and scurried away, as if Lina’s bad luck were a disease she

might catch. Lina stood on the steps for a moment and gazed across Harken Square, where people walked briskly, bundled up cozily in their coats and scarves, or talked to one another in the pools of light beneath the great streetlamps. A boy in a red messenger's jacket ran toward the Gathering Hall. On Otterwill Street, a man pulled a cart filled with sacks of potatoes. And in the buildings all around the square, rows of lighted windows shone bright yellow and deep gold. Lina sighed. This was where she wanted to be, up here where everything happened, not down underground. Someone tapped her on the shoulder. Startled, she turned and saw Doon behind her. His thin face looked pale. "Will you trade with me?" he asked. "Trade?" "Trade jobs. I don't want to waste my time being a messenger. I want to help save the city, not run around carrying gossip." Lina gaped at him. "You'd rather be in the Pipeworks?" "Electrician's helper is what I wanted," Doon said. "But Chet won't trade, of course. Pipeworks is second best." "But why?" "Because the generator is in the Pipeworks," said Doon. Lina knew about the generator, of course. In some mysterious way, it turned the running of the river into power for the city. You could feel its deep rumble when you stood in Plummer Square. "I need to see the generator," Doon said. "I have...I have ideas about it." He thrust his hands into his pockets. "So," he said, "will you trade?" "Yes!" cried Lina. "Messenger is the job I want most!" And not a useless job at all, in her opinion. People couldn't be expected to trudge halfway across the city every time they wanted to communicate with someone. Messengers connected everyone to everyone else. Anyway, whether it was important or not, the job of messenger just happened to be perfect for Lina. She loved to run. She could run forever. And she loved exploring every nook and cranny of the city, which was what a messenger got to do. "All right then," said Doon. He handed her his crumpled piece of paper, which he must have retrieved from the floor. Lina reached into her pocket, pulled out her slip of paper, and handed it to him. "Thank you," he said. "You're welcome," said Lina. Happiness sprang up in her, and happiness always made her want to run. She took the steps three at a time and sped down Broad Street toward home.

CHAPTER 2 A Message to the Mayor

Lina often took different routes between school and home. Sometimes, just for variety, she'd go all the way around Sparkswallow Square, or way up by the shoe repair shops on Liverie Street. But today she took the shortest route because she was eager to get home and tell her news. She ran fast and easily through the streets of Ember. Every corner, every alley, every building was familiar to her. She always knew where she was, though most streets looked more or less the same. All of them were lined with old two-story stone buildings, the wood of their window frames and doors long unpainted. On the street level were shops; above the shops were the apartments where people lived. Every building, at the place where the wall met the roof, was equipped with a row of floodlights—big cone-shaped lamps that cast a strong yellow glare. Stone walls, lighted windows, lumpy, muffled shapes of people—Lina flew by them. Her slender legs felt immensely strong, like the wood of a bow that flexes and springs. She darted around obstacles—broken furniture left for the trash heaps or for scavengers, stoves and refrigerators that were past repair, peddlers sitting on the pavement with their wares spread out around them. She leapt over cracks and potholes. When she came to Hafter Street, she slowed a little. This street was deep in shadow. Four of its streetlamps were out and had not been fixed. For a second, Lina thought of the rumor she'd heard about light bulbs: that some kinds were completely gone. She was used to shortages of things—everyone was—but not of light bulbs! If the bulbs for the streetlamps ran out, the only lights would be inside the buildings. What would happen then? How could people find their way through the streets in the dark? Somewhere inside her, a black worm of dread stirred. She thought about Doon's outburst in class. Could things really be as bad as he said? She didn't want to believe it. She pushed the thought away. As she turned onto Budloe Street, she sped up again. She passed a line of customers waiting to get into the vegetable market, their

shopping bags draped over their arms. At the corner of Oliver Street, she dodged a group of washers trudging along with bags of laundry, and some movers carrying away a broken table. She passed a street-sweeper shoving dust around with his broom. I am so lucky, she thought, to have the job I want. And because of Doon Harrow, of all people. When they were younger, Lina and Doon had been friends. Together they had explored the back alleys and dimly lit edges of the city. But in their fourth year of school, they had begun to grow apart. It started one day during the hour of free time, when the children in their class were playing on the front steps of the school. "I can go down three steps at a time," someone would boast. "I can hop down on one foot!" someone else would say. The others would chime in. "I can do a handstand against the pillar!" "I can leapfrog over the trash can!" As soon as one child did something, all the rest would do it, too, to prove they could. Lina could do it all, even when the dares got wilder. She yelled out the wildest one of all: "I can climb the light pole!" For a second everyone just stared at her. But Lina dashed across the street, took off her shoes and socks, and wrapped herself around the cold metal of the pole. Pushing with her bare feet, she inched upward. She didn't get very far before she lost her grip and fell back down. The children laughed, and so did she. "I didn't say I'd climb to the top," she explained. "I just said I'd climb it." The others swarmed forward to try. Lizzie wouldn't take off her socks—her feet were too cold, she said—so she kept sliding back. Fordy Penn wasn't strong enough to get more than a foot off the ground. Next came Doon. He took his shoes and socks off and placed them neatly at the foot of the pole. Then he announced, in his serious way, "I'm going to the top." He clasped the pole and started upward, pushing with his feet, his knees sticking out to the sides. He pulled himself upward, pushed again—he was higher now than Lina had been—but suddenly his hands slid and he came plummeting down. He landed on his bottom with his legs poking up in the air. Lina laughed. She shouldn't have; he might have been hurt. But he looked so funny that she couldn't help it. He wasn't hurt. He could have jumped up, grinned, and walked away. But Doon didn't take things lightly. When he heard Lina and the others laughing, his face darkened. His temper rose in him like hot water. "Don't you dare laugh at me," he said to Lina. "I did better than you did! That was a stupid idea anyway, a stupid, stupid idea to climb that pole...." And as he was shouting, red in the face, their teacher, Mrs. Polster, came out onto the steps and saw him. She took him by the shirt collar to the school director's office, where he got a scolding he didn't think he deserved. After that day, Lina and Doon barely looked at each other when they passed in the hallway. At first it was because they were fuming about what had happened. Doon didn't like being laughed at; Lina didn't like being shouted at. After a while the memory of the light-pole incident faded, but by then they had got out of the habit of friendship. By the time they were twelve, they knew each other only as classmates. Lina was friends with Vindie Chance, Orly Gordon, and most of all, red-haired Lizzie Bisco, who could run almost as fast as Lina and could talk three times faster.