

The Giver

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For all the children
To whom we entrust the future

The Giver

1

It was almost December, and Jonas was beginning to be frightened. No. Wrong word, Jonas thought. Frightened meant that deep, sickening feeling of something terrible about to happen. Frightened was the way he had felt a year ago when an unidentified aircraft had overflowed the community twice. He had seen it both times. Squinting toward the sky, he had seen the sleek jet, almost a blur at its high speed, go past, and a second later heard the blast of sound that followed. Then one more time, a moment later, from the opposite direction, the same plane.

At first, he had been only fascinated. He had never seen aircraft so close, for it was against the rules for Pilots to fly over the community. Occasionally, when supplies were delivered by cargo planes to the landing field across the river, the children rode their bicycles to the riverbank and watched, intrigued, the unloading and then the takeoff directed to the west, always away from the community.

But the aircraft a year ago had been different. It was not a squat, fat-bellied cargo plane but a needle-nosed single-pilot jet. Jonas, looking around anxiously, had seen others — adults as well as children — stop what they were doing and wait, confused, for an explanation of the frightening event.

Then all of the citizens had been ordered to go into the nearest building and stay there. IMMEDIATELY, the rasping voice through the speakers had said. LEAVE YOUR BICYCLES WHERE THEY ARE.

Instantly, obediently, Jonas had dropped his bike on its side on the path behind his family's dwelling. He had run indoors and stayed there, alone. His parents were both at work, and his little sister, Lily, was at the Childcare Center where she spent her after-school hours.

Looking through the front window, he had seen no people: none of the busy afternoon crew of Street Cleaners, Landscape Workers, and Food Delivery people who usually populated the community at that time of day. He saw only the abandoned bikes here and there on their sides; an upturned wheel on one was still revolving slowly.

He had been frightened then. The sense of his own community silent, waiting, had made his stomach churn. He had trembled.

But it had been nothing. Within minutes the speakers had crackled again, and the voice, reassuring now and less urgent, had explained that a Pilot-in-Training had misread his navigational instructions and made a wrong turn. Desperately the Pilot had been trying to make his way back before his error was noticed.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, HE WILL BE RELEASED, the voice had said, followed by silence. There was an ironic tone to that final message, as if the Speaker found it amusing; and Jonas had smiled a little, though he knew what a grim statement it had been. For a contributing citizen to be released from the community was a final decision, a terrible punishment, an overwhelming statement of failure.

Even the children were scolded if they used the term lightly at play, jeering at a teammate who missed a catch or stumbled in a race. Jonas had done it once, had shouted at his best friend, "That's it, Asher! You're released!" when Asher's clumsy error had lost a match for his team. He had been taken aside for a brief and serious talk by the coach, had hung his head with guilt and embarrassment, and apologized to Asher after the game.

Now, thinking about the feeling of fear as he pedaled home along the river path, he remembered that moment of palpable, stomach-sinking terror when the aircraft had streaked above. It was not what he was feeling now with December approaching. He searched for the right word to describe his own feeling.

Jonas was careful about language. Not like his friend, Asher, who talked too fast and mixed things up, scrambling words and phrases until they were barely recognizable and often very funny.

Jonas grinned, remembering the morning that Asher had dashed into the classroom, late as usual, arriving breathlessly in the middle of the chanting of the morning anthem. When the class took their seats at the conclusion of the patriotic hymn, Asher remained standing to make his public apology as was required.

"I apologize for inconveniencing my learning community." Asher ran through the standard apology phrase rapidly, still catching his breath. The Instructor and class waited patiently for his explanation. The students had all been grinning, because they had listened to Asher's explanations so many times before.

"I left home at the correct time but when I was riding

along near the hatchery, the crew was separating some salmon. I guess I just got distraught, watching them.

"I apologize to my classmates," Asher concluded. He smoothed his rumpled tunic and sat down.

"We accept your apology, Asher." The class recited the standard response in unison. Many of the students were biting their lips to keep from laughing.

"I accept your apology, Asher," the Instructor said. He was smiling. "And I thank you, because once again you have provided an opportunity for a lesson in language. 'Distraught' is too strong an adjective to describe salmon-viewing." He turned and wrote "distraught" on the instructional board. Beside it he wrote "distracted."

Jonas, nearing his home now, smiled at the recollection. Thinking, still, as he wheeled his bike into its narrow port beside the door, he realized that frightened was the wrong word to describe his feelings, now that December was almost here. It was too strong an adjective.

He had waited a long time for this special December. Now that it was almost upon him, he wasn't frightened, but he was . . . eager, he decided. He was eager for it to come. And he was excited, certainly. All of the Elevens were excited about the event that would be coming so soon.

But there was a little shudder of nervousness when he thought about it, about what might happen.

Apprehensive, Jonas decided. That's what I am.

"Who wants to be the first tonight, for feelings?" Jonas's father asked, at the conclusion of their evening meal.

It was one of the rituals, the evening telling of feelings.

Sometimes Jonas and his sister, Lily, argued over turns, over who would get to go first. Their parents, of course, were part of the ritual; they, too, told their feelings each evening. But like all parents — all adults — they didn't fight and wheedle for their turn.

Nor did Jonas, tonight. His feelings were too complicated this evening. He wanted to share them, but he wasn't eager to begin the process of sifting through his own complicated emotions, even with the help that he knew his parents could give.

"You go, Lily," he said, seeing his sister, who was much younger — only a Seven — wiggling with impatience in her chair.

"I felt very angry this afternoon," Lily announced. "My Childcare group was at the play area, and we had a visiting group of Sevens, and they didn't obey the rules at *all*. One of them — a male; I don't know his name — kept going right to the front of the line for the slide, even though the rest of us were all waiting. I felt so angry at him. I made my hand into a fist, like this." She held up a clenched fist and the rest of the family smiled at her small defiant gesture.

"Why do you think the visitors didn't obey the rules?" Mother asked.

Lily considered, and shook her head. "I don't know. They acted like . . . like . . ."

"Animals?" Jonas suggested. He laughed.

"That's right," Lily said, laughing too. "Like animals." Neither child knew what the word meant, exactly, but it was often used to describe someone uneducated or clumsy, someone who didn't fit in.

"Where were the visitors from?" Father asked.

Lily frowned, trying to remember. "Our leader told us, when he made the welcome speech, but I can't remember. I guess I wasn't paying attention. It was from another community. They had to leave very early, and they had their midday meal on the bus."

Mother nodded. "Do you think it's possible that their rules may be different? And so they simply didn't know what your play area rules were?"

Lily shrugged, and nodded. "I suppose."

"You've visited other communities, haven't you?" Jonas asked. "My group has, often."

Lily nodded again. "When we were Sixes, we went and shared a whole school day with a group of Sixes in their community."

"How did you feel when you were there?"

Lily frowned. "I felt strange. Because their methods were different. They were learning usages that my group hadn't learned yet, so we felt stupid."

Father was listening with interest. "I'm thinking, Lily," he said, "about the boy who didn't obey the rules today. Do you think it's possible that he felt strange and stupid, being in a new place with rules that he didn't know about?"

Lily pondered that. "Yes," she said, finally.

"I feel a little sorry for him," Jonas said, "even though I don't even know him. I feel sorry for anyone who is in a place where he feels strange and stupid."

"How do you feel now, Lily?" Father asked. "Still angry?"

"I guess not," Lily decided. "I guess I feel a little sorry for him. And sorry I made a fist." She grinned.

Jonas smiled back at his sister. Lily's feelings were always straightforward, fairly simple, usually easy to resolve. He guessed that his own had been, too, when he was a Seven.

He listened politely, though not very attentively, while his father took his turn, describing a feeling of worry that he'd had that day at work: a concern about one of the newchildren who wasn't doing well. Jonas's father's title was Nurturer. He and the other Nurturers were responsible for all the physical and emotional needs of every new-child during its earliest life. It was a very important job, Jonas knew, but it wasn't one that interested him much.

"What gender is it?" Lily asked.

"Male," Father said. "He's a sweet little male with a lovely disposition. But he isn't growing as fast as he should, and he doesn't sleep soundly. We have him in the extra care section for supplementary nurturing, but the committee's beginning to talk about releasing him."

"Oh, no," Mother murmured sympathetically. "I know how sad that must make you feel."

Jonas and Lily both nodded sympathetically as well. Release of newchildren was always sad, because they hadn't had a chance to enjoy life within the community yet. And they hadn't done anything wrong.

There were only two occasions of release which were not punishment. Release of the elderly, which was a time of celebration for a life well and fully lived; and release of a newchild, which always brought a sense of what-could-we-have-done. This was especially troubling for the Nurturers, like Father, who felt they had failed somehow. But it happened very rarely.

"Well," Father said, "I'm going to keep trying. I may

ask the committee for permission to bring him here at night, if you don't mind. You know what the night-crew Nurturers are like. I think this little guy needs something extra."

"Of course," Mother said, and Jonas and Lily nodded. They had heard Father complain about the night crew before. It was a lesser job, night-crew nurturing, assigned to those who lacked the interest or skills or insight for the more vital jobs of the daytime hours. Most of the people on the night crew had not even been given spouses because they lacked, somehow, the essential capacity to connect to others, which was required for the creation of a family unit.

"Maybe we could even keep him," Lily suggested sweetly, trying to look innocent. The look was fake, Jonas knew; they all knew.

"Lily," Mother reminded her, smiling, "you know the rules."

Two children — one male, one female — to each family unit. It was written very clearly in the rules.

Lily giggled. "Well," she said, "I thought maybe just this once."

Next, Mother, who held a prominent position at the Department of Justice, talked about her feelings. Today a repeat offender had been brought before her, someone who had broken the rules before. Someone who she hoped had been adequately and fairly punished, and who had been restored to his place: to his job, his home, his family unit. To see him brought before her a second time caused her overwhelming feelings of frustration and anger. And even

guilt, that she hadn't made a difference in his life.

"I feel frightened, too, for him," she confessed. "You know that there's no third chance. The rules say that if there's a third transgression, he simply has to be released." Jonas shivered. He knew it happened. There was even a boy in his group of Elevens whose father had been released years before. No one ever mentioned it; the disgrace was unspeakable. It was hard to imagine.

Lily stood up and went to her mother. She stroked her mother's arm.

From his place at the table, Father reached over and took her hand. Jonas reached for the other.

One by one, they comforted her. Soon she smiled, thanked them, and murmured that she felt soothed.

The ritual continued. "Jonas?" Father asked. "You're last, tonight."

Jonas sighed. This evening he almost would have preferred to keep his feelings hidden. But it was, of course, against the rules.

"I'm feeling apprehensive," he confessed, glad that the appropriate descriptive word had finally come to him.

"Why is that, son?" His father looked concerned.

"I know there's really nothing to worry about," Jonas explained, "and that every adult has been through it. I know you have, Father, and you too, Mother. But it's the Ceremony that I'm apprehensive about. It's almost December."

Lily looked up, her eyes wide. "The Ceremony of Twelve," she whispered in an awed voice. Even the smallest children — Lily's age and younger — knew that it lay in the future for each of them.

“I’m glad you told us of your feelings,” Father said.

“Lily,” Mother said, beckoning to the little girl, “Go on now and get into your nightclothes. Father and I are going to stay here and talk to Jonas for a while.”

Lily sighed, but obediently she got down from her chair.
“Privately?” she asked.

Mother nodded. “Yes,” she said, “this talk will be a private one with Jonas.”

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Jonas watched as his father poured a fresh cup of coffee. He waited.

“You know,” his father finally said, “every December was exciting to me when I was young. And it has been for you and Lily, too, I’m sure. Each December brings such changes.”

Jonas nodded. He could remember the Decembers back to when he had become, well, probably a Four. The earlier ones were lost to him. But he observed them each year, and he remembered Lily’s earliest Decembers. He remembered when his family received Lily, the day she was named, the day that she had become a One.

The Ceremony for the Ones was always noisy and fun. Each December, all the newchildren born in the previous year turned One. One at a time — there were always fifty in each year’s group, if none had been released — they had been brought to the stage by the Nurturers who had cared for them since birth. Some were already walking, wobbly on their unsteady legs; others were no more than a few days old, wrapped in blankets, held by their Nurturers.

“I enjoy the Naming,” Jonas said.

His mother agreed, smiling. “The year we got Lily, we

knew, of course, that we'd receive our female, because we'd made our application and been approved. But I'd been wondering and wondering what her name would be.

"I could have sneaked a look at the list prior to the ceremony," Father confided. "The committee always makes the list in advance, and it's right there in the office at the Nurturing Center.

"As a matter of fact," he went on, "I feel a little guilty about this. But I *did* go in this afternoon and looked to see if this year's Naming list had been made yet. It was right there in the office, and I looked up number Thirty-six — that's the little guy I've been concerned about — because it occurred to me that it might enhance his nurturing if I could call him by a name. Just privately, of course, when no one else is around."

"Did you find it?" Jonas asked. He was fascinated. It didn't seem a terribly important rule, but the fact that his father had broken a rule at all awed him. He glanced at his mother, the one responsible for adherence to the rules, and was relieved that she was smiling.

His father nodded. "His name — if he makes it to the Naming without being released, of course — is to be Gabriel. So I whisper that to him when I feed him every four hours, and during exercise and playtime. If no one can hear me.

"I call him Gabe, actually," he said, and grinned.

"Gabe." Jonas tried it out. A good name, he decided.

Though Jonas had only become a Five the year that they acquired Lily and learned her name, he remembered the excitement, the conversations at home, wondering about her: how she would look, who she would be, how

she would fit into their established family unit. He remembered climbing the steps to the stage with his parents, his father by his side that year instead of with the Nurturers, since it was the year that he would be given a new-child of his own.

He remembered his mother taking the newchild, his sister, into her arms, while the document was read to the assembled family units. "Newchild Twenty-three," the Namer had read. "Lily."

He remembered his father's look of delight, and that his father had whispered, "She's one of my favorites. I was hoping for her to be the one." The crowd had clapped, and Jonas had grinned. He liked his sister's name. Lily, barely awake, had waved her small fist. Then they had stepped down to make room for the next family unit.

"When I was an Eleven," his father said now, "as you are, Jonas, I was very impatient, waiting for the Ceremony of Twelve. It's a long two days. I remember that I enjoyed the Ones, as I always do, but that I didn't pay much attention to the other ceremonies, except for my sister's. She became a Nine that year, and got her bicycle. I'd been teaching her to ride mine, even though technically I wasn't supposed to."

Jonas laughed. It was one of the few rules that was not taken very seriously and was almost *always* broken. The children all received their bicycles at Nine; they were not allowed to ride bicycles before then. But almost always, the older brothers and sisters had secretly taught the younger ones. Jonas had been thinking already about teaching Lily.

There was talk about changing the rule and giving the bicycles at an earlier age. A committee was studying

the idea. When something went to a committee for study, the people always joked about it. They said that the committee members would become Elders by the time the rule change was made.

Rules were very hard to change. Sometimes, if it was a very important rule — unlike the one governing the age for bicycles — it would have to go, eventually, to The Receiver for a decision. The Receiver was the most important Elder. Jonas had never even seen him, that he knew of; someone in a position of such importance lived and worked alone. But the committee would never bother The Receiver with a question about bicycles; they would simply fret and argue about it themselves for years, until the citizens forgot that it had ever gone to them for study.

His father continued. “So I watched and cheered when my sister, Katya, became a Nine and removed her hair ribbons and got her bicycle,” Father went on. “Then I didn’t pay much attention to the Tens and Elevens. And *finally*, at the end of the second day, which seemed to go on forever, it was my turn. It was the Ceremony of Twelve.”

Jonas shivered. He pictured his father, who must have been a shy and quiet boy, for he was a shy and quiet man, seated with his group, waiting to be called to the stage. The Ceremony of Twelve was the last of the Ceremonies. The most important.

“I remember how proud my parents looked — and my sister, too; even though she wanted to be out riding the bicycle publicly, she stopped fidgeting and was very still and attentive when my turn came.

“But to be honest, Jonas,” his father said, “for me there

was not the element of suspense that there is with your Ceremony. Because I was already fairly certain of what my Assignment was to be.”

Jonas was surprised. There was no way, really, to know in advance. It was a secret selection, made by the leaders of the community, the Committee of Elders, who took the responsibility so seriously that there were never even any jokes made about Assignments.

His mother seemed surprised, too. “How could you have known?” she asked.

His father smiled his gentle smile. “Well, it was clear to me — and my parents later confessed that it had been obvious to them, too — what my aptitude was. I had always loved the newchildren more than anything. When my friends in my age group were holding bicycle races, or building toy vehicles or bridges with their construction sets, or — ”

“All the things I do with my friends,” Jonas pointed out, and his mother nodded in agreement.

“I always participated, of course, because as children we must experience all of those things. And I studied hard in school, as you do, Jonas. But again and again, during free time, I found myself drawn to the newchildren. I spent almost all of my volunteer hours helping in the Nurturing Center. Of course the Elders knew that, from their observation.”

Jonas nodded. During the past year he had been aware of the increasing level of observation. In school, at recreation time, and during volunteer hours, he had noticed the Elders watching him and the other Elevens. He had seen them taking notes. He knew, too, that the Elders were

meeting for long hours with all of the instructors that he and the other Elevens had had during their years of school.

"So I expected it, and I was pleased, but not at all surprised, when my Assignment was announced as Nurturer," Father explained.

"Did everyone applaud, even though they weren't surprised?" Jonas asked.

"Oh, of course. They were happy for me, that my Assignment was what I wanted most. I felt very fortunate." His father smiled.

"Were any of the Elevens disappointed, your year?" Jonas asked. Unlike his father, he had no idea what his Assignment would be. But he knew that some would disappoint him. Though he respected his father's work, Nurturer would not be his wish. And he didn't envy Laborers at all.

His father thought. "No, I don't think so. Of course the Elders are so careful in their observations and selections."

"I think it's probably the most important job in our community," his mother commented.

"My friend Yoshiko was surprised by her selection as Doctor," Father said, "but she was thrilled. And let's see, there was Andrei — I remember that when we were boys he never wanted to do physical things. He spent all the recreation time he could with his construction set, and his volunteer hours were always on building sites. The Elders knew that, of course. Andrei was given the Assignment of Engineer and he was delighted."

"Andrei later designed the bridge that crosses the river to the west of town," Jonas's mother said. "It wasn't there when we were children."

"There are very rarely disappointments, Jonas. I don't think you need to worry about that," his father reassured him. "And if there are, you know there's an appeal process." But they all laughed at that — an appeal went to a committee for study.

"I worry a little about Asher's Assignment," Jonas confessed. "Asher's such *fun*. But he doesn't really have any serious interests. He makes a game out of everything."

His father chuckled. "You know," he said, "I remember when Asher was a newchild at the Nurturing Center, before he was named. He never cried. He giggled and laughed at everything. All of us on the staff enjoyed nurturing Asher."

"The Elders know Asher," his mother said. "They'll find exactly the right Assignment for him. I don't think you need to worry about him. But, Jonas, let me warn you about something that may not have occurred to you. I know I didn't think about it until after my Ceremony of Twelve."

"What's that?"

"Well, it's the last of the Ceremonies, as you know. After Twelve, age isn't important. Most of us even lose track of how old we are as time passes, though the information is in the Hall of Open Records, and we could go and look it up if we wanted to. What's important is the preparation for adult life, and the training you'll receive in your Assignment."

"I know that," Jonas said. "Everyone knows that."

"But it means," his mother went on, "that you'll move into a new group. And each of your friends will. You'll no longer be spending your time with your group of Elevens. After the Ceremony of Twelve, you'll be with your Assign-

ment group, with those in training. No more volunteer hours. No more recreation hours. So your friends will no longer be as close.”

Jonas shook his head. “Asher and I will always be friends,” he said firmly. “And there will still be school.”

“That’s true,” his father agreed. “But what your mother said is true as well. There will be changes.”

“*Good* changes, though,” his mother pointed out. “After my Ceremony of Twelve, I missed my childhood recreation. But when I entered my training for Law and Justice, I found myself with people who shared my interests. I made friends on a new level, friends of all ages.”

“Did you still play at all, after Twelve?” Jonas asked.

“Occasionally,” his mother replied. “But it didn’t seem as important to me.”

“I did,” his father said, laughing. “I still do. Every day, at the Nurturing Center, I play bounce-on-the-knee, and peek-a-boo, and hug-the-teddy.” He reached over and stroked Jonas’s neatly trimmed hair. “Fun doesn’t end when you become Twelve.”

Lily appeared, wearing her nightclothes, in the doorway. She gave an impatient sigh. “This is certainly a very *long* private conversation,” she said. “And there are certain people waiting for their comfort object.”

“Lily,” her mother said fondly, “you’re very close to being an Eight, and when you’re an Eight, your comfort object will be taken away. It will be recycled to the younger children. You should be starting to go off to sleep without it.”

But her father had already gone to the shelf and taken down the stuffed elephant which was kept there. Many of

the comfort objects, like Lily’s, were soft, stuffed, imaginary creatures. Jonas’s had been called a bear.

“Here you are, Lily-billy,” he said. “I’ll come help you remove your hair ribbons.”

Jonas and his mother rolled their eyes, yet they watched affectionately as Lily and her father headed to her sleeping-room with the stuffed elephant that had been given to her as her comfort object when she was born. His mother moved to her big desk and opened her briefcase; her work never seemed to end, even when she was at home in the evening. Jonas went to his own desk and began to sort through his school papers for the evening’s assignment. But his mind was still on December and the coming Ceremony.

Though he had been reassured by the talk with his parents, he hadn’t the slightest idea what Assignment the Elders would be selecting for his future, or how he might feel about it when the day came.

3

"Oh, look!" Lily squealed in delight. "Isn't he cute? Look how tiny he is! And he has funny eyes like yours, Jonas!" Jonas glared at her. He didn't like it that she had mentioned his eyes. He waited for his father to chastise Lily. But Father was busy unstrapping the carrying basket from the back of his bicycle. Jonas walked over to look.

It was the first thing Jonas noticed as he looked at the newchild peering up curiously from the basket. The pale eyes.

Almost every citizen in the community had dark eyes. His parents did, and Lily did, and so did all of his group members and friends. But there were a few exceptions: Jonas himself, and a female Five who he had noticed had the different, lighter eyes. No one mentioned such things; it was not a rule, but was considered rude to call attention to things that were unsettling or different about individuals. Lily, he decided, would have to learn that soon, or she would be called in for chastisement because of her insensitive chatter.

Father put his bike into its port. Then he picked up the basket and carried it into the house. Lily followed be-

hind, but she glanced back over her shoulder at Jonas and teased, "Maybe he had the same Birthmother as you."

Jonas shrugged. He followed them inside. But he had been startled by the newchild's eyes. Mirrors were rare in the community; they weren't forbidden, but there was no real need of them, and Jonas had simply never bothered to look at himself very often even when he found himself in a location where a mirror existed. Now, seeing the newchild and its expression, he was reminded that the light eyes were not only a rarity but gave the one who had them a certain look — what was it? *Depth*, he decided; as if one were looking into the clear water of the river, down to the bottom, where things might lurk which hadn't been discovered yet. He felt self-conscious, realizing that he, too, had that look.

He went to his desk, pretending not to be interested in the newchild. On the other side of the room, Mother and Lily were bending over to watch as Father unwrapped its blanket.

"What's his comfort object called?" Lily asked, picking up the stuffed creature which had been placed beside the newchild in his basket.

Father glanced at it. "Hippo," he said.

Lily giggled at the strange word. "Hippo," she repeated, and put the comfort object down again. She peered at the unwrapped newchild, who waved his arms.

"I think newchildren are so cute," Lily sighed. "I hope I get assigned to be a Birthmother."

"Lily!" Mother spoke very sharply. "Don't say that. There's very little honor in that Assignment."

"But I was talking to Natasha. You know the Ten who

lives around the corner? She does some of her volunteer hours at the Birthing Center. And she told me that the Birthmothers get wonderful food, and they have very gentle exercise periods, and most of the time they just play games and amuse themselves while they're waiting. I think I'd like that," Lily said petulantly.

"Three years," Mother told her firmly. "Three births, and that's all. After that they are Laborers for the rest of their adult lives, until the day that they enter the House of the Old. Is that what you want, Lily? Three lazy years, and then hard physical labor until you are old?"

"Well, no, I guess not," Lily acknowledged reluctantly.

Father turned the newchild onto his tummy in the basket. He sat beside it and rubbed its small back with a rhythmic motion. "Anyway, Lily-billy," he said affectionately, "the Birthmothers never even get to see newchildren. If you enjoy the little ones so much, you should hope for an Assignment as Nurturer."

"When you're an Eight and start your volunteer hours, you can try some at the Nurturing Center," Mother suggested.

"Yes, I think I will," Lily said. She knelt beside the basket. "What did you say his name is? Gabriel? Hello, Gabriel," she said in a singsong voice. Then she giggled. "Ooops," she whispered. "I think he's asleep. I guess I'd better be quiet."

Jonas turned to the school assignments on his desk. Some chance of *that*, he thought. Lily was *never* quiet. Probably she should hope for an Assignment as Speaker, so that she could sit in the office with the microphone all day, making announcements. He laughed silently to him-self, picturing his sister droning on in the self-important

voice that all the Speakers seemed to develop, saying things like, ATTENTION. THIS IS A REMINDER TO FEMALES UNDER NINE THAT HAIR RIBBONS ARE TO BE NEATLY TIED AT ALL TIMES.

He turned toward Lily and noticed to his satisfaction that her ribbons were, as usual, undone and dangling. There would be an announcement like that quite soon, he felt certain, and it would be directed mainly at Lily, though her name, of course, would not be mentioned. Everyone would know.

Everyone had known, he remembered with humiliation, that the announcement ATTENTION. THIS IS A REMINDER TO MALE ELEVENS THAT OBJECTS ARE NOT TO BE REMOVED FROM THE RECREATION AREA AND THAT SNACKS ARE TO BE EATEN, NOT HOARDED had been specifically directed at him, the day last month that he had taken an apple home. No one had mentioned it, not even his parents, because the public announcement had been sufficient to produce the appropriate remorse. He had, of course, disposed of the apple and made his apology to the Recreation Director the next morning, before school.

Jonas thought again about that incident. He was still bewildered by it. Not by the announcement or the necessary apology; those were standard procedures, and he had deserved them — but by the incident itself. He probably should have brought up his feeling of bewilderment that very evening when the family unit had shared their feelings of the day. But he had not been able to sort out and put words to the source of his confusion, so he had let it pass.

It had happened during the recreation period, when he had been playing with Asher. Jonas had casually picked

up an apple from the basket where the snacks were kept, and had thrown it to his friend. Asher had thrown it back, and they had begun a simple game of catch.

There had been nothing special about it; it was an activity that he had performed countless times: throw, catch; throw, catch. It was effortless for Jonas, and even boring, though Asher enjoyed it, and playing catch was a required activity for Asher because it would improve his hand-eye coordination, which was not up to standards.

But suddenly Jonas had noticed, following the path of the apple through the air with his eyes, that the piece of fruit had — well, this was the part that he couldn't adequately understand — the apple had *changed*. Just for an instant. It had changed in mid-air, he remembered. Then it was in his hand, and he looked at it carefully, but it was the same apple. Unchanged. The same size and shape: a perfect sphere. The same nondescript shade, about the same shade as his own tunic.

There was absolutely nothing remarkable about that apple. He had tossed it back and forth between his hands a few times, then thrown it again to Asher. And again — in the air, for an instant only — it had changed.

It had happened four times. Jonas had blinked, looked around, and then tested his eyesight, squinting at the small print on the identification badge attached to his tunic. He read his name quite clearly. He could also clearly see Asher at the other end of the throwing area. And he had had no problem catching the apple.

Jonas had been completely mystified.

“Ash?” he had called. “Does anything seem strange to you? About the apple?”

“Yes,” Asher called back, laughing. “It jumps out of

my hand onto the ground!” Asher had just dropped it once again.

So Jonas laughed too, and with his laughter tried to ignore his uneasy conviction that *something* had happened. But he had taken the apple home, against the recreation area rules. That evening, before his parents and Lily arrived at the dwelling, he had held it in his hands and looked at it carefully. It was slightly bruised now, because Asher had dropped it several times. But there was nothing at all unusual about the apple.

He had held a magnifying glass to it. He had tossed it several times across the room, watching, and then rolled it around and around on his desktop, waiting for the thing to happen again.

But it hadn’t. The only thing that happened was the announcement later that evening over the speaker, the announcement that had singled him out without using his name, that had caused both of his parents to glance meaningfully at his desk where the apple still lay.

Now, sitting at his desk, staring at his schoolwork as his family hovered over the newchild in its basket, he shook his head, trying to forget the odd incident. He forced himself to arrange his papers and try to study a little before the evening meal. The newchild, Gabriel, stirred and whimpered, and Father spoke softly to Lily, explaining the feeding procedure as he opened the container that held the formula and equipment.

The evening proceeded as all evenings did in the family unit, in the dwelling, in the community: quiet, reflective, a time for renewal and preparation for the day to come. It was different only in the addition to it of the newchild with his pale, solemn, knowing eyes.

4

Jonas rode at a leisurely pace, glancing at the bikeports beside the buildings to see if he could spot Asher's. He didn't often do his volunteer hours with his friend because Asher frequently fooled around and made serious work a little difficult. But now, with Twelve coming so soon and the volunteer hours ending, it didn't seem to matter.

The freedom to choose where to spend those hours had always seemed a wonderful luxury to Jonas; other hours of the day were so carefully regulated.

He remembered when he had become an Eight, as Lily would do shortly, and had been faced with that freedom of choice. The Eights always set out on their first volunteer hour a little nervously, giggling and staying in groups of friends. They almost invariably did their hours on Recreation Duty first, helping with the younger ones in a place where they still felt comfortable. But with guidance, as they developed self-confidence and maturity, they moved on to other jobs, gravitating toward those that would suit their own interests and skills.

A male Eleven named Benjamin had done his entire nearly-Four years in the Rehabilitation Center, working with citizens who had been injured. It was rumored that he was as skilled now as the Rehabilitation Directors

themselves, and that he had even developed some machines and methods to hasten rehabilitation. There was no doubt that Benjamin would receive his Assignment to that field and would probably be permitted to bypass most of the training.

Jonas was impressed by the things Benjamin had achieved. He knew him, of course, since they had always been groupmates, but they had never talked about the boy's accomplishments because such a conversation would have been awkward for Benjamin. There was never any comfortable way to mention or discuss one's successes without breaking the rule against bragging, even if one didn't mean to. It was a minor rule, rather like rudeness, punishable only by gentle chastisement. But still. Better to steer clear of an occasion governed by a rule which would be so easy to break.

The area of dwellings behind him, Jonas rode past the community structures, hoping to spot Asher's bicycle parked beside one of the small factories or office buildings. He passed the Childcare Center where Lily stayed after school, and the play areas surrounding it. He rode through the Central Plaza and the large Auditorium where public meetings were held.

Jonas slowed and looked at the nametags on the bicycles lined up outside the Nurturing Center. Then he checked those outside Food Distribution; it was always fun to help with the deliveries, and he hoped he would find his friend there so that they could go together on the daily rounds, carrying the cartons of supplies into the dwellings of the community. But he finally found Asher's bicycle — leaning, as usual, instead of upright in its port, as it should have been — at the House of the Old.

There was only one other child's bicycle there, that of a female Eleven named Fiona. Jonas liked Fiona. She was a good student, quiet and polite, but she had a sense of fun as well, and it didn't surprise him that she was working with Asher today. He parked his bicycle neatly in the port beside theirs and entered the building.

"Hello, Jonas," the attendant at the front desk said. She handed him the sign-up sheet and stamped her own official seal beside his signature. All of his volunteer hours would be carefully tabulated at the Hall of Open Records. Once, long ago, it was whispered among the children, an Eleven had arrived at the Ceremony of Twelve only to hear a public announcement that he had not completed the required number of volunteer hours and would not, therefore, be given his Assignment. He had been permitted an additional month in which to complete the hours, and then given his Assignment privately, with no applause, no celebration: a disgrace that had clouded his entire future.

"It's good to have some volunteers here today," the attendant told him. "We celebrated a release this morning, and that always throws the schedule off a little, so things get backed up." She looked at a printed sheet. "Let's see. Asher and Fiona are helping in the bathing room. Why don't you join them there? You know where it is, don't you?"

Jonas nodded, thanked her, and walked down the long hallway. He glanced into the rooms on either side. The Old were sitting quietly, some visiting and talking with one another, others doing handwork and simple crafts. A few were asleep. Each room was comfortably furnished, the floors covered with thick carpeting. It was a serene and

slow-paced place, unlike the busy centers of manufacture and distribution where the daily work of the community occurred.

Jonas was glad that he had, over the years, chosen to do his hours in a variety of places so that he could experience the differences. He realized, though, that not focusing on one area meant he was left with not the slightest idea — not even *a guess* — of what his Assignment would be.

He laughed softly. Thinking about the Ceremony again, Jonas? He teased himself. But he suspected that with the date so near, probably all of his friends were, too.

He passed a Caretaker walking slowly with one of the Old in the hall. "Hello, Jonas," the young uniformed man said, smiling pleasantly. The woman beside him, whose arm he held, was hunched over as she shuffled along in her soft slippers. She looked toward Jonas and smiled, but her dark eyes were clouded and blank. He realized she was blind.

He entered the bathing room with its warm moist air and scent of cleansing lotions. He removed his tunic, hung it carefully on a wall hook, and put on the volunteer's smock that was folded on a shelf.

"Hi, Jonas!" Asher called from the corner where he was kneeling beside a tub. Jonas saw Fiona nearby, at a different tub. She looked up and smiled at him, but she was busy, gently washing a man who lay in the warm water.

Jonas greeted them and the caretaking attendants at work nearby. Then he went to the row of padded lounging chairs where others of the Old were waiting. He had worked here before; he knew what to do.

"Your turn, Larissa," he said, reading the nametag on

the woman's robe. "I'll just start the water and then help you up." He pressed the button on a nearby empty tub and watched as the warm water flowed in through the many small openings on the sides. The tub would be filled in a minute and the water flow would stop automatically.

He helped the woman from the chair, led her to the tub, removed her robe, and steadied her with his hand on her arm as she stepped in and lowered herself. She leaned back and sighed with pleasure, her head on a soft cushioned headrest.

"Comfortable?" he asked, and she nodded, her eyes closed. Jonas squeezed cleansing lotion onto the clean sponge at the edge of the tub and began to wash her frail body.

Last night he had watched as his father bathed the newchild. This was much the same: the fragile skin, the soothing water, the gentle motion of his hand, slippery with soap. The relaxed, peaceful smile on the woman's face reminded him of Gabriel being bathed.

And the nakedness, too. It was against the rules for children or adults to look at another's nakedness; but the rule did not apply to newchildren or the Old. Jonas was glad. It was a nuisance to keep oneself covered while changing for games, and the required apology if one had by mistake glimpsed another's body was always awkward. He couldn't see why it was necessary. He liked the feeling of safety here in this warm and quiet room; he liked the expression of trust on the woman's face as she lay in the water unprotected, exposed, and free.

From the corner of his eye he could see his friend Fiona

help the old man from the tub and tenderly pat his thin, naked body dry with an absorbent cloth. She helped him into his robe.

Jonas thought Larissa had drifted into sleep, as the Old often did, and he was careful to keep his motions steady and gentle so he wouldn't wake her. He was surprised when she spoke, her eyes still closed.

"This morning we celebrated the release of Roberto," she told him. "It was wonderful."

"I knew Roberto!" Jonas said. "I helped with his feeding the last time I was here, just a few weeks ago. He was a very interesting man."

Larissa opened her eyes happily. "They told his whole life before they released him," she said. "They always do. But to be honest," she whispered with a mischievous look, "some of the tellings are a little boring. I've even seen some of the Old fall asleep during tellings — when they released Edna recently. Did you know Edna?"

Jonas shook his head. He couldn't recall anyone named Edna.

"Well, they tried to make her life sound meaningful. And of course," she added primly, "all lives *are* meaningful, I don't mean that they aren't. But *Edna*. My goodness. She was a Birthmother, and then she worked in Food Production for years, until she came here. She never even had a family unit."

Larissa lifted her head and looked around to make sure no one else was listening. Then she confided, "I don't think Edna was very smart."

Jonas laughed. He rinsed her left arm, laid it back into the water, and began to wash her feet. She murmured

with pleasure as he massaged her feet with the sponge.

"But Roberto's life was wonderful," Larissa went on, after a moment. "He had been an Instructor of Elevens — you know how important that is — and he'd been on the Planning Committee. And — goodness, I don't know how he found the time — he also raised two very successful children, and he was *also* the one who did the landscaping design for the Central Plaza. He didn't do the actual labor, of course."

"Now your back. Lean forward and I'll help you sit up." Jonas put his arm around her and supported her as she sat. He squeezed the sponge against her back and began to rub her sharp-boned shoulders. "Tell me about the celebration."

"Well, there was the telling of his life. That is always first. Then the toast. We all raised our glasses and cheered. We chanted the anthem. He made a lovely good-bye speech. And several of us made little speeches wishing him well. I didn't, though. I've never been fond of public speaking.

"He was thrilled. You should have seen the look on his face when they let him go."

Jonas slowed the strokes of his hand on her back thoughtfully. "Larissa," he asked, "what happens when they make the actual release? Where exactly did Roberto go?"

She lifted her bare wet shoulders in a small shrug. "I don't know. I don't think anybody does, except the committee. He just bowed to all of us and then walked, like they all do, through the special door in the Releasing Room. But you should have seen his look. Pure happiness, I'd call it."

Jonas grinned. "I wish I'd been there to see it."

Larissa frowned. "I don't know why they don't let children come. Not enough room, I guess. They should enlarge the Releasing Room."

"We'll have to suggest that to the committee. Maybe they'd study it," Jonas said slyly, and Larissa chortled with laughter.

"*Right!*" she hooted, and Jonas helped her from the tub.

5

Usually, at the morning ritual when the family members told their dreams, Jonas didn't contribute much. He rarely dreamed. Sometimes he awoke with a feeling of fragments afloat in his sleep, but he couldn't seem to grasp them and put them together into something worthy of telling at the ritual.

But this morning was different. He had dreamed very vividly the night before.

His mind wandered while Lily, as usual, recounted a lengthy dream, this one a frightening one in which she had, against the rules, been riding her mother's bicycle and been caught by the Security Guards.

They all listened carefully and discussed with Lily the warning that the dream had given.

"Thank you for your dream, Lily." Jonas said the standard phrase automatically, and tried to pay better attention while his mother told of a dream fragment, a disquieting scene where she had been chastised for a rule infraction she didn't understand. Together they agreed that it probably resulted from her feelings when she had reluctantly dealt punishment to the citizen who had broken the major rules a second time.

Father said that he had had no dreams.

"Gabe?" Father asked, looking down at the basket where the newchild lay gurgling after his feeding, ready to be taken back to the Nurturing Center for the day.

They all laughed. Dream-telling began with Threes. If newchildren dreamed, no one knew.

"Jonas?" Mother asked. They always asked, though they knew how rarely Jonas had a dream to tell.

"I *did* dream last night," Jonas told them. He shifted in his chair, frowning.

"Good," Father said. "Tell us."

"The details aren't clear, really," Jonas explained, trying to recreate the odd dream in his mind. "I think I was in the bathing room at the House of the Old."

"That's where you were yesterday," Father pointed out.

Jonas nodded. "But it wasn't really the same. There was a tub, in the dream. But only one. And the real bathing room has rows and rows of them. But the room in the dream was warm and damp. And I had taken off my tunic, but hadn't put on the smock, so my chest was bare. I was perspiring, because it was so warm. And Fiona was there, the way she was yesterday."

"Asher, too?" Mother asked.

Jonas shook his head. "No. It was only me and Fiona, alone in the room, standing beside the tub. She was laughing. But I wasn't. I was almost a little angry at her, in the dream, because she wasn't taking me seriously."

"Seriously about what?" Lily asked.

Jonas looked at his plate. For some reason that he didn't understand, he felt slightly embarrassed. "I think I

was trying to convince her that she should get into the tub of water."

He paused. He knew he had to tell it all, that it was not only all right but necessary to tell *all* of a dream. So he forced himself to relate the part that made him uneasy.

"I wanted her to take off her clothes and get into the tub," he explained quickly. "I wanted to bathe her. I had the sponge in my hand. But she wouldn't. She kept laughing and saying no."

He looked up at his parents. "That's all," he said. "Can you describe the strongest feeling in your dream, son?" Father asked.

Jonas thought about it. The details were murky and vague. But the feelings were clear, and flooded him again now as he thought. "The *wanting*," he said. "I knew that she wouldn't. And I think I knew that she *shouldn't*. But I wanted it so terribly. I could feel the wanting all through me."

"Thank you for your dream, Jonas," Mother said after a moment. She glanced at Father.

"Lily," Father said, "it's time to leave for school. Would you walk beside me this morning and keep an eye on the newchild's basket? We want to be certain he doesn't wiggle himself loose."

Jonas began to rise to collect his schoolbooks. He thought it surprising that they hadn't talked about his dream at length before the thank you. Perhaps they found it as confusing as he had.

"Wait, Jonas," Mother said gently. "I'll write an apology to your instructor so that you won't have to speak one for being late."

He sank back down into his chair, puzzled. He waved to Father and Lily as they left the dwelling, carrying Gabe in his basket. He watched while Mother tidied the remains of the morning meal and placed the tray by the front door for the Collection Crew.

Finally she sat down beside him at the table. "Jonas," she said with a smile, "the feeling you described as the wanting? It was your first Stirrings. Father and I have been expecting it to happen to you. It happens to everyone. It happened to Father when he was your age. And it happened to me. It will happen someday to Lily."

"And very often," Mother added, "it begins with a dream."

Stirrings. He had heard the word before. He remembered that there was a reference to the Stirrings in the Book of Rules, though he didn't remember what it said. And now and then the Speaker mentioned it. ATTENTION.

A REMINDER THAT STIRRINGS MUST BE REPORTED IN ORDER FOR TREATMENT TO TAKE PLACE.

He had always ignored that announcement because he didn't understand it and it had never seemed to apply to him in any way. He ignored, as most citizens did, many of the commands and reminders read by the Speaker.

"Do I have to report it?" he asked his mother.

She laughed. "You did, in the dream-telling. That's enough."

"But what about the treatment? The Speaker says that treatment must take place." Jonas felt miserable. Just when the Ceremony was about to happen, his Ceremony of Twelve, would he have to go away someplace for treatment? Just because of a stupid dream?

But his mother laughed again in a reassuring, affectionate way. "No, no," she said. "It's just the pills. You're ready for the pills, that's all. That's the treatment for Stirrings."

Jonas brightened. He knew about the pills. His parents both took them each morning. And some of his friends did, he knew. Once he had been heading off to school with Asher, both of them on their bikes, when Asher's father had called from their dwelling doorway, "You forgot your pill, Asher!" Asher had groaned good-naturedly, turned his bike, and ridden back while Jonas waited.

It was the sort of thing one didn't ask a friend about because it might have fallen into that uncomfortable category of 'being different.' Asher took a pill each morning; Jonas did not. Always better, less rude, to talk about things that were the same.

Now he swallowed the small pill that his mother handed him.

"That's all?" he asked.

"That's all," she replied, returning the bottle to the cupboard. "But you mustn't forget. I'll remind you for the first weeks, but then you must do it on your own. If you forget, the Stirrings will come back. The dreams of Stirrings will come back. Sometimes the dosage must be adjusted."

"Asher takes them," Jonas confided.

His mother nodded, unsurprised. "Many of your groupmates probably do. The males, at least. And they all will, soon. Females too."

"How long will I have to take them?"

"Until you enter the House of the Old," she explained.

"All of your adult life. But it becomes routine; after a while you won't even pay much attention to it."

She looked at her watch. "If you leave right now, you won't even be late for school. Hurry along.

"And thank you again, Jonas," she added, as he went to the door, "for your dream."

Pedaling rapidly down the path, Jonas felt oddly proud to have joined those who took the pills. For a moment, though, he remembered the dream again. The dream had felt pleasurable. Though the feelings were confused, he thought that he had liked the feelings that his mother had called Stirrings. He remembered that upon waking, he had wanted to feel the Stirrings again.

Then, in the same way that his own dwelling slipped away behind him as he rounded a corner on his bicycle, the dream slipped away from his thoughts. Very briefly, a little guiltily, he tried to grasp it back. But the feelings had disappeared. The Stirrings were gone.

6

"Lily, *please* hold still," Mother said again.

Lily, standing in front of her, fidgeted impatiently. "I can tie them myself," she complained. "I always have."

"I know that," Mother replied, straightening the hair ribbons on the little girl's braids. "But I also know that they constantly come loose and more often than not, they're dangling down your back by afternoon. Today, at least, we want them to be neatly tied and to *stay* neatly tied."

"I don't like hair ribbons. I'm glad I only have to wear them one more year," Lily said irritably. "Next year I get my bicycle, too," she added more cheerfully.

"There are good things each year," Jonas reminded her. "This year you get to start your volunteer hours. And remember last year, when you became a Seven, you were so happy to get your front-buttoned jacket?"

The little girl nodded and looked down at herself, at the jacket with its row of large buttons that designated her as a Seven. Fours, Fives, and Sixes all wore jackets that fastened down the back so that they would have to help each other dress and would learn interdependence.

The front-buttoned jacket was the first sign of inde-

pendence, the first very visible symbol of growing up. The bicycle, at Nine, would be the powerful emblem of moving gradually out into the community, away from the protective family unit.

Lily grinned and wriggled away from her mother. "And this year you get your Assignment," she said to Jonas in an excited voice. "I hope you get Pilot. And that you take me flying!"

"Sure I will," said Jonas. "And I'll get a special little parachute that just fits you, and I'll take you up to, oh, maybe twenty thousand feet, and open the door, and —"

"*Jonas*," Mother warned.

"I was only joking," Jonas groaned. "I don't want Pilot, anyway. If I get Pilot I'll put in an appeal."

"Come on," Mother said. She gave Lily's ribbons a final tug. "Jonas? Are you ready? Did you take your pill? I want to get a good seat in the Auditorium." She prodded Lily to the front door and Jonas followed.

It was a short ride to the Auditorium, Lily waving to her friends from her seat on the back of Mother's bicycle. Jonas stowed his bicycle beside Mother's and made his way through the throng to find his group.

The entire community attended the Ceremony each year. For the parents, it meant two days holiday from work; they sat together in the huge hall. Children sat with their groups until they went, one by one, to the stage.

Father, though, would not join Mother in the audience right away. For the earliest ceremony, the Naming, the Nurturers brought the newchildren to the stage. Jonas, from his place in the balcony with the Elevens, searched the Auditorium for a glimpse of Father. It wasn't at all

hard to spot the Nurturers' section at the front; coming from it were the wails and howls of the newchildren who sat squirming on the Nurturers' laps. At every other public ceremony, the audience was silent and attentive. But once a year, they all smiled indulgently at the commotion from the little ones waiting to receive their names and families.

Jonas finally caught his father's eye and waved. Father grinned and waved back, then held up the hand of the newchild on his lap, making it wave, too.

It wasn't Gabriel. Gabe was back at the Nurturing Center today, being cared for by the night crew. He had been given an unusual and special reprieve from the committee, and granted an additional year of nurturing before his Naming and Placement. Father had gone before the committee with a plea on behalf of Gabriel, who had not yet gained the weight appropriate to his days of life nor begun to sleep soundly enough at night to be placed with his family unit. Normally such a newchild would be labeled Inadequate and released from the community.

Instead, as a result of Father's plea, Gabriel had been labeled Uncertain and given the additional year. He would continue to be nurtured at the Center and would spend his nights with Jonas's family unit. Each family member, including Lily, had been required to sign a pledge that they would not become attached to this little temporary guest, and that they would relinquish him without protest or appeal when he was assigned to his own family unit at next year's Ceremony.

At least, Jonas thought, after Gabriel was placed next year, they would still see him often because he would be

part of the community. If he were released, they would not see him again. Ever. Those who were released — even as newchildren — were sent Elsewhere and never returned to the community.

Father had not had to release a single newchild this year, so Gabriel would have represented a real failure and sadness. Even Jonas, though he didn't hover over the little one the way Lily and his father did, was glad that Gabe had not been released.

The first Ceremony began right on time, and Jonas watched as one after another each newchild was given a name and handed by the Nurturers to its new family unit. For some, it was a first child. But many came to the stage accompanied by another child beaming with pride to receive a little brother or sister, the way Jonas had when he was about to be a Five.

Asher poked Jonas's arm. "Remember when we got Phillipa?" he asked in a loud whisper. Jonas nodded. It had only been last year. Asher's parents had waited quite a long time before applying for a second child. Maybe, Jonas suspected, they had been so exhausted by Asher's lively foolishness that they had needed a little time.

Two of their group, Fiona and another female named Thea, were missing temporarily, waiting with their parents to receive newchildren. But it was rare that there was such an age gap between children in a family unit.

When her family's ceremony was completed, Fiona took the seat that had been saved for her in the row ahead of Asher and Jonas. She turned and whispered to them, "He's cute. But I don't like his name very much." She made a face and giggled. Fiona's new brother had been

named Bruno. It wasn't *a great* name, Jonas thought, like — well, like Gabriel, for example. But it was okay.

The audience applause, which was enthusiastic at each Naming, rose in an exuberant swell when one parental pair, glowing with pride, took a male newchild and heard him named Caleb.

This new Caleb was a replacement child. The couple had lost their first Caleb, a cheerful little Four. Loss of a child was very, very rare. The community was extraordinarily safe, each citizen watchful and protective of all children. But somehow the first little Caleb had wandered away unnoticed, and had fallen into the river. The entire community had performed the Ceremony of Loss together, murmuring the name Caleb throughout an entire day, less and less frequently, softer in volume, as the long and somber day went on, so that the little Four seemed to fade away gradually from everyone's consciousness.

Now, at this special Naming, the community performed the brief Murmur-of-Replacement Ceremony, repeating the name for the first time since the loss: softly and slowly at first, then faster and with greater volume, as the couple stood on the stage with the newchild sleeping in the mother's arms. It was as if the first Caleb were returning.

Another newchild was given the name Roberto, and Jonas remembered that Roberto the Old had been released only last week. But there was no Murmur-of-Replacement Ceremony for the new little Roberto. Release was not the same as Loss.

He sat politely through the ceremonies of Two and Three and Four, increasingly bored as he was each year. Then a break for midday meal — served outdoors — and

back again to the seats, for the Fives, Sixes, Sevens, and finally, last of the first day's ceremonies, the Eights.

Jonas watched and cheered as Lily marched proudly to the stage, became an Eight and received the identifying jacket that she would wear this year, this one with smaller buttons and, for the first time, pockets, indicating that she was mature enough now to keep track of her own small belongings. She stood solemnly listening to the speech of firm instructions on the responsibilities of Eight and doing volunteer hours for the first time. But Jonas could see that Lily, though she seemed attentive, was looking longingly at the row of gleaming bicycles, which would be presented tomorrow morning to the Nines.

Next year, Lily-billy, Jonas thought.

It was an exhausting day, and even Gabriel, retrieved in his basket from the Nurturing Center, slept soundly that night.

Finally it was the morning of the Ceremony of Twelve.

Now Father sat beside Mother in the audience. Jonas could see them applauding dutifully as the Nines, one by one, wheeled their new bicycles, each with its gleaming nametag attached to the back, from the stage. He knew that his parents cringed a little, as he did, when Fritz, who lived in the dwelling next door to theirs, received his bike and almost immediately bumped into the podium with it. Fritz was a very awkward child who had been summoned for chastisement again and again. His transgressions were small ones, always: shoes on the wrong feet, schoolwork misplaced, failure to study adequately for a quiz. But each such error reflected negatively on his parents' guidance and

infringed on the community's sense of order and success. Jonas and his family had not been looking forward to Fritz's bicycle, which they realized would probably too often be dropped on the front walk instead of wheeled neatly into its port.

Finally the Nines were all resettled in their seats, each having wheeled a bicycle outside where it would be waiting for its owner at the end of the day. Everyone always chuckled and made small jokes when the Nines rode home for the first time. "Want me to show you how to ride?" older friends would call. "I know you've never been on a bike before!" But invariably the grinning Nines, who in technical violation of the rule had been practicing secretly for weeks, would mount and ride off in perfect balance, training wheels never touching the ground.

Then the Tens. Jonas never found the Ceremony of Ten particularly interesting — only time-consuming, as each child's hair was snipped neatly into its distinguishing cut: females lost their braids at Ten, and males, too, relinquished their long childish hair and took on the more manly short style which exposed their ears.

Laborers moved quickly to the stage with brooms and swept away the mounds of discarded hair. Jonas could see the parents of the new Tens stir and murmur, and he knew that this evening, in many dwellings, they would be snipping and straightening the hastily done haircuts, trimming them into a neater line.

Elevens. It seemed a short time ago that Jonas had undergone the Ceremony of Eleven, but he remembered that it was not one of the more interesting ones. By Eleven, one was only waiting to be Twelve. It was simply a marking of

time with no meaningful changes. There was new clothing: different undergarments for the females, whose bodies were beginning to change; and longer trousers for the males, with a specially shaped pocket for the small calculator that they would use this year in school; but those were simply presented in wrapped packages without an accompanying speech.

Break for midday meal. Jonas realized he was hungry. He and his groupmates congregated by the tables in front of the Auditorium and took their packaged food. Yesterday there had been merriment at lunch, a lot of teasing and energy. But today the group stood anxiously, separate from the other children. Jonas watched the new Nines gravitate toward their waiting bicycles, each one admiring his or her nametag. He saw the Tens stroking their new shortened hair, the females shaking their heads to feel the unaccustomed lightness without the heavy braids they had worn so long.

"I heard about a guy who was absolutely certain he was going to be assigned Engineer," Asher muttered as they ate, "and instead they gave him Sanitation Laborer. He went out the next day, jumped into the river, swam across, and joined the next community he came to. Nobody ever saw him again."

Jonas laughed. "Somebody made that story up, Ash," he said. "My father said he heard that story when *he* was a Twelve."

But Asher wasn't reassured. He was eyeing the river where it was visible behind the Auditorium. "I can't even swim very well," he said. "My swimming instructor said that I don't have the right boyishness or something."

"Buoyancy," Jonas corrected him.

"Whatever. I don't have it. I sink."

"Anyway," Jonas pointed out, "have you ever once known of anyone — I mean really known for sure, Asher, not just heard a story about it — who joined another community?"

"No," Asher admitted reluctantly. "But you can. It says so in the rules. If you don't fit in, you can apply for Elsewhere and be released. My mother says that once, about ten years ago, someone applied and was gone the next day." Then he chuckled. "She told me that because I was driving her crazy. She threatened to apply for Elsewhere."

"She was joking."

"I know. But it was true, what she said, that someone did that once. She said that it was really true. Here today and gone tomorrow. Never seen again. Not even a Ceremony of Release."

Jonas shrugged. It didn't worry him. How could someone not fit in? The community was so meticulously ordered, the choices so carefully made.

Even the Matching of Spouses was given such weighty consideration that sometimes an adult who applied to receive a spouse waited months or even *years* before a Match was approved and announced. All of the factors — disposition, energy level, intelligence, and interests — had to correspond and to interact perfectly. Jonas's mother, for example, had higher intelligence than his father; but his father had a calmer disposition. They balanced each other. Their Match, which like all Matches had been monitored by the Committee of Elders for three years before they

could apply for children, had always been a successful one.

Like the Matching of Spouses and the Naming and Placement of newchildren, the Assignments were scrupulously thought through by the Committee of Elders.

He was certain that his Assignment, whatever it was to be, and Asher's too, would be the right one for them. He only wished that the midday break would conclude, that the audience would reenter the Auditorium, and the suspense would end.

As if in answer to his unspoken wish, the signal came and the crowd began to move toward the doors.

7

Now Jonas's group had taken a new place in the Auditorium, trading with the new Elevens, so that they sat in the very front, immediately before the stage.

They were arranged by their original numbers, the numbers they had been given at birth. The numbers were rarely used after the Naming. But each child knew his number, of course. Sometimes parents used them in irritation at a child's misbehavior, indicating that mischief made one unworthy of a name. Jonas always chuckled when he heard a parent, exasperated, call sharply to a whining toddler, "That's *enough*, Twenty-three!"

Jonas was Nineteen. He had been the nineteenth new-child born his year. It had meant that at his Naming, he had been already standing and bright-eyed, soon to walk and talk. It had given him a slight advantage the first year or two, a little more maturity than many of his group-mates who had been born in the later months of that year. But it evened out, as it always did, by Three.

After Three, the children progressed at much the same level, though by their first number one could always tell who was a few months older than others in his group. Technically, Jonas's full number was Eleven-nineteen,

since there were other Nineteens, of course, in each age group. And today, now that the new Elevens had been advanced this morning, there were *two* Eleven-nineteens. At the midday break he had exchanged smiles with the new one, a shy female named Harriet.

But the duplication was only for these few hours. Very soon he would not be an Eleven but a Twelve, and age would no longer matter. He would be an adult, like his parents, though a new one and untrained still.

Asher was Four, and sat now in the row ahead of Jonas. He would receive his Assignment fourth.

Fiona, Eighteen, was on his left; on his other side sat Twenty, a male named Pierre whom Jonas didn't like much. Pierre was very serious, not much fun, and a worrier and tattletale, too. "Have you checked the rules, Jonas?" Pierre was always whispering solemnly. "I'm not sure that's within the rules." Usually it was some foolish thing that no one cared about — opening his tunic if it was a day with a breeze; taking a brief try on a friend's bicycle, just to experience the different feel of it.

The initial speech at the Ceremony of Twelve was made by the Chief Elder, the leader of the community who was elected every ten years. The speech was much the same each year: recollection of the time of childhood and the period of preparation, the coming responsibilities of adult life, the profound importance of Assignment, the seriousness of training to come.

Then the Chief Elder moved ahead in her speech. "This is the time," she began, looking directly at them, when we acknowledge differences. You Elevens have spent all your years till now learning to fit in, to standard-

ize your behavior, to curb any impulse that might set you apart from the group.

"But today we honor your differences. They have determined your futures."

She began to describe this year's group and its variety of personalities, though she singled no one out by name. She mentioned that there was one who had singular skills at caretaking, another who loved newchildren, one with unusual scientific aptitude, and a fourth for whom physical labor was an obvious pleasure. Jonas shifted in his seat, trying to recognize each reference as one of his group-mates. The caretaking skills were no doubt those of Fiona, on his left; he remembered noticing the tenderness with which she had bathed the Old. Probably the one with scientific aptitude was Benjamin, the male who had devised new, important equipment for the Rehabilitation Center.

He heard nothing that he recognized as himself, Jonas.

Finally the Chief Elder paid tribute to the hard work of her committee, which had performed the observations so meticulously all year. The Committee of Elders stood and was acknowledged by applause. Jonas noticed Asher yawn slightly, covering his mouth politely with his hand.

Then, at last, the Chief Elder called number One to the stage, and the Assignments began.

Each announcement was lengthy, accompanied by a speech directed at the new Twelve. Jonas tried to pay attention as One, smiling happily, received her Assignment as Fish Hatchery Attendant along with words of praise for her childhood spent doing many volunteer hours there, and her obvious interest in the important process of providing nourishment for the community.

Number One — her name was Madeline — returned, finally, amidst applause, to her seat, wearing the new badge that designated her Fish Hatchery Attendant. Jonas was certainly glad that *that* Assignment was taken; he wouldn't have wanted it. But he gave Madeline a smile of congratulation.

When Two, a female named Inger, received her Assignment as Birthmother, Jonas remembered that his mother had called it a job without honor. But he thought that the Committee had chosen well. Inger was a nice girl though somewhat lazy, and her body was strong. She would enjoy the three years of being pampered that would follow her brief training; she would give birth easily and well; and the task of Laborer that would follow would use her strength, keep her healthy, and impose self-discipline. Inger was smiling when she resumed her seat. Birthmother was an important job, if lacking in prestige.

Jonas noticed that Asher looked nervous. He kept turning his head and glancing back at Jonas until the group leader had to give him a silent chastisement, a motion to sit still and face forward.

Three, Isaac, was given an Assignment as Instructor of Sixes, which obviously pleased him and was well deserved. Now there were three Assignments gone, none of them ones that Jonas would have liked — not that he could have been a Birthmother, anyway, he realized with amusement. He tried to sort through the list in his mind, the possible Assignments that remained. But there were so many he gave it up; and anyway, now it was Asher's turn. He paid strict attention as his friend went to the stage and stood self-consciously beside the Chief Elder.

"All of us in the community know and enjoy Asher," the Chief Elder began. Asher grinned and scratched one leg with the other foot. The audience chuckled softly.

"When the committee began to consider Asher's Assignment," she went on, "there were some possibilities that were immediately discarded. Some that would clearly, not have been right for Asher.

"For example," she said, smiling, "we did not consider for an instant designating Asher an Instructor of Threes."

The audience howled with laughter. Asher laughed, too, looking sheepish but pleased at the special attention. The Instructors of Threes were in charge of the acquisition of correct language.

"In fact," the Chief Elder continued, chuckling a little herself, "we even gave a little thought to some retroactive chastisement for the one who had been *Asher's* Instructor of Threes so long ago. At the meeting where Asher was discussed, we retold many of the stories that we all remembered from his days of language acquisition.

"Especially," she said, chuckling, "the difference between snack and smack. Remember, Asher?"

Asher nodded ruefully, and the audience laughed aloud. Jonas did, too. He remembered, though he had been only a Three at the time himself.

The punishment used for small children was a regulated system of smacks with the discipline wand: a thin, flexible weapon that stung painfully when it was wielded. The Childcare specialists were trained very carefully in the discipline methods: a quick smack across the hands for a bit of minor misbehavior; three sharper smacks on the bare legs for a second offense.

Poor Asher, who always talked too fast and mixed up words, even as a toddler. As a Three, eager for his juice and crackers at snacktime, he one day said "smack" in stead of "snack" as he stood waiting in line for the morning treat.

Jonas remembered it clearly. He could still see little Asher, wiggling with impatience in the line. He remembered the cheerful voice call out, "I want my smack!"

The other Threes, including Jonas, had laughed nervously. "Snack!" they corrected. "You meant snack, Asher!" But the mistake had been made. And precision of language was one of the most important tasks of small children. Asher had asked for a smack.

The discipline wand, in the hand of the Childcare worker, whistled as it came down across Asher's hands. Asher whimpered, cringed, and corrected himself instantly. "Snack," he whispered.

But the next morning he had done it again. And again the following week. He couldn't seem to stop, though for each lapse the discipline wand came again, escalating to a series of painful lashes that left marks on Asher's legs. Eventually, for a period of time, Asher stopped talking altogether, when he was a Three.

"For a while," the Chief Elder said, relating the story, we had a silent Asher! But he learned."

She turned to him with a smile. "When he began to talk again, it was with greater precision. And now his lapses are very few. His corrections and apologies are very prompt. And his good humor is unfailing." The audience murmured in agreement. Asher's cheerful disposition was well-known throughout the community.

"Asher." She lifted her voice to make the official announcement. "We have given you the Assignment of Assistant Director of Recreation."

She clipped on his new badge as he stood beside her, beaming. Then he turned and left the stage as the audience cheered. When he had taken his seat again, the Chief Elder looked down at him and said the words that she had said now four times, and would say to each new Twelve. Somehow she gave it special meaning for each of them.

"Asher," she said, "thank you for your childhood."

The Assignments continued, and Jonas watched and listened, relieved now by the wonderful Assignment his best friend had been given. But he was more and more apprehensive as his own approached. Now the new Twelves in the row ahead had all received their badges. They were fingering them as they sat, and Jonas knew that each one was thinking about the training that lay ahead. For some — one studious male had been selected as Doctor, a female as Engineer, and another for Law and Justice — it would be years of hard work and study. Others, like Laborers and Birthmothers, would have a much shorter training period.

Eighteen, Fiona, on his left, was called. Jonas knew she must be nervous, but Fiona was a calm female. She had been sitting quietly, serenely, throughout the Ceremony.

Even the applause, though enthusiastic, seemed serene when Fiona was given the important Assignment of Care-taker of the Old. It was perfect for such a sensitive, gentle girl, and her smile was satisfied and pleased when she took her seat beside him again.

Jonas prepared himself to walk to the stage when the applause ended and the Chief Elder picked up the next folder and looked down to the group to call forward the next new Twelve. He was calm now that his turn had come. He took a deep breath and smoothed his hair with his hand.

"Twenty," he heard her voice say clearly. "Pierre."

She skipped me, Jonas thought, stunned. Had he heard wrong? No. There was a sudden hush in the crowd, and he knew that the entire community realized that the Chief Elder had moved from Eighteen to Twenty, leaving a gap. On his right, Pierre, with a startled look, rose from his seat and moved to the stage.

A mistake. She made a mistake. But Jonas knew, even as he had the thought, that she hadn't. The Chief Elder made no mistakes. Not at the Ceremony of Twelve.

He felt dizzy, and couldn't focus his attention. He didn't hear what Assignment Pierre received, and was only dimly aware of the applause as the boy returned, wearing his new badge. Then: Twenty-one. Twenty-two.

The numbers continued in order. Jonas sat, dazed, as they moved into the Thirties and then the Forties, nearing the end. Each time, at each announcement, his heart jumped for a moment, and he thought wild thoughts. Perhaps now she would call his name. Could he have forgotten his own number? No. He had always been Nineteen. He was sitting in the seat marked Nineteen.

But she had *skipped* him. He saw the others in his group glance at him, embarrassed, and then avert their eyes quickly. He saw a worried look on the face of his group leader.

8

He hunched his shoulders and tried to make himself smaller in the seat. He wanted to disappear, to fade away, not to exist. He didn't dare to turn and find his parents in the crowd. He couldn't bear to see their faces darkened with shame.

Jonas bowed his head and searched through his mind.
What had he done wrong?

The audience was clearly ill at ease. They applauded at the final Assignment; but the applause was piecemeal, no longer a crescendo of united enthusiasm. There were murmurs of confusion.

Jonas moved his hands together, clapping, but it was an automatic, meaningless gesture that he wasn't even aware of. His mind had shut out all of the earlier emotions: the anticipation, excitement, pride, and even the happy kinship with his friends. Now he felt only humiliation and terror.

The Chief Elder waited until the uneasy applause subsided. Then she spoke again.

"I know," she said in her vibrant, gracious voice, "that you are all concerned. That you feel I have made a mistake."

She smiled. The community, relieved from its discomfort very slightly by her benign statement, seemed to breathe more easily. It was very silent.

Jonas looked up.

"I have caused you anxiety," she said. "I apologize to my community." Her voice flowed over the assembled crowd.

"We accept your apology," they all uttered together.

"Jonas," she said, looking down at him, "I apologize to you in particular. I caused you anguish."

"I accept your apology," Jonas replied shakily.

"Please come to the stage now."

Earlier that day, dressing in his own dwelling, he had practiced the kind of jaunty, self-assured walk that he hoped he could make to the stage when his turn came. All of that was forgotten now. He simply willed himself to stand, to move his feet that felt weighted and clumsy, to go forward, up the steps and across the platform until he stood at her side.

Reassuringly she placed her arm across his tense shoulders.

"Jonas has not been assigned," she informed the crowd, and his heart sank.

Then she went on. "Jonas has been *selected*."

He blinked. What did that mean? He felt a collective, questioning stir from the audience. They, too, were puzzled.

In a firm, commanding voice she announced, "Jonas has been selected to be our next Receiver of Memory."

Then he heard the gasp — the sudden intake of breath, drawn sharply in astonishment, by each of the seated citizens. He saw their faces; the eyes widened in awe.

And still he did not understand.

"Such a selection is very, very rare," the Chief Elder told the audience. "Our community has only one Receiver. It is he who trains his successor."

"We have had our current Receiver for a very long time," she went on. Jonas followed her eyes and saw that

she was looking at one of the Elders. The Committee of Elders was sitting together in a group; and the Chief Elder's eyes were now on one who sat in the midst but seemed oddly separate from them. It was a man Jonas had never noticed before, a bearded man with pale eyes. He was watching Jonas intently.

"We failed in our last selection," the Chief Elder said solemnly. "It was ten years ago, when Jonas was just a toddler. I will not dwell on the experience because it causes us all terrible discomfort."

Jonas didn't know what she was referring to, but he could sense the discomfort of the audience. They shifted uneasily in their seats.

"We have not been hasty this time," she continued. "We could not afford another failure."

"Sometimes," she went on, speaking now in a lighter tone, relaxing the tension in the Auditorium, "we are not entirely certain about the Assignments, even after the most painstaking observations. Sometimes we worry that the one assigned might not develop, through training, every attribute necessary. Elevens are still children, after all. What we observe as playfulness and patience — the requirements to become Nurturer — could, with maturity, be revealed as simply foolishness and indolence. So we continue to observe during training, and to modify behavior when necessary.

"But the Receiver-in-training cannot be observed, cannot be modified. That is stated quite clearly in the rules. He is to be alone, apart, while he is prepared by the cur-rent Receiver for the job which is the most honored in our community."

Alone? Apart? Jonas listened with increasing unease.

"Therefore the selection must be sound. It must be a unanimous choice of the Committee. They can have no doubts, however fleeting. If, during the process, an Elder reports a dream of uncertainty, that dream has the power to set a candidate aside instantly.

"Jonas was identified as a possible Receiver many years ago. We have observed him meticulously. There were no dreams of uncertainty.

"He has shown all of the qualities that a Receiver must have."

With her hand still firmly on his shoulder, the Chief Elder listed the qualities.

"Intelligence," she said. "We are all aware that Jonas has been a top student throughout his school days.

"Integrity," she said next. "Jonas has, like all of us, committed minor transgressions." She smiled at him. "We expect that. We hoped, also, that he would present himself promptly for chastisement, and he has always done so.

"Courage," she went on. "Only one of us here today has ever undergone the rigorous training required of a Receiver. He, of course, is the most important member of the Committee: the current Receiver. It was he who reminded us, again and again, of the courage required.

"Jonas," she said, turning to him, but speaking in a voice that the entire community could hear, "the training required of you involves pain. Physical pain."

He felt fear flutter within him.

"You have never experienced that. Yes, you have scraped your knees in falls from your bicycle. Yes, you crushed your finger in a door last year."

Jonas nodded, agreeing, as he recalled the incident, and its accompanying misery.

"But you will be faced, now," she explained gently, "with pain of a magnitude that none of us here can comprehend because it is beyond our experience. The Receiver himself was not able to describe it, only to remind us that you would be faced with it, that you would need immense courage. We cannot prepare you for that.

"But we feel certain that you are brave," she said to him.

He did not feel brave at all. Not now.

"The fourth essential attribute," the Chief Elder said, "is *wisdom*. Jonas has not yet acquired that. The acquisition of wisdom will come through his training.

"We are convinced that Jonas has the ability to acquire wisdom. That is what we looked for.

"Finally, The Receiver must have one more quality, and it is one which I can only name, but not describe. I do not understand it. You members of the community will not understand it, either. Perhaps Jonas will, because the current Receiver has told us that Jonas already has this quality. He calls it the Capacity to See Beyond."

The Chief Elder looked at Jonas with a question in her eyes. The audience watched him, too. They were silent.

For a moment he froze, consumed with despair. He *didn't* have it, the whatever-she-had-said. He didn't know what it was. Now was the moment when he would have to confess, to say, "No, I don't. I *can't*," and throw himself on their mercy, ask their forgiveness, to explain that he had been wrongly chosen, that he was not the right one at all.

9

But when he looked out across the crowd, the sea of faces, the thing happened again. The thing that had happened with the apple.

They *changed*.

He blinked, and it was gone. His shoulders straightened slightly. Briefly he felt a tiny sliver of sureness for the first time.

She was still watching him. They all were.

"I think it's true," he told the Chief Elder and the community. "I don't understand it yet. I don't know what it is. But sometimes I see something. And maybe it's beyond."

She took her arm from his shoulders.

"Jonas," she said, speaking not to him alone but to the entire community of which he was a part, "you will be trained to be our next Receiver of Memory. We thank you for your childhood."

Then she turned and left the stage, left him there alone, standing and facing the crowd, which began spontaneously the collective murmur of his name.

"Jonas." It was a whisper at first: hushed, barely audible. "Jonas. Jonas."

Then louder, faster. "JONAS. JONAS. JONAS."

With the chant, Jonas knew, the community was accepting him and his new role, giving him life, the way they had given it to the newchild Caleb. His heart swelled with gratitude and pride.

But at the same time he was filled with fear. He did not know what his selection meant. He did not know what he was to become.

Or what would become of him.

Now, for the first time in his twelve years of life, Jonas felt separate, different. He remembered what the Chief Elder had said: that his training would be alone and apart.

But his training had not yet begun and already, upon leaving the Auditorium, he felt the apartness. Holding the folder she had given him, he made his way through the throng, looking for his family unit and for Asher. People moved aside for him. They watched him. He thought he could hear whispers.

"Ash!" he called, spotting his friend near the rows of bicycles. "Ride back with me?"

"Sure." Asher smiled, his usual smile, friendly and familiar. But Jonas felt a moment of hesitation from his friend, an uncertainty.

"Congratulations," Asher said.

"You too," Jonas replied. "It was really funny, when she told about the smacks. You got more applause than almost anybody else."

The other new Twelves clustered nearby, placing their folders carefully into the carrying containers on the backs of the bikes. In each dwelling tonight they would be

studying the instructions for the beginning of their training. Each night for years the children had memorized the required lessons for school, often yawning with boredom. Tonight they would all begin eagerly to memorize the rules for their adult Assignments.

"Congratulations, Asher!" someone called. Then that hesitation again. "You too, Jonas!"

Asher and Jonas responded with congratulations to their groupmates. Jonas saw his parents watching him from the place where their own bicycles were waiting. Lily had already been strapped into her seat.

He waved. They waved back, smiling, but he noticed that Lily was watching him solemnly, her thumb in her mouth.

He rode directly to his dwelling, exchanging only small jokes and unimportant remarks with Asher.

"See you in the morning, Recreation Director!" he called, dismounting by his door as Asher continued on.

"Right! See you!" Asher called back. Once again, there was just a moment when things weren't quite the same, weren't quite as they had always been through the long friendship. Perhaps he had imagined it. Things couldn't change, with Asher.

The evening meal was quieter than usual. Lily chattered about her plans for volunteer work; she would begin, she said, at the Nurturing Center, since she was already an expert at feeding Gabriel.

"I know," she added quickly, when her father gave her a warning glance, "I won't mention his name. I know I'm not supposed to know his name."

"I can't wait for tomorrow to come," she said happily. Jonas sighed uneasily. "I can," he muttered.

"You've been greatly honored," his mother said. "Your father and I are very proud."

"It's the most important job in the community," Father said.

"But just the other night, you said that the job of making Assignments was the most important!"

Mother nodded. "This is different. It's not *a job*, really. I never thought, never expected — " She paused. "There's only one Receiver."

"But the Chief Elder said that they had made a selection before, and that it failed. What was she talking about?"

Both of his parents hesitated. Finally his father described the previous selection. "It was very much as it was today, Jonas — the same suspense, as one Eleven had been passed over when the Assignments were given. Then the announcement, when they singled out the one — "

Jonas interrupted. "What was his name?"

His mother replied, "Her, not his. It was a female. But we are never to speak the name, or to use it again for a newchild."

Jonas was shocked. A name designated Not-to-Be-Spoken indicated the highest degree of disgrace.

"What happened to her?" he asked nervously.

But his parents looked blank. "We don't know," his father said uncomfortably. "We never saw her again."

A silence fell over the room. They looked at each other. Finally his mother, rising from the table, said, "You've been greatly honored, Jonas. Greatly honored."

Alone in his sleepingroom, prepared for bed, Jonas opened his folder at last. Some of the other Twelves, he had no-

ticed, had been given folders thick with printed pages. He imagined Benjamin, the scientific male in his group, beginning to read pages of rules and instructions with relish. He pictured Fiona smiling her gentle smile as she bent over the lists of duties and methods that she would be required to learn in the days to come.

But his own folder was startlingly close to empty. Inside there was only a single printed sheet. He read it twice.

JONAS
RECEIVER OF MEMORY

1. Go immediately at the end of school hours each day to the Annex entrance behind the House of the Old and present yourself to the attendant.
2. Go immediately to your dwelling at the conclusion of Training Hours each day.
3. From this moment you are exempted from rules governing rudeness. You may ask any question of any citizen and you will receive answers.
4. Do not discuss your training with any other member of the community, including parents and Elders.
5. From this moment you are prohibited from dream-telling.
6. Except for illness or injury unrelated to your training, do not apply for any medication.
7. You are not permitted to apply for release.
8. You may lie.

Jonas was stunned. What would happen to his friendships? His mindless hours playing ball, or riding his bike along the river? Those had been happy and vital times for him. Were they to be completely taken from him, now? The simple logistic instructions — where to go, and when — were expected. Every Twelve had to be told, of course, where and how and when to report for training. But he was a little dismayed that his schedule left no time, apparently, for recreation.

The exemption from rudeness startled him. Reading it again, however, he realized that it didn't compel him to be rude; it simply allowed him the option. He was quite certain he would never take advantage of it. He was so completely, so thoroughly accustomed to courtesy within the community that the thought of asking another citizen an intimate question, of calling someone's attention to an area of awkwardness, was unnerving.

The prohibition of dream-telling, he thought, would not be a real problem. He dreamed so rarely that the dream-telling did not come easily to him anyway, and he was glad to be excused from it. He wondered briefly, though, how to deal with it at the morning meal. What if he *did* dream — should he simply tell his family unit, as he did so often, anyway, that he hadn't? That would be a lie. Still, the final rule said ... well, he wasn't quite ready to think about the final rule on the page.

The restriction of medication unnerved him. Medication was always available to citizens, even to children, through their parents. When he had crushed his finger in the door, he had quickly, gasping into the speaker, notified his mother; she had hastily requisitioned relief-of-pain

medication which had promptly been delivered to his dwelling. Almost instantly the excruciating pain in his hand had diminished to the throb which was, now, all he could recall of the experience.

Re-reading rule number 6, he realized that a crushed finger fell into the category of "unrelated to training." So if it ever happened again — and he was quite certain it wouldn't; he had been very careful near heavy doors since the accident! — he could still receive medication.

The pill he took now, each morning, was also unrelated to training. So he would continue to receive the pill.

But he remembered uneasily what the Chief Elder had said about the pain that would come with his training. She had called it indescribable.

Jonas swallowed hard, trying without success to imagine what such pain might be like, with no medication at all. But it was beyond his comprehension.

He felt no reaction to rule number 7 at all. It had never occurred to him that under any circumstances, ever, he might apply for release.

Finally he steeled himself to read the final rule again. He had been trained since earliest childhood, since his earliest learning of language, never to lie. It was an integral part of the learning of precise speech. Once, when he had been a Four, he had said, just prior to the midday meal at school, "I'm starving."

Immediately he had been taken aside for a brief private lesson in language precision. He was not starving, it was pointed out. He was *hungry*. No one in the community was starving, had ever been starving, would ever be starving. To say "starving" was to speak a lie. An uninten-

tioned lie, of course. But the reason for precision of language was to ensure that unintentional lies were never uttered. Did he understand that' they asked him. And he had.

He had never, within his memory, been tempted to lie. Asher did not lie. Lily did not lie. His parents did not lie. No one did. Unless ...

Now Jonas had a thought that he had never had before. This new thought was frightening. What if *others — adults* — had, upon becoming Twelves, received in *their* instructions the same terrifying sentence?

What if they had all been instructed: *You may lie?*

His mind reeled. Now, empowered to ask questions of utmost rudeness — and promised answers — he *could*, conceivably (though it was almost unimaginable), ask someone, some adult, his father perhaps: "Do you lie? -

But he would have no way of knowing if the answer he received were true.

10

"I go in here, Jonas," Fiona told him when they reached the front door of the House of the Old after parking their bicycles in the designated area.

"I don't know why I'm nervous," she confessed. "I've been here so often before." She turned her folder over in her hands.

"Well, everything's different now," Jonas reminded her.

"Even the nameplates on our bikes," Fiona laughed. During the night the nameplate of each new Twelve had been removed by the Maintenance Crew and replaced with the style that indicated citizen-in-training.

"I don't want to be late," she said hastily, and started up the steps. "If we finish at the same time, I'll ride home with you."

Jonas nodded, waved to her, and headed around the building toward the Annex, a small wing attached to the back. He certainly didn't want to be late for his first day of training, either.

The Annex was very ordinary, its door unremarkable. He reached for the heavy handle, then noticed a buzzer on the wall. So he buzzed instead.

"Yes?" The voice came through a small speaker above the buzzer.

"It's, uh, Jonas. I'm the new — I mean — "

„Come in." A click indicated that the door had been unlatched.

The lobby was very small and contained only a desk at which a female Attendant sat working on some papers. She looked up when he entered; then, to his surprise, she stood. It was a small thing, the standing; but no one had ever stood automatically to acknowledge Jonas's presence before.

"Welcome, Receiver of Memory," she said respectfully.

"Oh, please," he replied uncomfortably. "Call me Jonas."

She smiled, pushed a button, and he heard a click that unlocked the door to her left. "You may go right on in," she told him.

Then she seemed to notice his discomfort and to realize its origin. No doors in the community were locked, ever. None that Jonas knew of, anyway.

"The locks are simply to insure The Receiver's privacy because he needs concentration," she explained. "It would be difficult if citizens wandered in, looking for the Department of Bicycle Repair, or something."

Jonas laughed, relaxing a little. The woman seemed very friendly, and it was true — in fact it was a joke throughout the community — that the Department of Bicycle Repair, an unimportant little office, was relocated so often that no one ever knew where it was.

"There is nothing dangerous here," she told him. "But," she added, glancing at the wall clock, "he doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Jonas hurried through the door and found himself in a comfortably furnished living area. It was not unlike his own family unit's dwelling. Furniture was standard throughout the community: practical, sturdy, the function of each piece clearly defined. A bed for sleeping. A table for eating. A desk for studying.

All of those things were in this spacious room, though each was slightly different from those in his own dwelling. The fabrics on the upholstered chairs and sofa were slightly thicker and more luxurious; the table legs were not straight like those at home, but slender and curved, with a small carved decoration at the foot. The bed, in an alcove at the far end of the room, was draped with a splendid cloth embroidered over its entire surface with intricate designs.

But the most conspicuous difference was the books. In his own dwelling, there were the necessary reference volumes that each household contained: a dictionary, and the thick community volume which contained descriptions of every office, factory, building, and committee. And the Book of Rules, of course.

The books in his own dwelling were the only books that Jonas had ever seen. He had never known that other books existed.

But this room's walls were completely covered by bookcases, filled, which reached to the ceiling. There must have been hundreds — perhaps thousands — of books, their titles embossed in shiny letters.

Jonas stared at them. He couldn't imagine what the thousands of pages contained. Could there be rules beyond the rules that governed the community? Could there be

more descriptions of offices and factories and committees?

He had only a second to look around because he was aware that the man sitting in a chair beside the table was watching him. Hastily he moved forward, stood before the man, bowed slightly, and said, "I'm Jonas."

"I know. Welcome, Receiver of Memory."

Jonas recognized the man. He was the Elder who had seemed separate from the others at the Ceremony, though he was dressed in the same special clothing that only Elders wore.

Jonas looked self-consciously into the pale eyes that mirrored his own.

"Sir, I apologize for my lack of understanding...."

He waited, but the man did not give the standard accepting-of-apology response.

After a moment, Jonas went on, "But I thought — I mean I *think*," he corrected, reminding himself that if precision of language were ever to be important, it was certainly important *now*, in the presence of this man, "that *you* are the receiver of Memory. I'm only, well, I was only assigned, I mean selected, yesterday. I'm not anything at all. Not yet."

The man looked at him thoughtfully, silently. It was a look that combined interest, curiosity, concern, and perhaps a little sympathy as well.

Finally he spoke. "Beginning today, this moment, at least to me, you are The Receiver.

"I have been The Receiver for a long time. A very, very long time. You can see that, can't you?"

Jonas nodded. The man was wrinkled, and his *eyes*, though piercing in their unusual lightness, seemed tired.

The flesh around them was darkened into shadowed circles.

"I can see that you are very old," Jonas responded with respect. The Old were always given the highest respect.

The man smiled. He touched the sagging flesh on his own face with amusement. "I am not, actually, as old as I look," he told Jonas. "This job has aged me. I know I look as if I should be scheduled for release very soon. But actually I have a good deal of time left."

"I was pleased, though, when you were selected. It took them a long time. The failure of the previous selection was ten years ago, and my energy is starting to diminish. I need what strength I have remaining for your training. We have hard and painful work to do, you and I."

"Please sit down," he said, and gestured toward the nearby chair. Jonas lowered himself onto the soft cushioned seat.

The man closed his eyes and continued speaking. "When I became a Twelve, I was selected, as you were. I was frightened, as I'm sure you are." He opened his eyes for a moment and peered at Jonas, who nodded.

The eyes closed again. "I came to this very room to begin my training. It was such a long time ago."

"The previous Receiver seemed just as old to me as I do to you. He was just as tired as I am today."

He sat forward suddenly, opened his eyes, and said, "You may ask questions. I have so little experience in describing this process. It is forbidden to talk of it."

"I know, sir. I have read the instructions," Jonas said.

"So I may neglect to make things as clear as I should." The man chuckled. "My job is important and has enormous honor. But that does not mean I am perfect, and

when I tried before to train a successor, I failed. Please ask any questions that will help you."

In his mind, Jonas had questions. A thousand. *A million* questions. As many questions as there were books lining the walls. But he did not ask one, not yet.

The man sighed, seeming to put his thoughts in order. Then he spoke again. "Simply stated," he said, "although it's not really simple at all, my job is to transmit to you all the memories I have within me. Memories of the past."

"Sir," Jonas said tentatively, "I would be very interested to hear the story of your life, and to listen to your memories."

"I apologize for interrupting," he added quickly.

The man waved his hand impatiently. "No apologies in this room. We haven't time."

"Well," Jonas went on, uncomfortably aware that he might be interrupting again, "I am really interested, I don't mean that I'm not. But I don't exactly understand why it's so important. I could do some adult job in the community, and in my recreation time I could come and listen to the stories from your childhood. I'd like that. Actually," he added, "I've done that already, in the House of the Old. The Old like to tell about their childhoods, and it's always fun to listen."

The man shook his head. "No, no," he said. "I'm not being clear. It's not my past, not my childhood that I must transmit to you."

He leaned back, resting his head against the back of the upholstered chair. "It's the memories of the whole world," he said with a sigh. "Before you, before me, before the previous Receiver, and generations before him."

Jonas frowned. "The whole world?" he asked. "I don't

understand. Do you mean not just us? Not just the community? Do you mean Elsewhere, too?" He tried, in his mind, to grasp the concept. "I'm sorry, sir. I don't understand exactly. Maybe I'm not smart enough. I don't know what you mean when you say 'the whole world' or 'generations before him.' I thought there was only us. I thought there was only now."

"There's much more. There's all that goes beyond — all that is Elsewhere — and all that goes back, and back, and back. I received all of those, when I was selected. And here in this room, all alone, I re-experience them again and again. It is how wisdom comes. And how we shape our future."

He rested for a moment, breathing deeply. "I am so *weighted* with them," he said.

Jonas felt a terrible concern for the man, suddenly.

"It's as if ..." The man paused, seeming to search his mind for the right words of description. "It's like going downhill through deep snow on a sled," he said, finally. "At first it's exhilarating: the speed; the sharp, clear air; but then the snow accumulates, builds up on the runners, and you slow, you have to push hard to keep going, and —"

He shook his head suddenly, and peered at Jonas. "That meant nothing to you, did it?" he asked.

Jonas was confused. "I didn't understand it, sir."

"Of course you didn't. You don't know what snow is, do you?"

Jonas shook his head.

"Or a sled? Runners?"

"No, sir," Jonas said.

"Downhill? The term means nothing to you?"
"Nothing, sir."

Well, it's a place to start. I'd been wondering how to begin. Move to the bed, and lie face down. Remove your tunic first."

Jonas did so, a little apprehensively. Beneath his bare chest, he felt the soft folds of the magnificent cloth that covered the bed. He watched as the man rose and moved first to the wall where the speaker was. It was the same sort of speaker that occupied a place in every dwelling, but one thing about it was different. This one had a switch, which the man deftly snapped to the end that said OFF.

Jonas almost gasped aloud. To have the power to turn the speaker *off*. It was an astonishing thing.

Then the man moved with surprising quickness to the corner where the bed was. He sat on a chair beside Jonas, who was motionless, waiting for what would happen next.

"Close your eyes. Relax. This will not be painful."

Jonas remembered that he was allowed, that he had even been encouraged, to ask questions. "What are you going to do, sir?" he asked, hoping that his voice didn't betray his nervousness.

"I am going to transmit the memory of snow," the old man said, and placed his hands on Jonas's bare back.

11

Jonas felt nothing unusual at first. He felt only the light touch of the old man's hands on his back.

He tried to relax, to breathe evenly. The room was absolutely silent, and for a moment Jonas feared that he might disgrace himself now, on the first day of his training, by falling asleep.

Then he shivered. He realized that the touch of the hands felt, suddenly, cold. At the same instant, breathing in, he felt the air change, and his very breath was cold. He licked his lips, and in doing so, his tongue touched the suddenly chilled air.

It was very startling; but he was not at all frightened, now. He was filled with energy, and he breathed again, feeling the sharp intake of frigid air. Now, too, he could feel cold air swirling around his entire body. He felt it blow against his hands where they lay at his sides, and over his back.

The touch of the man's hands seemed to have disappeared.

Now he became aware of an entirely new sensation: pinpricks? No, because they were soft and without pain. Tiny, cold, featherlike feelings peppered his body and face. He put out his tongue again, and caught one of the

dots of cold upon it. It disappeared from his awareness instantly; but he caught another, and another. The sensation made him smile.

One part of his consciousness knew that he was still lying there, on the bed, in the Annex room. Yet another, separate part of his being was upright now, in a sitting position, and beneath him he could feel that he was not on the soft decorated bedcovering at all, but rather seated on a flat, hard surface. His hands now held (though at the same time they were still motionless at his sides) a rough, damp rope.

And he could *see*, though his eyes were closed. He could see a bright, whirling torrent of crystals in the air around him, and he could see them gather on the backs of his hands, like cold fur.

His breath was visible.

Beyond, through the swirl of what he now, somehow, perceived was the thing the old man had spoken of — *snow* — he could look out and down a great distance. He was up high someplace. The ground was thick with the furry snow, but he sat slightly above it on a hard, flat object.

Sled, he knew abruptly. He was sitting on a thing called *sled*. And the sled itself seemed to be poised at the top of a long, extended mound that rose from the very land where he was. Even as he thought the word "mound," his new consciousness told him *hill*.

Then the sled, with Jonas himself upon it, began to move through the snowfall, and he understood instantly that now he was going downhill. No voice made an explanation. The experience explained itself to him.

His face cut through the frigid air as he began the de-

scent, moving through the substance called snow on the vehicle called sled, which propelled itself on what he now knew without doubt to be *runners*.

Comprehending all of those things as he sped downward, he was free to enjoy the breathless glee that overwhelmed him: the speed, the clear cold air, the total silence, the feeling of balance and excitement and peace.

Then, as the angle of incline lessened, as the mound — the *hill* — flattened, nearing the bottom, the sled's forward motion slowed. The snow was piled now around it, and he pushed with his body, moving it forward, not wanting the exhilarating ride to end.

Finally the obstruction of the piled snow was too much for the thin runners of the sled, and he came to a stop. He sat there for a moment, panting, holding the rope in his cold hands. Tentatively he opened his eyes — not his snow-hill-sled eyes, for they had been open throughout the strange ride. He opened his ordinary eyes, and saw that he was still on the bed, that he had not moved at all.

The old man, still beside the bed, was watching him. "How do you fee?" he asked.

Jonas sat up and tried to answer honestly. "Surprised," he said, after a moment.

The old man wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "Whew," he said. "It was exhausting. But you know, even transmitting that tiny memory to you — I think it lightened me just a little."

"Do you mean — you did say I could ask questions?"

The man nodded, encouraging his question.

"Do you mean that now you don't have the memory of it — of that ride on the sled — anymore?"

"That's right. A little weight off this old body."

"But it was such fun! And now you don't have it anymore! I *took* it from you!"

But the old man laughed. "All I gave you was one ride, on one sled, in one snow, on one hill. I have a whole world of them in my memory. I could give them to you one by one, a thousand times, and there would still be more."

"Are you saying that I — I mean we — could do it again?" Jonas asked. "I'd really like to. I think I could steer, by pulling the rope. I didn't try this time, because it was so new."

The old man, laughing, shook his head. "Maybe another day, for a treat. But there's no time, really, just to play. I only wanted to begin by showing you how it works.

"Now," he said, turning businesslike, "Lie back down. I want to — "

Jonas did. He was eager for whatever experience would come next. But he had, suddenly, so many questions.

"Why don't we have snow, and sleds, and hills?" he asked. "And when did we, in the past? Did my parents have sleds when they were young? Did you?"

The old man shrugged and gave a short laugh. "No," he told Jonas. "It's a very distant memory. That's why it was so exhausting — I had to tug it forward from many generations back. It was given to me when I was a new Receiver, and the previous Receiver had to pull it through a long time period, too."

"But what happened to those things? Snow, and the rest of it?"

"Climate Control. Snow made growing food difficult, limited the agricultural periods. And unpredictable weath-

er made transportation almost impossible at times. It wasn't a practical thing, so it became obsolete when we went to Sameness.

"And hills, too," he added. "They made conveyance of goods unwieldy. Trucks; buses. Slowed them down. So—" He waved his hand, as if a gesture had caused hills to disappear. "Sameness," he concluded.

Jonas frowned. "I wish we had those things, still. Just now and then."

The old man smiled. "So do I" he said. "But that choice is not ours."

"But sir," Jonas suggested, "since you have so much power — "

The man corrected him. "Honor," he said firmly. "I have great honor. So will you. But you will find that that is not the same as power.

"Lie quietly now. Since we've entered into the topic of climate, let me give you something else. And this time I'm not going to tell you the name of it, because I want to test the receiving. You should be able to perceive the name without being told. I gave away snow and sled and down-hill and runners by telling them to you in advance."

Without being instructed, Jonas closed his eyes again. He felt the hands on his back again. He waited.

Now it came more quickly, the feelings. This time the hands didn't become cold, but instead began to feel warm on his body. They moistened a little. The warmth spread, extending across his shoulders, up his neck, onto the side of his face. He could feel it through his clothed parts, too: a pleasant, all-over sensation; and when he licked his lips this time, the air was hot and heavy.

He didn't move. There was no sled. His posture didn't change. He was simply alone someplace, out of doors, lying down, and the warmth came from far above. It was not as exciting as the ride through the snowy air; but it was pleasurable and comforting.

Suddenly he perceived the word for it: *sunshine*. He perceived that it came from the sky.

Then it ended.

"Sunshine," he said aloud, opening his eyes.

"Good. You did get the word. That makes my job easier. Not so much explaining."

"And it came from the sky."

"That's right," the old man said. "Just the way it used to.

"Before Sameness. Before Climate Control," Jonas added.

The man laughed. "You receive well, and learn quickly. I'm very pleased with you. That's enough for today, I think. We're off to a good start."

There was a question bothering Jonas. "Sir," he said, "The Chief Elder told me — she told everyone — and you told me, too, that it would be painful. So I was a little scared. But it didn't hurt at all. I really enjoyed it." He looked quizzically at the old man.

The man sighed. "I started you with memories of pleasure. My previous failure gave me the wisdom to do that." He took a few deep breaths. "Jonas," he said, "it *will* be painful. But it need not be painful yet." "I'm brave. I really am." Jonas sat up a little straighter. The old man looked at him for a moment. He smiled. "I can see that," he said. "Well, since you asked the ques-

tion — I think I have enough energy for one more transmission.

"Lie down once more. This will be the last today."

Jonas obeyed cheerfully. He closed his eyes, waiting, and felt the hands again; then he felt the warmth again, the sunshine again, coming from the sky of this other consciousness that was so new to him. This time, as he lay basking in the wonderful warmth, he felt the passage of time. His real self was aware that it was only a minute or two; but his other, memory-receiving self felt hours pass in the sun. His skin began to sting. Restlessly he moved one arm, bending it, and felt a sharp pain in the crease of his inner arm at the elbow.

"Ouch," he said loudly, and shifted on the bed. "Owwww," he said, wincing at the shift, and even mm - ing his mouth to speak made his face hurt.

He knew there was a word, but the pain kept him from grasping it.

Then it ended. He opened his eyes, wincing with discomfort. "It hurt," he told the man, "and I couldn't get the word for it."

"It was sunburn," the old man told him.

"It hurt *a lot*," Jonas said, "but I'm glad you gave it to me. It was interesting. And now I understand better, what it meant, that there would be pain."

The man didn't respond. He sat silently for a second. Finally he said, "Get up, now. It's time for you to go home."

They both walked to the center of the room. Jonas put his tunic back on. "Goodbye, sir," he said. "Thank you for my first day."

The old man nodded to him. He looked drained, and a little sad.

"Sir?" Jonas said shyly.

"Yes? Do you have a question?—"

"It's just that I don't know your name. I thought you were The Receiver, but you say that now *I'm* The Receiver. So I don't know what to call you."

The man had sat back down in the comfortable upholstered chair. He moved his shoulders around as if to ease away an aching sensation. He seemed terribly weary.

"Call me The Giver," he told Jonas.

12

"You slept soundly, Jonas?" his mother asked at the morning meal. "No dreams?"

Jonas simply smiled and nodded, not ready to lie, not willing to tell the truth. "I slept very soundly," he said.

"I wish this one would," his father said, leaning down from his chair to touch Gabriel's waving fist. The basket was on the floor beside him; in its corner, beside Gabriel's head, the stuffed hippo sat staring with its blank eyes.

"So do I," Mother said, rolling her eyes. "He's so fretful at night."

Jonas had not heard the newchild during the night because as always, he *had* slept soundly. But it was not true that he had no dreams.

Again and again, as he slept, he had slid down that snow-covered hill. Always, in the dream, it seemed as if there were a destination: *a something* — he could not grasp what — that lay beyond the place where the thickness of snow brought the sled to a stop.

He was left, upon awakening, with the feeling that he wanted, even somehow needed, to reach the something that waited in the distance. The feeling that it was good. That it was welcoming. That it was significant.

But he did not know how to get there.

He tried to shed the leftover dream, gathering his schoolwork and preparing for the day.

School seemed a little different today. The classes were the same: language and communications; commerce and industry; science and technology; civil procedures and government. But during the breaks for recreation periods and the midday meal, the other new Twelves were abuzz with descriptions of their first day of training. All of them talked at once, interrupting each other, hastily making the required apology for interrupting, then forgetting again in the excitement of describing the new experiences.

Jonas listened. He was very aware of his own admonition not to discuss his training. But it would have been impossible, anyway. There was no way to describe to his friends what he had experienced there in the Annex room. How could you describe a sled without describing a hill and snow; and how could you describe a hill and snow to someone who had never felt height or wind or that feathery, magical cold?

Even trained for years as they all had been in precision of language, what words could you use which would give another the experience of sunshine?

So it was easy for Jonas to be still and to listen.

After school hours he rode again beside Fiona to the House of the Old.

"I looked for you yesterday," she told him, "so we could ride home together. Your bike was still there, and I waited for a little while. But it was getting late, so I went on home."

"I apologize for making you wait," Jonas said.

"I accept your apology," she replied automatically.

"I stayed a little longer than I expected," Jonas explained.

She pedaled forward silently, and he knew that she expected him to tell her why. She expected him to describe his first day of training. But to ask would have fallen into the category of rudeness.

"You've been doing so many volunteer hours with the Old," Jonas said, changing the subject. "There won't be much that you don't already know."

"Oh, there's lots to learn," Fiona replied. "There's administrative work, and the dietary rules, and punishment for disobedience — did you know that they use a discipline wand on the Old, the same as for small children? And there's occupational therapy, and recreational activities, and medications, and — "

They reached the building and braked their bikes.

"I really think I'll like it better than school," Fiona confessed.

"Me too," Jonas agreed, wheeling his bike into its place.

She waited for a second, as if, again, she expected him to go on. Then she looked at her watch, waved, and hurried toward the entrance.

Jonas stood for a moment beside his bike, startled. It had happened again: the thing that he thought of now as "seeing beyond." This time it had been Fiona who had undergone that fleeting indescribable change. As he looked up and toward her going through the door, it happened; she changed. Actually, Jonas thought, trying to re-create it in his mind, it wasn't Fiona in her entirety. It

seemed to be just her hair. And just for that flickering instant.

He ran through it in his mind. It was clearly beginning to happen more often. First, the apple a few weeks before. The next time had been the faces in the audience at the Auditorium, just two days ago. Now, today, Fiona's hair.

Frowning, Jonas walked toward the Annex. I will ask The Giver, he decided.

The old man looked up, smiling, when Jonas entered the room. He was already seated beside the bed, and he seemed more energetic today, slightly renewed, and glad to see Jonas.

"Welcome," he said. "We must get started. You're one minute late."

"I apologize —" Jonas began, and then stopped, flustered, remembering there were to be no apologies.

He removed his tunic and went to the bed. "I'm one minute late because something happened," he explained. "And I'd like to ask you about it, if you don't mind."

You may ask me anything."

Jonas tried to sort it out in his mind so that he could explain it clearly. "I think it's what you call seeing-beyond," he said.

The Giver nodded. "Describe it," he said.

Jonas told him about the experience with the apple. Then the moment on the stage, when he had looked out and seen the same phenomenon in the faces of the crowd. "Then today, just now, outside, it happened with my friend Fiona. She herself didn't change, exactly. But something about her changed for a second. Her hair looked different; but not in its shape, not in its length. I can't

quite — " Jonas paused, frustrated by his inability to grasp and describe exactly what *had* occurred.

Finally he simply said, "It changed. I don't know how, or why.

"That's why I was one minute late," he concluded, and looked questioningly at The Giver.

To his surprise, the old man asked him a question which seemed unrelated to the seeing-beyond. "When I gave you the memory yesterday, the first one, the ride on the sled, did you look around?"

Jonas nodded. "Yes," he said, "but the stuff — I mean the snow — in the air made it hard to see anything." "Did you look at the sled?"

Jonas thought back. "No. I only felt it under me. I dreamed of it last night, too. But I don't remember *seeing* the sled in my dream, either. Just feeling it."

The Giver seemed to be thinking.

"When I was observing you, before the selection, I perceived that you probably had the capacity, and what you describe confirms that. It happened somewhat differently to me," The Giver told him. "When I was just your age — about to become the new Receiver — I began to experience it, though it took a different form. With me it was ... well, I won't describe that now; you wouldn't understand it yet.

"But I think I can guess how it's happening with you. Let me just make a little test, to confirm my guess. Lie down."

Jonas lay on the bed again with his hands at his sides. He felt comfortable here now. He closed his eyes and waited for the familiar feel of The Giver's hands on his back.

But it didn't come. Instead, The Giver instructed him, "Call back the memory of the ride on the sled. Just the beginning of it, where you're at the top of the hill, before the slide starts. And this time, look down at the sled."

Jonas was puzzled. He opened his eyes. "Excuse me," he asked politely, "but don't *you* have to give me the memory?"

"It's your memory, now. It's not mine to experience any longer. I gave it away."

"But how can I call it back?"

"You can remember last year, or the year that you were a Seven, or a Five, can't you?"

"Of course."

"It's much the same. Everyone in the community has one-generation memories like those. But now you will be able to go back farther. Try. Just concentrate."

Jonas closed his eyes again. He took a deep breath and sought the sled and the hill and the snow in his consciousness.

There they were, with no effort. He was again sitting in that whirling world of snowflakes, atop the hill.

Jonas grinned with delight, and blew his own steamy breath into view. Then, as he had been instructed, he looked down. He saw his own hands, furred again with snow, holding the rope. He saw his legs, and moved them aside for a glimpse of the sled beneath.

Dumbfounded, he stared at it. This time it was not a fleeting impression. This time the sled had — and continued to have, as he blinked, and stared at it again — that same mysterious quality that the apple had had so briefly. And Fiona's hair. The sled did not change. It simply was — whatever the thing was.

Jonas opened his eyes and was still on the bed. The Giver was watching him curiously.

"Yes," Jonas said slowly. "I saw it, in the sled."

"Let me try one more thing. Look over there, to the bookcase. Do you see the very top row of books, the ones behind the table, on the top shelf?"

Jonas sought them with his eyes. He stared at them, and they changed. But the change was fleeting. It slipped away the next instant.

"It happened," Jonas said. "It happened to the books, but it went away again."

"I'm right, then," The Giver said. "You're beginning to see the color red."

"The what?"

The Giver sighed. "How to explain this? Once, back in the time of the memories, everything had a shape and size, the way things still do, but they also had a quality called *color*.

"There were a lot of colors, and one of them was called red. That's the one you are starting to see. Your friend Fiona has red hair — quite distinctive, actually; I've noticed it before. When you mentioned Fiona's hair, it was the clue that told me you were probably beginning to see the color red."

"And the faces of people? The ones I saw at the Ceremony?"

The Giver shook his head. "No, flesh isn't red. But it has red tones in it. There was a time, actually — you'll see this in the memories later — when flesh was many different colors. That was before we went to Sameness. Today flesh is all the same, and what you saw was the red tones."

Probably when you saw the faces take on color it wasn't as deep or vibrant as the apple, or your friend's hair."

The Giver chuckled, suddenly. "We've never completely mastered Sameness. I suppose the genetic scientists are still hard at work trying to work the kinks out. Hair like Fiona's must drive them crazy."

Jonas listened, trying hard to comprehend. "And the sled?" he said. "It had that same thing: the color red. But it didn't *change*, Giver. It just *was*."

"Because it's a memory from the time when color *was*."

"It was so — oh, I wish language were more precise! The red was so beautiful!"

The Giver nodded. "It is."

"Do you see it all the time?"

"I see all of them. All the colors."

"Will I?"

"Of course. When you receive the memories. You have the capacity to see beyond. You'll gain wisdom, then, along with colors. And lots more."

Jonas wasn't interested, just then, in wisdom. It was the colors that fascinated him. "Why can't everyone see them? Why did colors disappear?"

The Giver shrugged. "Our people made that choice, the choice to go to Sameness. Before my time, before the previous time, back and back and back. We relinquished color when we relinquished sunshine and did away with differences." He thought for a moment. "We gained control of many things. But we had to let go of others."

"We shouldn't have!" Jonas said fiercely.

The Giver looked startled at the certainty of Jonas's reaction. Then he smiled wryly. "You've come very quickly

to that conclusion," he said. "It took me many years. Maybe your wisdom will come much more quickly than mine."

He glanced at the wall clock. "Lie back down, now. We have so much to do."

"Giver," Jonas asked as he arranged himself again on the bed, "how did it happen to you when you were becoming The Receiver? You said that the seeing-beyond happened to you, but not the same way."

The hands came to his back. "Another day," The Giver said gently. "I'll tell you another day. Now we must work. And I've thought of a way to help you with the concept of color.

"Close your eyes and be still, now. I'm going to give you a memory of a rainbow."

13

Days went by, and weeks. Jonas learned, through the memories, the names of colors; and now he began to see them all, in his ordinary life (though he knew it was ordinary no longer, and would never be again). But they didn't last. There would be a glimpse of green — the landscaped lawn around the Central Plaza; a bush on the riverbank. The bright orange of pumpkins being trucked in from the agricultural fields beyond the community boundary — seen in an instant, the flash of brilliant color, but gone again, returning to their flat and hueless shade.

The Giver told him that it would be a very long time before he had the colors to keep.

"But I want them!" Jonas said angrily. "It isn't fair that nothing has color!"

"Not fair?" The Giver looked at Jonas curiously. "Explain what you mean."

"Well ..." Jonas had to stop and think it through. "If everything's the same, then there aren't any choices! I want to wake up in the morning and *decide* things! A blue tunic, or a red one?"

He looked down at himself, at the colorless fabric of his clothing. "But it's all the same, always."

Then he laughed a little. "I know it's not important, what you wear. It doesn't matter. But —

"It's the choosing that's important, isn't it?" The Giver asked him.

Jonas nodded. "My little brother — " he began, and then corrected himself. "No, that's inaccurate. He's not my brother, not really. But this newchild that my family takes care of — his name's Gabriel?"

"Yes, I know about Gabriel."

"Well, he's right at the age where he's learning so much. He grabs toys when we hold them in front of him — my father says he's learning small-muscle control. And he's really cute."

The Giver nodded.

"But now that I can see colors, at least sometimes, I was just thinking: what if we could hold up things that were bright red, or bright yellow, and he could *choose*? Instead of the Sameness."

"He might make wrong choices."

"Oh." Jonas was silent for a minute. "Oh, I see what you mean. It wouldn't matter for a newchild's toy. But later it *does* matter, doesn't it? We don't dare to let people make choices of their own."

"Not safe?" The Giver suggested.

"Definitely not safe," Jonas said with certainty. "What if they were allowed to choose their own mate? And chose *wrong*?"

"Or what if," he went on, almost laughing at the absurdity, "they chose their own *jobs*?"

"Frightening, isn't it?" The Giver said.

Jonas chuckled. "Very frightening. I can't even imagine it. We really have to protect people from wrong choices."

"It's safer."

"Yes," Jonas agreed. "Much safer."

But when the conversation turned to other things, Jonas was left, still, with a feeling of frustration that he didn't understand.

He found that he was often angry, now: irrationally angry at his groupmates, that they were satisfied with their lives which had none of the vibrance his own was taking on. And he was angry at himself, that he could not change that for them.

He tried. Without asking permission from The Giver, because he feared — or knew — that it would be denied, he tried to give his new awareness to his friends.

"Asher," Jonas said one morning, "look at those flowers very carefully." They were standing beside a bed of geraniums planted near the Hall of Open Records. He put his hands on Asher's shoulders, and concentrated on the red of the petals, trying to hold it as long as he could, and trying at the same time to transmit the awareness of red to his friend.

"What's the matter?" Asher asked uneasily. "Is something wrong?" He moved away from Jonas's hands. It was extremely rude for one citizen to touch another outside of family units.

"No, nothing. I thought for a minute that they were wilting, and we should let the Gardening Crew know they needed more watering." Jonas sighed, and turned away.

One evening he came home from his training weighted with new knowledge. The Giver had chosen a startling and disturbing memory that day. Under the touch of his hands, Jonas had found himself suddenly in a place that was completely alien: hot and windswept under a vast

blue sky. There were tufts of sparse grass, a few bushes and rocks, and nearby he could see an area of thicker vegetation: broad, low trees outlined against the sky. He could hear noises: the sharp crack of weapons — he perceived the word *guns* — and then shouts, and an immense crashing thud as something fell, tearing branches from the trees.

He heard voices calling to one another. Peering from the place where he stood hidden behind some shrubbery, he was reminded of what The Giver had told him, that there had been a time when flesh had different colors. Two of these men had dark brown skin; the others were light. Going closer, he watched them hack the tusks from a motionless elephant on the ground and haul them away, spattered with blood. He felt himself overwhelmed with a new perception of the color he knew as red.

Then the men were gone, speeding toward the horizon in a vehicle that spit pebbles from its whirling tires. One hit his forehead and stung him there. But the memory continued, though Jonas ached now for it to end.

Now he saw another elephant emerge from the place where it had stood hidden in the trees. Very slowly it walked to the mutilated body and looked down. With its sinuous trunk it stroked the huge corpse; then it reached up, broke some leafy branches with a snap, and draped them over the mass of torn thick flesh.

Finally it tilted its massive head, raised its trunk, and roared into the empty landscape. Jonas had never heard such a sound. It was a sound of rage and grief and it seemed never to end.

He could still hear it when he opened his eyes and lay anguished on the bed where he received the memories. It

continued to roar into his consciousness as he pedaled slowly home.

"Lily," he asked that evening when his sister took her comfort object, the stuffed elephant, from the shelf, "did you know that once there really were elephants? Live ones?"

She glanced down at the ragged comfort object and grinned. "Right," she said, skeptically. "Sure, Jonas."

Jonas went and sat beside them while his father untied Lily's hair ribbons and combed her hair. He placed one hand on each of their shoulders. With all of his being he tried to give each of them a piece of the memory: not of the tortured cry of the elephant, but of the *being* of the elephant, of the towering, immense creature and the meticulous touch with which it had tended its friend at the end.

But his father had continued to comb Lily's long hair, and Lily, impatient, had finally wiggled under her brother's touch. "Jonas," she said, "you're *hurting* me with your hand."

"I apologize for hurting you, Lily," Jonas mumbled, and took his hand away.

"'Ccept your apology," Lily responded indifferently, stroking the lifeless elephant.

"Giver," Jonas asked once, as they prepared for the day's work, "don't you have a spouse? Aren't you allowed to apply for one?" Although he was exempted from the rules against rudeness, he was aware that this was a rude question. But The Giver had encouraged all of his questions, not seeming to be embarrassed or offended by even the most personal.

The Giver chuckled. "No, there's no rule against it.

And I did have a spouse. You're forgetting how old I am, Jonas. My former spouse lives now with the Childless Adults."

"Oh, of course." Jonas *had* forgotten The Giver's obvious age. When adults of the community became older, their lives became different. They were no longer needed to create family units. Jonas's own parents, when he and Lily were grown, would go to live with the Childless Adults.

"You'll be able to apply for a spouse, Jonas, if you want to. I'll warn you, though, that it will be difficult. Your living arrangements will have to be different from those of most family units, because the books are forbidden to citizens. You and I are the only ones with access to the books."

Jonas glanced around at the astonishing array of volumes. From time to time, now, he could see their colors. With their hours together, his and The Giver's, consumed by conversation and by the transmission of memories, Jonas had not yet opened any of the books. But he read the titles here and there, and knew that they contained all of the knowledge of centuries, and that one day they would belong to him.

"So if I have a spouse, and maybe children, I will have to hide the books from them?"

The Giver nodded. "I wasn't permitted to share the books with my spouse, that's correct. And there are other difficulties, too. You remember the rule that says the new Receiver can't talk about his training?"

Jonas nodded. Of course he remembered. It had turned out, by far, to be the most frustrating of the rules he was required to obey.

"When you become the official Receiver, when we're finished here, you'll be given a whole new set of rules. Those are the rules that I obey. And it won't surprise you that I am forbidden to talk about my work to anyone except the new Receiver. That's you, of course."

"So there will be a whole part of your life which you won't be able to share with a family. It's hard, Jonas. It was hard for me."

"You do understand, don't you, that this is my life? The memories?"

Jonas nodded again, but he was puzzled. Didn't life consist of the things you did each day? There wasn't anything else, really. "I've seen you taking walks," he said.

The Giver sighed. "I walk. I eat at mealtime. And when I am called by the Committee of Elders, I appear before them, to give them counsel and advice."

"Do you advise them often?" Jonas was a little frightened at the thought that one day he would be the one to advise the ruling body.

But The Giver said no. "Rarely. Only when they are faced with something that they have not experienced before. Then they call upon me to use the memories and advise them. But it very seldom happens. Sometimes I wish they'd ask for my wisdom more often — there are so many things I could tell them; things I wish they would change. But they don't want change. Life here is so orderly, so predictable — so painless. It's what they've chosen."

"I don't know why they even *need* a Receiver, then, if they never call upon him," Jonas commented.

"They need me. And you," The Giver said, but didn't explain. "They were reminded of that ten years ago."

"What happened ten years ago?" Jonas asked. "Oh, I know. You tried to train a successor and it failed. Why? Why did that remind them?"

The Giver smiled grimly. "When the new Receiver failed, the memories that she had received were released. They didn't come back to me. They went ... "

He paused, and seemed to be struggling with the concept. "I don't know, exactly. They went to the place where memories once existed before Receivers were created. Someplace out *there* — " He gestured vaguely with his arm. "And then the people had access to them. Apparently that's the way it was, once. Everyone had access to memories.

"It was chaos," he said. "They really suffered for a while. Finally it subsided as the memories were assimilated. But it certainly made them aware of how they need a Receiver to contain all that pain. And knowledge."

"But you have to suffer like that all the time," Jonas pointed out.

The Giver nodded. "And you will. It's my life. It will be yours."

Jonas thought about it, about what it would be like for him. "Along with walking and eating and — " He looked around the walls of books. "Reading? That's it?"

The Giver shook his head. "Those are simply the things that *I do*. *My life is here*."

"In this room?"

The Giver shook his head. He put his hands to his own face, to his chest. "No. Here, in my being. Where the memories are."

"My Instructors in science and technology have taught

us about how the brain works," Jonas told him eagerly. "It's full of electrical impulses. It's like a computer. If you stimulate one part of the brain with an electrode, it — " He stopped talking. He could see an odd look on The Giver's face.

"They know nothing," The Giver said bitterly.

Jonas was shocked. Since the first day in the Annex room, they had together disregarded the rules about rudeness, and Jonas felt comfortable with that now. But this was different, and far beyond rude. This was a terrible accusation. What if someone had heard?

He glanced quickly at the wall speaker, terrified that the Committee might be listening as they could at any time. But, as always during their sessions together, the switch had been turned to OFF.

"Nothing?" Jonas whispered nervously. "But my instructors — "

The Giver flicked his hand as if brushing something aside. "Oh, your instructors are well trained. They know their scientific facts. *Everyone is* well trained for his job.

"It's just that . . . without the memories it's all meaningless. They gave that burden to me. And to the previous Receiver. And the one before him."

"And back and back and back," Jonas said, knowing the phrase that always came.

The Giver smiled, though his smile was oddly harsh. "That's right. And next it will be you. A great honor."

"Yes, sir. They told me that at the Ceremony. The very highest honor."

Some afternoons The Giver sent him away without training. Jonas knew, on days when he arrived to find The

Giver hunched over, rocking his body slightly back and forth, his face pale, that he would be sent away.

"Go," The Giver would tell him tensely. "I'm in pain today. Come back tomorrow."

On those days, worried and disappointed, Jonas would walk alone beside the river. The paths were empty of people except for the few Delivery Crews and Landscape Workers here and there. Small children were all at the Childcare Center after school, and the older ones busy with volunteer hours or training.

By himself, he tested his own developing memory. He watched the landscape for glimpses of the green that he knew was embedded in the shrubbery; when it came flickering into his consciousness, he focused upon it, keeping it there, darkening it, holding it in his vision as long as possible until his head hurt and he let it fade away.

He stared at the flat, colorless sky, bringing blue from it, and remembered sunshine until finally, for an instant, he could feel warmth.

He stood at the foot of the bridge that spanned the river, the bridge that citizens were allowed to cross only on official business. Jonas had crossed it on school trips, visiting the outlying communities, and he knew that the land beyond the bridge was much the same, flat and well ordered, with fields for agriculture. The other communities he had seen on visits were essentially the same as his own, the only differences were slightly altered styles of dwellings, slightly different schedules in the schools.

He wondered what lay in the far distance where he had never gone. The land didn't *end* beyond those nearby communities. Were there *hills* Elsewhere? Were there vast

wind-torn areas like the place he had seen in memory, the place where the elephant died?

"Giver," he asked one afternoon following a day when he had been sent away, "what causes you pain?"

When The Giver was silent, Jonas continued. "The Chief Elder told me, at the beginning, that the receiving of memory causes terrible pain. And you described for me that the failure of the last new Receiver released painful memories to the community.

"But I haven't suffered, Giver. Not really." Jonas smiled. "Oh, I remember the sunburn you gave me on the *very* first day. But that wasn't so terrible. What is it that makes you suffer so much? If you gave some of it to me, maybe your pain would be less."

The Giver nodded. "Lie down," he said. "It's time, I suppose. I can't shield you forever. You'll have to take it all on eventually.

"Let me think," he went on, when Jonas was on the bed, waiting, a little fearful.

"All right," The Giver said after a moment, "I've decided. We'll start with something familiar. Let's go once again to a hill, and a sled."

He placed his hands on Jonas's back.

14

It was much the same, this memory, though the hill seemed to be a different one, steeper, and the snow was not falling as thickly as it had before.

It was colder, also, Jonas perceived. He could see, as he sat waiting at the top of the hill, that the snow beneath the sled was not thick and soft as it had been before, but hard, and coated with bluish ice.

The sled moved forward, and Jonas grinned with delight, looking forward to the breathtaking slide down through the invigorating air.

But the runners, this time, couldn't slice through the frozen expanse as they had on the other, snow-cushioned hill. They skittered sideways and the sled gathered speed. Jonas pulled at the rope, trying to steer, but the steepness and speed took control from his hands and he was no longer enjoying the feeling of freedom but instead, terrified, was at the mercy of the wild acceleration downward over the ice.

Sideways, spinning, the sled hit a bump in the hill and Jonas was jarred loose and thrown violently into the air. He fell with his leg twisted under him, and could hear the crack of bone. His face scraped along jagged edges of ice

and when he came, at last, to a stop, he lay shocked and still, feeling nothing at first but fear.

Then, the first wave of pain. He gasped. It was as if a hatchet lay lodged in his leg, slicing through each nerve with a hot blade. In his agony he perceived the word "fire" and felt flames licking at the torn bone and flesh. He tried to move, and could not. The pain grew.

He screamed. There was no answer.

Sobbing, he turned his head and vomited onto the frozen snow. Blood dripped from his face into the vomit.

"NOOOOO!" he cried, and the sound disappeared into the empty landscape, into the wind.

Then, suddenly, he was in the Annex room again, writhing on the bed. His face was wet with tears.

Able to move now, he rocked his own body back and forth, breathing deeply to release the remembered pain.

He sat, and looked at his own leg, where it lay straight on the bed, unbroken. The brutal slice of pain was gone. But the leg ached horribly, still, and his face felt raw.

"May I have relief-of-pain, please?" he begged. It was always provided in his everyday life for the bruises and wounds, for a mashed finger, a stomach ache, a skinned knee from a fall from a bike. There was always a daub of anesthetic ointment, or a pill; or in severe instances, an injection that brought complete and instantaneous deliverance.

But The Giver said no, and looked away.

Limping, Jonas walked home, pushing his bicycle, that evening. The sunburn pain had been so small, in comparison, and had not stayed with him. But this ache lingered.

It was not unendurable, as the pain on the hill had been. Jonas tried to be brave. He remembered that the Chief Elder had said he was brave.

"Is something wrong, Jonas?" his father asked at the evening meal. "You're so quiet tonight. Aren't you feeling well? Would you like some medication?"

But Jonas remembered the rules. No medication for anything related to his training.

And no discussion of his training. At the time for sharing-of-feelings, he simply said that he felt tired, that his school lessons had been unusually demanding that day.

He went to his sleepingroom early, and from behind the closed door he could hear his parents and sister laughing as they gave Gabriel his evening bath.

They have never known pain, he thought. The realization made him feel desperately lonely, and he rubbed his throbbing leg. He eventually slept. Again and again he dreamed of the anguish and the isolation on the forsaken hill.

The daily training continued, and now it always included pain. The agony of the fractured leg began to seem no more than a mild discomfort as The Giver led Jonas firmly, little by little, into the deep and terrible suffering of the past. Each time, in his kindness, The Giver ended the afternoon with a color-filled memory of pleasure: a brisk sail on a blue-green lake; a meadow dotted with yellow wildflowers; an orange sunset behind mountains.

It was not enough to assuage the pain that Jonas was beginning, now, to know.

"*Why?*" Jonas asked him after he had received a torturous memory in which he had been neglected and unfed;

the hunger had caused excruciating spasms in his empty, distended stomach. He lay on the bed, aching. "Why do you and I have to hold these memories?"

"It gives us wisdom," The Giver replied. "Without wisdom I could not fulfill my function of advising the Committee of Elders when they call upon me."

"But what wisdom do you get from hunger?" Jonas groaned. His stomach still hurt, though the memory had ended.

"Some years ago," The Giver told him, "before your birth, a lot of citizens petitioned the Committee of Elders. They wanted to increase the rate of births. They wanted each Birthmother to be assigned four births instead of three, so that the population would increase and there would be more Laborers available."

Jonas nodded, listening. "That makes sense."

"The idea was that certain family units could accommodate an additional child."

Jonas nodded again. "Mine could," he pointed out. "We have Gabriel this year, and it's fun, having a third child."

"The Committee of Elders sought my advice," The Giver said. "It made sense to them, too, but it was a new idea, and they came to me for wisdom."

"And you used your memories?"

The Giver said yes. "And the strongest memory that came was hunger. It came from many generations back. *Centuries* back. The population had gotten so big that hunger was everywhere. Excruciating hunger and starvation. It was followed by warfare."

Warfare? It was a concept Jonas did not know. But hunger was familiar to him now. Unconsciously he rubbed

his own abdomen, recalling the pain of its unfulfilled needs. "So you described that to them?"

"They don't want to hear about pain. They just seek the advice. I simply advised them against increasing the population."

"But you said that that was before my birth. They hardly ever come to you for advice. Only when they — what was it you said? When they have a problem they've never faced before. When did it happen last?"

"Do you remember the day when the plane flew over the community?"

"Yes. I was scared."

"So were they. They prepared to shoot it down. But they sought my advice. I told them to wait."

"But how did you know? How did you know the pilot was lost?"

"I didn't. I used my wisdom, from the memories. I knew that there had been times in the past — terrible times — when people had destroyed others in haste, in fear, and had brought about their own destruction."

Jonas realized something. "That means," he said slowly, "that you have memories of destruction. And you have to give them to me, too, because I have to get the wisdom."

The Giver nodded.

"But it will hurt," Jonas said. It wasn't a question.

"It will hurt terribly," The Giver agreed.

"But why can't *everyone* have the memories? I think it would seem a little easier if the memories were shared. You and I wouldn't have to bear so much by ourselves, if everybody took a part."

The Giver sighed. "You're right," he said. "But then everyone would be burdened and pained. They don't want that. And that's the real reason The Receiver is so vital to them, and so honored. They selected me — and you — to lift that burden from themselves."

"When did they decide that?" Jonas asked angrily. "It wasn't fair. Let's change it!"

"How do you suggest we do that? I've never been able to think of a way, and I'm supposed to be the one with all the wisdom."

"But there are two of us now," Jonas said eagerly. "*Together* we can think of something!"

The Giver watched him with a wry smile.

"Why can't we just apply for a change of rules?" Jonas suggested.

The Giver laughed; then Jonas, too, chuckled reluctantly.

"The decision was made long before my time or yours," The Giver said, "and before the previous Receiver, and —" He waited.

"Back and back and back." Jonas repeated the familiar phrase. Sometimes it had seemed humorous to him. Sometimes it had seemed meaningful and important.

Now it was ominous. It meant, he knew, that nothing could be changed.

The newchild, Gabriel, was growing, and successfully passed the tests of maturity that the Nurturers gave each month; he could sit alone, now, could reach for and grasp small play objects, and he had six teeth. During the daytime hours, Father reported, he was cheerful and seemed

of normal intelligence. But he remained fretful at night, whimpering often, needing frequent attention.

"After all this extra time I've put in with him," Father said one evening after Gabriel had been bathed and was lying, for the moment, hugging his hippo placidly in the small crib that had replaced the basket, "I hope they're not going to decide to release him."

"Maybe it would be for the best," Mother suggested. "I know you don't mind getting up with him at night. But the lack of sleep is awfully hard for me."

"If they release Gabriel, can we get another newchild as a visitor?" asked Lily. She was kneeling beside the crib, making funny faces at the little one, who was smiling back at her.

Jonas's mother rolled her eyes in dismay.

"No," Father said, smiling. He ruffled Lily's hair. "It's very rare, anyway, that a newchild's status is as uncertain as Gabriel's. It probably won't happen again, for a long time.

"Anyway," he sighed, "they won't make the decision for a while. Right now we're all preparing for a release we'll probably have to make very soon. There's a Birth-mother who's expecting twin males next month."

"Oh, dear," Mother said, shaking her head. "If they're identical, I hope you're not the one assigned —"

"I am. I'm next on the list. I'll have to select the one to be nurtured, and the one to be released. It's usually not hard, though. Usually it's just a matter of birthweight. We release the smaller of the two."

Jonas, listening, thought suddenly about the bridge and how, standing there, he had wondered what lay Elsewhere.

Was there someone there, waiting, who would receive the tiny released twin? Would it grow up Elsewhere, not knowing, ever, that in this community lived a being who looked exactly the same?

For a moment he felt a tiny, fluttering hope that he knew was quite foolish. He hoped that it would be Larissa, waiting. Larissa, the old woman he had bathed. He remembered her sparkling eyes, her soft voice, her low chuckle. Fiona had told him recently that Larissa had been released at a wonderful ceremony.

But he knew that the Old were not given children to raise. Larissa's life Elsewhere would be quiet and serene as befit the Old; she would not welcome the responsibility of nurturing a newchild who needed feeding and care, and would likely cry at night.

"Mother? Father?" he said, the idea coming to him unexpectedly, "why don't we put Gabriel's crib in my room tonight? I know how to feed and comfort him, and it would let you and Father get some sleep."

Father looked doubtful. "You sleep so soundly, Jonas. What if his restlessness didn't wake you?"

It was Lily who answered that. "If no one goes to tend Gabriel," she pointed out, "he gets very loud. He'd wake *all* of us, if Jonas slept through it."

Father laughed. "You're right, Lily-billy. All right, Jonas, let's try it, just for tonight. I'll take the night off and we'll let Mother get some sleep, too."

Gabriel slept soundly for the earliest part of the night. Jonas, in his bed, lay awake for a while; from time to time he raised himself on one elbow, looking over at the crib.

The newchild was on his stomach, his arms relaxed beside his head, his eyes closed, and his breathing regular and undisturbed. Finally Jonas slept too.

Then, as the middle hours of the night approached, the noise of Gabe's restlessness woke Jonas. The newchild was turning under his cover, flailing his arms, and beginning to whimper.

Jonas rose and went to him. Gently he patted Gabriel's back. Sometimes that was all it took to lull him back to sleep. But the newchild still squirmed fretfully under his hand.

Still patting rhythmically, Jonas began to remember the wonderful sail that The Giver had given him not long before: a bright, breezy day on a clear turquoise lake, and above him the white sail of the boat billowing as he moved along in the brisk wind.

He was not aware of giving the memory; but suddenly he realized that it was becoming dimmer, that it was sliding through his hand into the being of the newchild. Gabriel became quiet. Startled, Jonas pulled back what was left of the memory with a burst of will. He removed his hand from the little back and stood quietly beside the crib.

To himself, he called the memory of the sail forward again. It was still there, but the sky was less blue, the gentle motion of the boat slower, the water of the lake more murky and clouded. He kept it for a while, soothing his own nervousness at what had occurred, then let it go and returned to his bed.

Once more, toward dawn, the newchild woke and cried out. Again Jonas went to him. This time he quite deliberately placed his hand firmly on Gabriel's back, and re-

leased the rest of the calming day on the lake. Again Gabriel slept.

But now Jonas lay awake, thinking. He no longer had any more than a wisp of the memory, and he felt a small lack where it had been. He could ask The Giver for another sail, he knew. A sail perhaps on ocean, next time, for Jonas had a memory of ocean, now, and knew what it was; he knew that there were sailboats there, too, in memories yet to be acquired.

He wondered, though, if he should confess to The Giver that he had given a memory away. He was not yet qualified to be a Giver himself; nor had Gabriel been selected to be a Receiver.

That he had this power frightened him. He decided not to tell.

15

Jonas entered the Annex room and realized immediately that it was a day when he would be sent away. The Giver was rigid in his chair, his face in his hands.

"I'll come back tomorrow, sir," he said quickly. Then he hesitated. "Unless maybe there's something I can do to help."

The Giver looked up at him, his face contorted with suffering. "Please," he gasped, "take some of the pain."

Jonas helped him to his chair at the side of the bed. Then he quickly removed his tunic and lay face down. "Put your hands on me," he directed, aware that in such anguish The Giver might need reminding.

The hands came, and the pain came with them and through them. Jonas braced himself and entered the memory which was torturing The Giver.

He was in a confused, noisy, foul-smelling place. It was daylight, early morning, and the air was thick with smoke that hung, yellow and brown, above the ground. Around him, everywhere, far across the expanse of what seemed to be a field, lay groaning men. A wild-eyed horse, its bridle torn and dangling, trotted frantically through the mounds of men, tossing its head, whinnying in panic. It stumbled, finally, then fell, and did not rise.

Jonas heard a voice next to him. "Water," the voice said in a parched, croaking whisper.

He turned his head toward the voice and looked into the half-closed eyes of a boy who seemed not much older than himself. Dirt streaked the boy's face and his matted blond hair. He lay sprawled, his gray uniform glistening with wet, fresh blood.

The colors of the carnage were grotesquely bright: the crimson wetness on the rough and dusty fabric, the ripped shreds of grass, startlingly green, in the boy's yellow hair.

The boy stared at him. "Water," he begged again. When he spoke, a new spurt of blood drenched the coarse cloth across his chest and sleeve.

One of Jonas's arms was immobilized with pain, and he could see through his own torn sleeve something that looked like ragged flesh and splintery bone. He tried his remaining arm and felt it move. Slowly he reached to his side, felt the metal container there, and removed its cap, stopping the small motion of his hand now and then to wait for the surging pain to ease. Finally, when the container was open, he extended his arm slowly across the blood-soaked earth, inch by inch, and held it to the lips of the boy. Water trickled into the imploring mouth and down the grimy chin.

The boy sighed. His head fell back, his lower jaw dropping as if he had been surprised by something. A dull blankness slid slowly across his eyes. He was silent.

But the noise continued all around: the cries of the wounded men, the cries begging for water and for Mother and for death. Horses lying on the ground shrieked, raised their heads, and stabbed randomly toward the sky with their hooves.

From the distance, Jonas could hear the thud of cannons. Overwhelmed by pain, he lay there in the fearsome stench for hours, listened to the men and animals die, and learned what warfare meant.

Finally, when he knew that he could bear it no longer and would welcome death himself, he opened his eyes and was once again on the bed.

The Giver looked away, as if he could not bear to see what he had done to Jonas. "Forgive me," he said.

16

Jonas did not want to go back. He didn't want the memories, didn't want the honor, didn't want the wisdom, didn't want the pain. He wanted his childhood again, his scraped knees and ball games. He sat in his dwelling alone, watching through the window, seeing children at play, citizens bicycling home from uneventful days at work, ordinary lives free of anguish because he had been selected, as others before him had, to bear their burden.

But the choice was not his. He returned each day to the Annex room.

The Giver was gentle with him for many days following the terrible shared memory of war.

"There are so many good memories," The Giver reminded Jonas. And it was true. By now Jonas had experienced countless bits of happiness, things he had never known of before.

He had seen a birthday party, with one child singled out and celebrated on his day, so that now he understood the joy of being an individual, special and unique and proud.

He had visited museums and seen paintings filled with all the colors he could now recognize and name.

In one ecstatic memory he had ridden a gleaming brown horse across a field that smelled of damp grass, and had dismounted beside a small stream from which both he and the horse drank cold, clear water. Now he understood about animals; and in the moment that the horse turned from the stream and nudged Jonas's shoulder affectionately with its head, he perceived the bonds between animal and human.

He had walked through woods, and sat at night beside a campfire. Although he had through the memories learned about the pain of loss and loneliness, now he gained, too, an understanding of solitude and its joy.

"What is your favorite?" Jonas asked The Giver. "You don't have to give it away yet," he added quickly. "Just tell me about it, so I can look forward to it, because I'll have to receive it when your job is done."

The Giver smiled. "Lie down," he said. "I'm happy to give it to you."

Jonas felt the joy of it as soon as the memory began. Sometimes it took a while for him to get his bearings, to find his place. But this time he fit right in and felt the happiness that pervaded the memory.

He was in a room filled with people, and it was warm, with firelight glowing on a hearth. He could see through a window that outside it was night, and snowing. There were colored lights: red and green and yellow, twinkling from a tree which was, oddly, inside the room. On a table, lighted candles stood in a polished golden holder and cast a soft, flickering glow. He could smell things cooking, and he heard soft laughter. A golden-haired dog lay sleeping on the floor.

On the floor there were packages wrapped in brightly colored paper and tied with gleaming ribbons. As Jonas watched, a small child began to pick up the packages and pass them around the room: to other children, to adults who were obviously parents, and to an older, quiet couple, man and woman, who sat smiling together on a couch.

While Jonas watched, the people began one by one to untie the ribbons on the packages, to unwrap the bright papers, open the boxes and reveal toys and clothing and books. There were cries of delight. They hugged one another.

The small child went and sat on the lap of the old woman, and she rocked him and rubbed her cheek against his.

Jonas opened his eyes and lay contentedly on the bed, still luxuriating in the warm and comforting memory. It had all been there, all the things he had learned to treasure.

"What did you perceive?" The Giver asked.

"Warmth," Jonas replied, "and happiness. And — let me think. *Family*. That it was a celebration of some sort, a holiday. And something else — I can't quite get the word for it."

"It will come to you."

"Who were the old people? Why were they there?" It had puzzled Jonas, seeing them in the room. The Old of the community did not ever leave their special place, the House of the Old, where they were so well cared for and respected.

"They were called Grandparents."

"Grand parents?"

"Grandparents. It meant parents-of-the-parents, long ago."

"Back and back and back?" Jonas began to laugh. "So actually, there could be parents-of-the-parents-of-the-parents-of-the-parents?"

The Giver laughed, too. "That's right. It's a little like looking at yourself looking in a mirror looking at yourself looking in a mirror."

Jonas frowned. "But my parents must have had parents! I never thought about it before. Who are my parents-of-the-parents? *Where* are they?"

"You could go look in the Hall of Open Records. You'd find the names. But think, son. If you apply for children, then who will be their parents-of-the-parents? Who will be their grandparents?"

"My mother and father, of course."

"And where will they be?"

Jonas thought. "Oh," he said slowly. "When I finish my training and become a full adult, I'll be given my own dwelling. And then when Lily does, a few years later, she'll get *her* own dwelling, and maybe a spouse, and children if she applies for them, and then Mother and Father —"

"That's right."

"As long as they're still working and contributing to the community, they'll go and live with the other Child-less Adults. And they won't be part of my life anymore.

"And after that, when the time comes, they'll go to the House of the Old," Jonas went on. He was thinking aloud. "And they'll be well cared for, and respected, and when they're released, there will be a celebration."

"Which you won't attend," The Giver pointed out.

"No, of course not, because I won't even know about it. By then I'll be so busy with my own life. And Lily will, too. So our children, if we have them, won't know who their parents-of-parents are, either."

"It seems to work pretty well that way, doesn't it? The way we do it in our community?" Jonas asked. "I just didn't realize there was any other way, until I received that memory."

"It works," The Giver agreed.

Jonas hesitated. "I certainly liked the memory, though. I can see why it's your favorite. I couldn't quite get the word for the whole feeling of it, the feeling that was so strong in the room."

"Love," The Giver told him.

Jonas repeated it. "Love." It was a word and concept new to him.

They were both silent for a minute. Then Jonas said, "Giver?"

"Yes?"

"I feel very foolish saying this. Very, very foolish." "No need. Nothing is foolish here. Trust the memories and how they make you feel."

"Well," Jonas said, looking at the floor, "I know you don't have the memory anymore, because you gave it to me, so maybe you won't understand this —"

"I will. I am left with a vague wisp of that one; and I have many other memories of families, and holidays, and happiness. Of love."

Jonas blurted out what he was feeling. "I was thinking that . . . well, I can see that it wasn't a very practical way

to live, with the Old right there in the same place, where maybe they wouldn't be well taken care of, the way they are now, and that we have a better-arranged way of doing things. But anyway, I was thinking, I mean feeling, actually, that it was kind of nice, then. And that I wish we could be that way, and that you could be my grandparent. The family in the memory seemed a little more — " He faltered, not able to find the word he wanted.

"A little more complete," The Giver suggested.

Jonas nodded. "I liked the feeling of love," he confessed. He glanced nervously at the speaker on the wall, reassuring himself that no one was listening. "I wish we still had that," he whispered. "Of course," he added quickly, "I do understand that it wouldn't work very well. And that it's much better to be organized the way we are now. I can see that it was *a dangerous* way to live."

"What do you mean?"

Jonas hesitated. He wasn't certain, really, what he had meant. He could feel that there was *risk* involved, though he wasn't sure how. "Well," he said finally, grasping for an explanation, "they had *fire* right there in that room. There was a fire burning in the fireplace. And there were candles on a table. I can certainly see why those things were outlawed.

"Still," he said slowly, almost to himself, "I did like the light they made. And the warmth."

"Father? Mother?" Jonas asked tentatively after the evening meal. "I have a question I want to ask you."

"What is it, Jonas?" his father asked.

He made himself say the words, though he felt flushed

with embarrassment. He had rehearsed them in his mind all the way home from the Annex.

"Do you love me?"

There was an awkward silence for a moment. Then Father gave a little chuckle. *Jonas. You*, of all people. Precision of language, *please!*"

"What do you mean?" Jonas asked. Amusement was not at all what he had anticipated.

"Your father means that you used a very generalized word, so meaningless that it's become almost obsolete," his mother explained carefully.

Jonas stared at them. Meaningless? He had never before felt anything as meaningful as the memory.

"And of course our community can't function smoothly if people don't use precise language. You could ask, 'Do you enjoy me?' The answer is 'Yes,'" his mother said.

"Or," his father suggested, "'Do you take pride in my accomplishments?' And the answer is wholeheartedly 'Yes.'"

"Do you understand why it's inappropriate to use a word like 'love'?" Mother asked.

Jonas nodded. "Yes, thank you, I do," he replied slowly. It was his first lie to his parents.

"Gabriel?" Jonas whispered that night to the newchild. The crib was in his room again. After Gabe had slept soundly in Jonas's room for four nights, his parents had pronounced the experiment a success and Jonas a hero. Gabriel was growing rapidly, now crawling and giggling across the room and pulling himself up to stand. He could

be upgraded in the Nurturing Center, Father said happily, now that he slept; he could be officially named and given to his family in December, which was only two months away.

But when he was taken away, he stopped sleeping again, and cried in the night.

So he was back in Jonas's sleepingroom. They would give it a little more time, they decided. Since Gabe seemed to like it in Jonas's room, he would sleep there at night a little longer, until the habit of sound sleep was fully formed. The Nurturers were very optimistic about Gabriel's future.

There was no answer to Jonas's whisper. Gabriel was sound asleep.

"Things could change, Gabe," Jonas went on. "Things could be different. I don't know how, but there must be some way for things to be different. There could be colors.

"And grandparents," he added, staring through the dimness toward the ceiling of his sleepingroom. "And everybody would have the memories.

"You know about memories," he whispered, turning toward the crib.

Gabriel's breathing was even and deep. Jonas liked having him there, though he felt guilty about the secret. Each night he gave memories to Gabriel: memories of boat rides and picnics in the sun; memories of soft rainfall against windowpanes; memories of dancing barefoot on a damp lawn.

"Gabe?"

The newchild stirred slightly in his sleep. Jonas looked over at him.

"There could be love," Jonas whispered.

The next morning, for the first time, Jonas did not take his pill. Something within him, something that had grown there through the memories, told him to throw the pill away.

17

TODAY IS DECLARED AN UNSCHEDULED HOLIDAY. Jonas, his parents, and Lily all turned in surprise and looked at the wall speaker from which the announcement had come. It happened so rarely, and was such a treat for the entire community when it did. Adults were exempted from the day's work, children from school and training and volunteer hours. The substitute Laborers, who would be given a different holiday, took over all the necessary tasks: nurturing, food delivery, and care of the Old; and the community was free.

Jonas cheered, and put his homework folder down. He had been about to leave for school. School was less important to him now; and before much more time passed, his formal schooling would end. But still, for Twelves, though they had begun their adult training, there were the endless lists of rules to be memorized and the newest technology to be mastered.

He wished his parents, sister, and Gabe a happy day, and rode down the bicycle path, looking for Asher.

He had not taken the pills, now, for four weeks. The Stirrings had returned, and he felt a little guilty and embarrassed about the pleasurable dreams that came to him

as he slept. But he knew he couldn't go back to the world of no feelings that he had lived in so long.

And his new, heightened feelings permeated a greater realm than simply his sleep. Though he knew that his failure to take the pills accounted for some of it, he thought that the feelings came also from the memories. Now he could see all of the colors; and he could *keep* them, too, so that the trees and grass and bushes stayed green in his vision. Gabriel's rosy cheeks stayed pink, even when he slept. And apples were always, always red.

Now, through the memories, he had seen oceans and mountain lakes and streams that gurgled through woods; and now he saw the familiar wide river beside the path differently. He saw all of the light and color and history it contained and carried in its slow-moving water; and he knew that there was an Elsewhere from which it came, and an Elsewhere to which it was going.

On this unexpected, casual holiday he felt happy, as he always had on holidays; but with a deeper happiness than ever before. Thinking, as he always did, about precision of language, Jonas realized that it was a new *depth* of feelings that he was experiencing. Somehow they were not at all the same as the feelings that every evening, in every dwelling, every citizen analyzed with endless talk.

"I felt angry because someone broke the play area rules," Lily had said once, making a fist with her small hand to indicate her fury. Her family — Jonas among them — had talked about the possible reasons for rule-breaking, and the need for understanding and patience, until Lily's fist had relaxed and her anger was gone.

But Lily had not felt anger, Jonas realized now. Shallow

impatience and exasperation, that was all Lily had felt. He knew that with certainty because now he knew what anger was. Now he had, in the memories, experienced injustice and cruelty, and he had reacted with rage that welled up so passionately inside him that the thought of discussing it calmly at the evening meal was unthinkable.

"I felt sad today," he had heard his mother say, and they had comforted her.

But now Jonas had experienced real sadness. He had felt grief. He knew that there was no quick comfort for emotions like those.

These were deeper and they did not need to be told. They were *felt*.

Today, he felt happiness.

"Asher!" He spied his friend's bicycle leaning against a tree at the edge of the playing field. Nearby, other bikes were strewn about on the ground. On a holiday the usual rules of order could be disregarded.

He skidded to a stop and dropped his own bike beside the others. "Hey, Ash!" he shouted, looking around. There seemed to be no one in the play area. "Where are you?"

"Psssheewww!" A child's voice, coming from behind a nearby bush, made the sound. "Pow! Pow! Pow!"

A female Eleven named Tanya staggered forward from where she had been hiding. Dramatically she clutched her stomach and stumbled about in a zig-zag pattern, groaning. "You got me!" she called, and fell to the ground, grinning.

"Blam!"

Jonas, standing on the side of the playing field, recog-

nized Asher's voice. He saw his friend, aiming an imaginary weapon in his hand, dart from behind one tree to another. "Blam! You're in my line of ambush, Jonas! Watch out!"

Jonas stepped back. He moved behind Asher's bike and knelt so that he was out of sight. It was a game he had often played with the other children, a game of good guys and bad guys, a harmless pastime that used up their contained energy and ended only when they all lay posed in freakish postures on the ground.

He had never recognized it before as a game of war.

"Attack!" The shout came from behind the small storehouse where play equipment was kept. Three children dashed forward, their imaginary weapons in firing position.

From the opposite side of the field came an opposing shout: "Counter-attack!" From their hiding places a horde of children — Jonas recognized Fiona in the group — emerged, running in a crouched position, firing across the field. Several of them stopped, grabbed their own shoulders and chests with exaggerated gestures, and pretended to be hit. They dropped to the ground and lay suppressing giggles.

Feelings surged within Jonas. He found himself walking forward into the field.

"You're hit, Jonas!" Asher yelled from behind the tree. "Pow! You're hit again!"

Jonas stood alone in the center of the field. Several of the children raised their heads and looked at him uneasily. The attacking armies slowed, emerged from their crouched positions, and watched to see what he was doing.

In his mind, Jonas saw again the face of the boy who had lain dying on a field and had begged him for water. He had a sudden choking feeling, as if it were difficult to breathe.

One of the children raised an imaginary rifle and made an attempt to destroy him with a firing noise. "Pssheeew!" Then they were all silent, standing awkwardly, and the only sound was the sound of Jonas's shuddering breaths. He was struggling not to cry.

Gradually, when nothing happened, nothing changed, the children looked at each other nervously and went away. He heard the sounds as they righted their bicycles and began to ride down the path that led from the field.

Only Asher and Fiona remained.

"What's wrong, Jonas? It was only a game," Fiona said.

"You ruined it," Asher said in an irritated voice.

"Don't play it anymore," Jonas pleaded.

"I'm the one who's training for Assistant Recreation Director," Asher pointed out angrily. "Games aren't *your* area of expertise."

"Expertise," Jonas corrected him automatically.

"Whatever. You can't say what we play, even if you *are* going to be the new Receiver." Asher looked warily at him. "I apologize for not paying you the respect you deserve," he mumbled.

"Asher," Jonas said. He was trying to speak carefully, and with kindness, to say exactly what he wanted to say. "You had no way of knowing this. I didn't know it myself until recently. But it's a cruel game. In the past, there have — "

"I said I *apologize*, Jonas."

Jonas sighed. It was no use. Of course Asher couldn't understand. "I accept your apology, Asher," he said wearily.

"Do you want to go for a ride along the river, Jonas?" Fiona asked, biting her lip with nervousness.

Jonas looked at her. She was so lovely. For a fleeting instant he thought he would like nothing better than to ride peacefully along the river path, laughing and talking with his gentle female friend. But he knew that such times had been taken from him now. He shook his head. After a moment his two friends turned and went to their bikes. He watched as they rode away.

Jonas trudged to the bench beside the Storehouse and sat down, overwhelmed with feelings of loss. His child-hood, his friendships, his carefree sense of security — all of these things seemed to be slipping away. With his new, heightened feelings, he was overwhelmed by sadness at the way the others had laughed and shouted, playing at war. But he knew that they could not understand why, without the memories. He felt such love for Asher and for Fiona. But they could not feel it back, without the memories. And he could not give them those. Jonas knew with certainty that he could change nothing.

Back in their dwelling, that evening, Lily chattered merrily about the wonderful holiday she had had, playing with her friends, having her midday meal out of doors, and (she confessed) sneaking a very short try on her father's bicycle.

"I can't wait till I get my very own bicycle next month. Father's is too big for me. I fell," she explained matter-of-

factly. "Good thing Gabe wasn't in the child seat!"

"A very good thing," Mother agreed, frowning at the idea of it. Gabriel waved his arms at the mention of himself. He had begun to walk just the week before. The first steps of a newchild were always the occasion for celebration at the Nurturing Center, Father said, but also for the introduction of a discipline wand. Now Father brought the slender instrument home with him each night, in case Gabriel misbehaved.

But he was a happy and easygoing toddler. Now he moved unsteadily across the room, laughing. "Gay!" he chirped. "Gay!" It was the way he said his own name.

Jonas brightened. It had been a depressing day for him, after such a bright start. But he set his glum thoughts aside. He thought about starting to teach Lily to ride so that she could speed off proudly after her Ceremony of Nine, which would be coming soon. It was hard to believe that it was almost December again, that almost a year had passed since he had become a Twelve.

He smiled as he watched the newchild plant one small foot carefully before the other, grinning with glee at his own steps as he tried them out.

"I want to get to sleep early tonight," Father said. "Tomorrow's a busy day for me. The twins are being born tomorrow, and the test results show that they're identical."

"One for here, one for Elsewhere," Lily chanted. "One for here, one for Else —"

"Do you actually *take* it Elsewhere, Father?" Jonas asked.

"No, I just have to make the selection. I weigh them, hand the larger over to a Nurturer who's standing by,

waiting, and then I get the smaller one all cleaned up and comfy. Then I perform a small Ceremony of Release and —" He glanced down, grinning at Gabriel. "Then I wave bye-bye," he said, in the special sweet voice he used when he spoke to the newchild. He waved his hand in the familiar gesture.

Gabriel giggled and waved bye-bye back to him. "And somebody else comes to get him? Somebody from Elsewhere?"

"That's right, Jonas-bonus."

Jonas rolled his eyes in embarrassment that his father had used the silly pet name.

Lily was deep in thought. "What if they give the little twin a name Elsewhere, a name like, oh, maybe Jonathan? And here, in our community, at his naming, the twin that we kept here is given the name Jonathan, and then there would be two children with the same name, and they would *look* exactly the same, and someday, maybe when they were a Six, one group of Sixes would go to visit an-other community on a bus, and there in the other community, in the *other* group of Sixes, would be a Jonathan who was exactly the same as the *other* Jonathan, and then maybe they would get mixed up and take the wrong Jonathan home, and maybe his parents wouldn't notice, and then —"

She paused for breath.

"Lily," Mother said, "I have a wonderful idea. Maybe when you become a Twelve, they'll give you the Assignment of Storyteller! I don't think we've had a Storyteller in the community for a long time. But if I were on the Committee, I would definitely choose you for that job!"

18

Lily grinned. "I have a *better* idea for one more story," she announced. "What if actually we were *all* twins and didn't know it, and so Elsewhere there would be another Lily, and another Jonas, and another Father, and another Asher, and another Chief Elder, and another — "

Father groaned. "Lily," he said. "It's bedtime."

"Giver," Jonas asked the next afternoon, "Do you ever think about release?"

"Do you mean my own release, or just the general topic of release?"

"Both, I guess. I apologize — I mean I should have been more precise. But I don't know exactly what I meant."

"Sit back up. No need to lie down while we're talking." Jonas, who had already been stretched out on the bed when the question came to his mind, sat back up.

"I guess I do think about it occasionally," The Giver said. "I think about my own release when I'm in an awful lot of pain. I wish I could put in a request for it, sometimes. But I'm not permitted to do that until the new Receiver is trained."

"Me," Jonas said in a dejected voice. He was not looking forward to the end of the training, when he would become the new Receiver. It was clear to him what a terribly difficult and lonely life it was, despite the honor.

"I can't request release either," Jonas pointed out. "It was in my rules."

The Giver laughed harshly. "I know that. They hammered out those rules after the failure ten years ago."

Jonas had heard again and again now, reference to the previous failure. But he still did not know what had happened ten years before. "Giver," he said, "tell me what happened. Please."

The Giver shrugged. "On the surface, it was quite simple. A Receiver-to-be was selected, the way you were. The selection went smoothly enough. The Ceremony was held, and the selection was made. The crowd cheered, as they did for you. The new Receiver was puzzled and a little frightened, as you were."

"My parents told me it was a female."

The Giver nodded.

Jonas thought of his favorite female, Fiona, and shivered. He wouldn't want his gentle friend to suffer the way he had, taking on the memories. "What was she like?" he asked The Giver.

The Giver looked sad, thinking about it. "She was a remarkable young woman. Very self-possessed and serene. Intelligent, eager to learn." He shook his head and drew a deep breath. "You know, Jonas, when she came to me in this room, when she presented herself to begin her training —"

Jonas interrupted him with a question. "Can you tell me her name? My parents said that it wasn't to be spoken again in the community. But couldn't you say it just to me?"

The Giver hesitated painfully, as if saying the name aloud might be excruciating. "Her name was Rosemary," he told Jonas, finally.

"Rosemary. I like that name."

The Giver went on. "When she came to me for the first

time, she sat there in the chair where you sat on your first day. She was eager and excited and a little scared. We talked. I tried to explain things as well as I could."

"The way you did to me."

The Giver chuckled ruefully. "The explanations are difficult. The whole thing is so beyond one's experience. But I tried. And she listened carefully. Her eyes were very luminous, I remember."

He looked up suddenly. "Jonas, I gave you a memory that I told you was my favorite. I still have a shred of it left. The room, with the family, and grandparents?"

Jonas nodded. Of course he remembered. "Yes," he said. "It had that wonderful feeling with it. You told me it was love."

"You can understand, then, that that's what I felt for Rosemary," The Giver explained. "I loved her."

"I feel it for you, too," he added.

"What happened to her?" Jonas asked.

"Her training began. She received well, as you do. She was so enthusiastic. So delighted to experience new things. I remember her laughter ... "

His voice faltered and trailed off.

"What happened?" Jonas asked again, after a moment. "Please tell me."

The Giver closed his eyes. "It broke my heart, Jonas, to transfer pain to her. But it was my job. It was what I had to do, the way I've had to do it to you."

The room was silent. Jonas waited. Finally The Giver continued.

"Five weeks. That was all. I gave her happy memories: a ride on a merry-go-round; a kitten to play with; a picnic.

Sometimes I chose one just because I knew it would make her laugh, and I so treasured the sound of that laughter in this room that had always been so silent.

"But she was like you, Jonas. She wanted to experience everything. She knew that it was her responsibility. And so she asked me for more difficult memories."

Jonas held his breath for a moment. "You didn't give her *war*, did you? Not after just five weeks?"

The Giver shook his head and sighed. "No. And I didn't give her physical pain. But I gave her loneliness. And I gave her loss. I transferred a memory of a child taken from its parents. That was the first one. She appeared stunned at its end."

Jonas swallowed. Rosemary, and her laughter, had begun to seem real to him, and he pictured her looking up from the bed of memories, shocked.

The Giver continued. "I backed off, gave her more little delights. But everything changed, once she knew about pain. I could see it in her eyes."

"She wasn't brave enough?" Jonas suggested.

The Giver didn't respond to the question. "She insisted that I continue, that I not spare her. She said it was her duty. And I knew, of course, that she was correct.

"I couldn't bring myself to inflict physical pain on her. But I gave her anguish of many kinds. Poverty, and hunger, and terror.

"I *had* to, Jonas. It was my job. And she had been chosen." The Giver looked at him imploringly. Jonas stroked his hand.

"Finally one afternoon, we finished for the day. It had been a hard session. I tried to finish — as I do with

you — by transferring something happy and cheerful. But the times of laughter were gone by then. She stood up very silently, frowning, as if she were making a decision. Then she came over to me and put her arms around me. She kissed my cheek." As Jonas watched, The Giver stroked his own cheek, recalling the touch of Rosemary's lips ten years before.

"She left here that day, left this room, and did not go back to her dwelling. I was notified by the Speaker that she had gone directly to the Chief Elder and asked to be released."

"But it's against the rules! The Receiver-in-training can't apply for rel — "

"It's in your rules, Jonas. But it wasn't in hers. She asked for release, and they had to give it to her. I never saw her again."

So that was the failure, Jonas thought. It was obvious that it saddened The Giver very deeply. But it didn't seem such a terrible thing, after all. And he, Jonas, would never have done it — never have requested release, no matter how difficult his training became. The Giver needed a successor, and he had been chosen.

A thought occurred to Jonas. Rosemary had been released very early in her training. What if something happened to him, Jonas? He had a whole year's worth of memories now.

"Giver," he asked, "I can't request release, I know that. But what if something happened: an accident? What if I fell into the river like the little Four, Caleb, did? Well, that doesn't make sense because I'm a good swimmer. But what if I couldn't swim, and fell into the river and was

lost? Then there wouldn't be a new Receiver, but you would already have given away an awful lot of important memories, so even though they would select a new Receiver, the memories would be gone except for the shreds that you have left of them? And then what if — "

He started to laugh, suddenly. "I sound like my sister, Lily," he said, amused at himself.

The Giver looked at him gravely. "You just stay away from the river, my friend," he said. "The community lost Rosemary after five weeks and it was a disaster for them. I don't know *what* the community would do if they lost you."

"Why was it a disaster?"

"I think I mentioned to you once," The Giver re-minded him, "that when she was gone, the memories came back to the people. If you were to be lost in the river, Jonas, your memories would not be lost with you. Memories are *forever*."

"Rosemary had only those five weeks worth, and most of them were good ones. But there were those few terrible memories, the ones that had overwhelmed her. For a while they overwhelmed the community. All those *feelings!* They'd never experienced that before.

"I was so devastated by my own grief at her loss, and my own feeling of failure, that I didn't even try to help them through it. I was angry, too."

The Giver was quiet for a moment, obviously thinking. "You know," he said, finally, "if they lost *you*, with all the training you've had now, they'd have all those memories again themselves."

Jonas made a face. "They'd hate that."

"They certainly would. They wouldn't know how to deal with it at all."

"The only way I deal with it is by having you there to help me," Jonas pointed out with a sigh.

The Giver nodded. "I suppose," he said slowly, "that I could — "

"You could what?"

The Giver was still deep in thought. After a moment, he said, "If you floated off in the river, I suppose I could help the whole community the way I've helped you. It's an interesting concept. I need to think about it some more. Maybe we'll talk about it again sometime. But not now."

"I'm glad you're a good swimmer, Jonas. But stay away from the river." He laughed a little, but the laughter was not lighthearted. His thoughts seemed to be else-where, and his eyes were very troubled.

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Jonas glanced at the clock. There was so much work to be done, always, that he and The Giver seldom simply sat and talked, the way they just had.

"I'm sorry that I wasted so much time with my questions," Jonas said. "I was only asking about release because my father is releasing a newchild today. A twin. He has to select one and release the other one. They do it by weight." Jonas glanced at the clock. "Actually, I suppose he's already finished. I think it was this morning."

The Giver's face took on a solemn look. "I wish they wouldn't do that," he said quietly, almost to himself.

"Well, they can't have two identical people around! Think how confusing it would be!" Jonas chuckled.

"I wish I could watch," he added, as an afterthought. He liked the thought of seeing his father perform the ceremony, and making the little twin clean and comfy. His father was such a gentle man.

"You can watch," The Giver said.

"No," Jonas told him. "They never let children watch. It's very private."

"Jonas," The Giver told him, "I know that you read your training instructions very carefully. Don't you remember that you are allowed to ask anyone anything?"

Jonas nodded. "Yes, but — "

"Jonas, when you and I have finished our time together, you will be the new Receiver. You can read the books; you'll have the memories. You have access to *everything*. It's part of your training. If you want to watch a release, you have simply to ask."

Jonas shrugged. "Well, maybe I will, then. But it's too late for this one. I'm sure it was this morning."

The Giver told him, then, something he had not known. "All private ceremonies are recorded. They're in the Hall of Closed Records. *Do you want to see this morning's release?*"

Jonas hesitated. He was afraid that his father wouldn't like it, if he watched something so private.

"I think you should," The Giver told him firmly.

"All right, then," Jonas said. "Tell me how."

The Giver rose from his chair, went to the speaker on the wall, and clicked the switch from OFF to ON.

The voice spoke immediately. "Yes, Receiver. How may I help you?"

"I would like to see this morning's release of the twin."

"One moment, Receiver. Thank you for your instructions."

Jonas watched the video screen above the row of switches. Its blank face began to flicker with zig-zag lines; then some numbers appeared, followed by the date and time. He was astonished and delighted that this was available to him, and surprised that he had not known.

Suddenly he could see a small windowless room, empty except for a bed, a table with some equipment on it — Jonas recognized a scale; he had seen them before, when he'd been doing volunteer hours at the Nurturing Center —

and a cupboard. He could see pale carpeting on the floor.

"It's just an ordinary room," he commented. "I thought maybe they'd have it in the Auditorium, so that everybody could come. All the Old go to Ceremonies of Release. But I suppose that when it's just a newborn, they don't — "

"Shhh," The Giver said, his eyes on the screen.

Jonas's father, wearing his nurturing uniform, entered the room, cradling a tiny newchild wrapped in a soft blanket in his arms. A uniformed woman followed through the door, carrying a second newchild wrapped in a similar blanket.

"That's my father." Jonas found himself whispering, as if he might wake the little ones if he spoke aloud. "And the other Nurturer is his assistant. She's still in training, but she'll be finished soon."

The two Nurturers unwrapped the blankets and laid the identical newborns on the bed. They were naked. Jonas could see that they were males.

He watched, fascinated, as his father gently lifted one and then the other to the scale and weighed them.

He heard his father laugh. "Good," his father said to the woman. "I thought for a moment that they might both be exactly the same. *Then* we'd have a problem. But this one," he handed one, after rewrapping it, to his assistant, "is six pounds even. So you can clean him up and dress him and take him over to the Center."

The woman took the newchild and left through the door she had entered.

Jonas watched as his father bent over the squirming newchild on the bed. "And you, little guy, you're only five

pounds ten ounces. *A shrimp.*"

"That's the special voice he uses with Gabriel," Jonas remarked, smiling.

"Watch," The Giver said.

"Now he cleans him up and makes him comfy," Jonas told him. "He told me."

"Be quiet, Jonas," The Giver commanded in a strange voice. *"Watch."*

Obediently Jonas concentrated on the screen, waiting for what would happen next. He was especially curious about the ceremony part.

His father turned and opened the cupboard. He took out a syringe and a small bottle. Very carefully he inserted the needle into the bottle and began to fill the syringe with a clear liquid.

Jonas winced sympathetically. He had forgotten that newchildren had to get shots. He hated shots himself, though he knew that they were necessary.

To his surprise, his father began very carefully to direct the needle into the top of newchild's forehead, puncturing the place where the fragile skin pulsed. The newborn squirmed, and wailed faintly.

"Why's he — "

"Shhh," The Giver said sharply.

His father was talking, and Jonas realized that he was hearing the answer to the question he had started to ask. Still in the special voice, his father was saying, "I know, I know. It hurts, little guy. But I have to use a vein, and the veins in your arms are still too teeny-weeny."

He pushed the plunger very slowly, injecting the liquid into the scalp vein until the syringe was empty.

All done. That wasn't so hard, was it?" Jonas heard his father say cheerfully. He turned aside and dropped the syringe into a waste receptacle.

Now he cleans him up and makes him comfy, Jonas said to himself, aware that The Giver didn't want to talk during the little ceremony.

As he continued to watch, the newchild, no longer crying, moved his arms and legs in a jerking motion. Then he went limp. His head fell to the side, his eyes half open. Then he was still.

With an odd, shocked feeling, Jonas recognized the gestures and posture and expression. They were familiar. He had seen them before. But he couldn't remember where.

Jonas stared at the screen, waiting for something to happen. But nothing did. The little twin lay motionless. His father was putting things away. Folding the blanket. Closing the cupboard.

Once again, as he had on the playing field, he felt the choking sensation. Once again he saw the face of the light-haired, bloodied soldier as life left his eyes. The memory came back.

He killed it! My father killed it! Jonas said to himself, stunned at what he was realizing. He continued to stare at the screen numbly.

His father tidied the room. Then he picked up a small carton that lay waiting on the floor, set it on the bed, and lifted the limp body into it. He placed the lid on tightly.

He picked up the carton and carried it to the other side of the room. He opened a small door in the wall; Jonas could see darkness behind the door. It seemed to be the

same sort of chute into which trash was deposited at school.

His father loaded the carton containing the body into the chute and gave it a shove.

"Bye-bye, little guy," Jonas heard his father say before he left the room. Then the screen went blank.

The Giver turned to him. Quite calmly, he related, "When the Speaker notified me that Rosemary had applied for release, they turned on the tape to show me the process. There she was — my last glimpse of that beautiful child — waiting. They brought in the syringe and asked her to roll up her sleeve.

"You suggested, Jonas, that perhaps she wasn't brave enough? I don't know about bravery: what it is, what it means. I do know that I sat here numb with horror. Wretched with helplessness. And I listened as Rosemary told them that she would prefer to inject herself.

"Then she did so. I didn't watch. I looked away."

The Giver turned to him. "Well, there you are, Jonas. You were wondering about release," he said in a bitter voice.

Jonas felt a ripping sensation inside himself, the feeling of terrible pain clawing its way forward to emerge in a cry.

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"I won't! I won't go home! You can't make me!" Jonas sobbed and shouted and pounded the bed with his fists. "Sit up, Jonas," The Giver told him firmly.

Jonas obeyed him. Weeping, shuddering, he sat on the edge of the bed. He would not look at The Giver.

"You may stay here tonight. I want to talk to you. But you must be quiet now, while I notify your family unit. No one must hear you cry."

Jonas looked up wildly. "No one heard that little twin cry, either! No one but my father!" He collapsed in sobs again.

The Giver waited silently. Finally Jonas was able to quiet himself and he sat huddled, his shoulders shaking.

The Giver went to the wall speaker and clicked the switch to ON.

"Yes, Receiver. How may I help you?"

"Notify the new Receiver's family unit that he will be staying with me tonight, for additional training."

"I will take care of that, sir. Thank you for your instructions," the voice said.

"I will take care of that, sir. I will take care of that, sir," Jonas mimicked in a cruel, sarcastic voice. "I will do what-

ever you like, sir. I will kill people, sir. Old people? Small newborn people? I'd be happy to kill them, sir. Thank you for your instructions, sir. How may I help y — " He couldn't seem to stop.

The Giver grasped his shoulders firmly. Jonas fell silent and stared at him.

"Listen to me, Jonas. They can't help it. *They know nothing.*"

"You said that to me once before."

"I said it because it's true. It's the way they live. It's the life that was created for them. It's the same life that you would have, if you had not been chosen as my successor."

"But he *lied* to me!" Jonas wept.

"It's what he was told to do, and he knows nothing else."

"What about you? Do *you* lie to me, too?" Jonas almost spat the question at The Giver.

"I am empowered to lie. But I have never lied to you."

Jonas stared at him. "Release is always like that? For people who break the rules three times? For the *Old*? Do they kill the *Old*, too?"

"Yes, it's true."

"And what about Fiona? She loves the *Old*! She's in training to care for them. Does she know yet? What will she do when she finds out? How will she feel?" Jonas brushed wetness from his face with the back of one hand.

"Fiona is already being trained in the fine art of release," The Giver told him. "She's very efficient at her work, your red-haired friend. Feelings are not part of the life she's learned."

Jonas wrapped his arms around himself and rocked his

own body back and forth. "What should I do? I can't go back! I can't!"

The Giver stood up. "First, I will order our evening meal. Then we will eat."

Jonas found himself using the nasty, sarcastic voice again. "Then we'll have a sharing of feelings?"

The Giver gave a rueful, anguished, empty laugh. "Jonas, you and I are the only ones who *have* feelings. We've been sharing them now for almost a year."

"I'm sorry, Giver," Jonas said miserably. "I don't mean to be so hateful. Not to you."

The Giver rubbed Jonas's hunched shoulders. "And after we eat," he went on, "we'll make a plan."

Jonas looked up, puzzled. "A plan for what? There's nothing. There's nothing we can do. It's always been this way. Before me, before you, before the ones who came before you. Back and back and back." His voice trailed the familiar phrase.

"Jonas," The Giver said, after a moment, "it's true that it has been this way for what seems forever. But the memories tell us that it has not *always* been. People felt things once. You and I have been part of that, so we know. We know that they once felt things like pride, and sorrow, and —"

"And love," Jonas added, remembering the family scene that had so affected him. "And pain." He thought again of the soldier.

"The worst part of holding the memories is not the pain. It's the loneliness of it. Memories need to be shared."

"I've started to share them with you," Jonas said, trying to cheer him.

"That's true. And having you here with me over the past year has made me realize that things must change. For years I've felt that they should, but it seemed so hopeless."

"Now for the first time I think there might be a way," The Giver said slowly. "And you brought it to my attention, barely —" He glanced at the clock. "two hours ago."

Jonas watched him, and listened.

It was late at night, now. They had talked and talked. Jonas sat wrapped in a robe belonging to The Giver, the long robe that only Elders wore.

It was possible, what they had planned. Barely possible. If it failed, he would very likely be killed.

But what did that matter? If he stayed, his life was no longer worth living.

"Yes," he told The Giver. "I'll do it. I think I can do it. I'll try, anyway. But I want you to come with me."

The Giver shook his head. "Jonas," he said, "the community has depended, all these generations, back and back and back, on a resident Receiver to hold their memories for them. I've turned over many of them to you in the past year. And I can't take them back. There's no way for me to get them back if I have given them."

"So if you escape, once you are gone — and, Jonas, you know that you can never return —"

Jonas nodded solemnly. It was the terrifying part. "Yes," he said, "I know. But if you come with me —"

The Giver shook his head and made a gesture to silence him. He continued. "If you get away, if you get beyond, if you get to Elsewhere, it will mean that the community has

to bear the burden themselves, of the memories you had been holding for them.

"I think that they can, and that they will acquire some wisdom. But it will be desperately hard for them. When we lost Rosemary ten years ago, and her memories re-turned to the people, they panicked. And those were such few memories, compared to yours. When your memories return, they'll need help. Remember how I helped you in the beginning, when the receiving of memories was new to you?"

Jonas nodded. "It was scary at first. And it hurt a lot."

"You needed me then. And now they will."

"It's no use. They'll find someone to take my place. They'll choose a new Receiver."

"There's no one ready for training, not right away. Oh, they'll speed up the selection, of course. But I can't think of another child who has the right qualities — "

"There's a little female with pale eyes. But she's only a Six."

"That's correct. I know the one you mean. Her name is Katharine. But she's too young. So they will be *forced* to bear those memories."

"I want you to come, Giver," Jonas pleaded.

"No. I have to stay here," The Giver said firmly. "I want to, Jonas. If I go with you, and together we take away *all* their protection from the memories, Jonas, the community will be left with no one to help them. They'll be thrown into chaos. They'll destroy themselves. I can't go"

"Giver," Jonas suggested, "you and I don't need to *care* about the rest of them."

The Giver looked at him with a questioning smile. Jonas hung his head. Of course they needed to care. It was the meaning of everything.

"And in any case, Jonas," The Giver sighed, "I wouldn't make it. I'm very weakened now. Do you know that I no longer see colors?"

Jonas's heart broke. He reached for The Giver's hand.

"You have the colors," The Giver told him. "And you have the courage. I will help you to have the strength."

"A year ago," Jonas reminded him, "when I had just become a Twelve, when I began to see the first color, you told me that the beginning had been different for you. But that I wouldn't understand."

The Giver brightened. "That's true. And do you know, Jonas, that with all your knowledge now, with all your memories, with all you've learned — *still* you won't understand? Because I've been a little selfish. I haven't given any of it to you. I wanted to keep it for myself to the last."

"Keep what?"

"When I was just a boy, younger than you, it began to come to me. But it wasn't the seeing-beyond for me. It was different. For me, it was *hearing-beyond*."

Jonas frowned, trying to figure that out. "What did you hear?" he asked.

"Music," The Giver said, smiling. "I began to hear something truly remarkable, and it is called music. I'll give you some before I go."

Jonas shook his head emphatically. "No, Giver," he said. "I want you to keep that, to have with you, when I'm gone."

Jonas went home the next morning, cheerfully greeted his parents, and lied easily about what a busy, pleasant night he had had.

His father smiled and lied easily, too, about his busy and pleasant day the day before.

Throughout the school day, as he did his lessons, Jonas went over the plan in his head. It seemed startlingly simple. Jonas and The Giver had gone over it and over it, late into the night hours.

For the next two weeks, as the time for the December Ceremony approached, The Giver would transfer every memory of courage and strength that he could to Jonas. He would need those to help him find the Elsewhere that they were both sure existed. They knew it would be a very difficult journey.

Then, in the middle of the night before the Ceremony, Jonas would secretly leave his dwelling. This was probably the most dangerous part, because it was a violation of a major rule for any citizen not on official business to leave a dwelling at night.

"I'll leave at midnight," Jonas said. "The Food Collectors will be finished picking up the evening-meal remains by then, and the Path-Maintenance Crews don't start their work that early. So there won't be anyone to see me, unless of course someone is out on emergency business."

"I don't know what you should do if you are seen, Jonas," The Giver had said. "I have memories, of course, of all kinds of escapes. People fleeing from terrible things throughout history. But every situation is individual. There is no memory of one like this."

"I'll be careful," Jonas said. "No one will see me."

"As Receiver-in-training, you're held in very high respect already. So I think you wouldn't be questioned very forcefully."

"I'd just say I was on some important errand for the Receiver. I'd say it was all your fault that I was out after hours," Jonas teased.

They both laughed a little nervously. But Jonas was certain that he could slip away, unseen, from his house, carrying an extra set of clothing. Silently he would take his bicycle to the riverbank and leave it there hidden in bushes with the clothing folded beside it.

Then he would make his way through the darkness, on foot, silently, to the Annex.

"There's no nighttime attendant," The Giver explained. "I'll leave the door unlocked. You simply slip into the room. I'll be waiting for you."

His parents would discover, when they woke, that he was gone. They would also find a cheerful note from Jonas on his bed, telling them that he was going for an early morning ride along the river; that he would be back for the Ceremony.

His parents would be irritated but not alarmed. They would think him inconsiderate and they would plan to chastise him, later.

They would wait, with mounting anger, for him; finally they would be forced to go, taking Lily to the Ceremony without him.

"They won't say anything to anyone, though," Jonas said, quite certain. "They won't call attention to my rudeness because it would reflect on their parenting. And anyway, everyone is so involved in the Ceremony that they

probably won't notice that I'm not there. Now that I'm a Twelve and in training, I don't have to sit with my age group any more. So Asher will think I'm with my parents, or with you — "

"And your parents will assume you're with Asher, or with me — "

Jonas shrugged. "It will take everyone a while to realize that I'm not there at all."

"And you and I will be long on our way by then."

In the early morning, The Giver would order a vehicle and driver from the Speaker. He visited the other communities frequently, meeting with their Elders; his responsibilities extended over all the surrounding areas. So this would not be an unusual undertaking.

Ordinarily The Giver did not attend the December Ceremony. Last year he had been present because of the occasion of Jonas's selection, in which he was so involved. But his life was usually quite separate from that of the community. No one would comment on his absence, or on the fact that he had chosen this day to be away.

When the driver and vehicle arrived, The Giver would send the driver on some brief errand. During his absence, The Giver would help Jonas hide in the storage area of the vehicle. He would have with him a bundle of food which The Giver would save from his own meals during the next two weeks.

The Ceremony would begin, with all the community there, and by then Jonas and The Giver would be on their way.

By midday Jonas's absence would become apparent, and would be a cause for serious concern. The Ceremony

would not be disrupted — such a disruption would be unthinkable. But searchers would be sent out into the community.

By the time his bicycle and clothing were found, The Giver would be returning. Jonas, by then, would be on his own, making his journey Elsewhere.

The Giver, on his return, would find the community in a state of confusion and panic. Confronted by a situation which they had never faced before, and having no memories from which to find either solace or wisdom, they would not know what to do and would seek his advice.

He would go to the Auditorium where the people would be gathered, still. He would stride to the stage and command their attention.

He would make the solemn announcement that Jonas had been lost in the river. He would immediately begin the Ceremony of Loss.

"Jonas, Jonas," they would say loudly, as they had once said the name of Caleb. The Giver would lead the chant. Together they would let Jonas's presence in their lives fade away as they said his name in unison more slowly, softer and softer, until he was disappearing from them, until he was no more than an occasional murmur and then, by the end of the long day, gone forever, not to be mentioned again.

Their attention would turn to the overwhelming task of bearing the memories themselves. The Giver would help them.

"Yes, I understand that they'll need you," Jonas had said at the end of the lengthy discussion and planning. "But

I'll need you, too. Please come with me." He knew the answer even as he made the final plea.

"My work will be finished," The Giver had replied gently, "when I have helped the community to change and become whole."

"I'm grateful to you, Jonas, because without you I would never have figured out a way to bring about the change. But your role now is to escape. And my role is to stay."

"But don't you *want* to be with me, Giver?" Jonas asked sadly.

The Giver hugged him. "I love you, Jonas," he said. "But I have another place to go. When my work here is finished, I want to be with my daughter."

Jonas had been staring glumly at the floor. Now he looked up, startled. "I didn't know you had a daughter, Giver! You told me that you'd had a spouse. But I never knew about your daughter."

The Giver smiled, and nodded. For the first time in their long months together, Jonas saw him look truly happy.

"Her name was Rosemary," The Giver said.

21

It would work. They could make it work, Jonas told himself again and again throughout the day.

But that evening everything changed. All of it — all the things they had thought through so meticulously — fell apart.

That night, Jonas was forced to flee. He left the dwelling shortly after the sky became dark and the community still. It was terribly dangerous because some of the work crews were still about, but he moved stealthily and silently, staying in the shadows, making his way past the darkened dwellings and the empty Central Plaza, toward the river. Beyond the Plaza he could see the House of the Old, with the Annex behind it, outlined against the night sky. But he could not stop there. There was no time. Every minute counted now, and every minute must take him farther from the community.

Now he was on the bridge, hunched over on the bicycle, pedaling steadily. He could see the dark, churning water far below.

He felt, surprisingly, no fear, nor any regret at leaving

the community behind. But he felt a very deep sadness that he had left his closest friend behind. He knew that in the danger of his escape he must be absolutely silent; but with his heart and mind, he called back and hoped that with his capacity for hearing-beyond, The Giver would know that Jonas had said goodbye.

It had happened at the evening meal. The family unit was eating together as always: Lily chattering away, Mother and Father making their customary comments (and lies, Jonas knew) about the day. Nearby, Gabriel played happily on the floor, babbling his baby talk, looking with glee now and then toward Jonas, obviously delighted to have him back after the unexpected night away from the dwelling.

Father glanced down toward the toddler. "Enjoy it, little guy," he said. "This is your last night as visitor."

"What do you mean?" Jonas asked him.

Father sighed with disappointment. "Well, you know he wasn't here when you got home this morning because we had him stay overnight at the Nurturing Center. It seemed like a good opportunity, with you gone, to give it a try. He'd been sleeping so soundly."

"Didn't it go well?" Mother asked sympathetically.

Father gave a rueful laugh. "That's an understatement. It was a disaster. He cried all night, apparently. The night crew couldn't handle it. They were *really* frazzled by the time I got to work."

"Gabe, you naughty thing," Lily said, with a scolding little cluck toward the grinning toddler on the floor. "So," Father went on, "we obviously had to make the

decision. Even I voted for Gabriel's release when we had the meeting this afternoon."

Jonas put down his fork and stared at his father. "Release?" he asked.

Father nodded. "We certainly gave it our best try, didn't we?"

"Yes, we did," Mother agreed emphatically.

Lily nodded in agreement, too.

Jonas worked at keeping his voice absolutely calm. "When?" he asked. "When will he be released?"

"First thing tomorrow morning. We have to start our preparations for the Naming Ceremony, so we thought we'd get this taken care of right away."

"It's bye-bye to you, Gabe, in the morning," Father had said, in his sweet, sing-song voice.

Jonas reached the opposite side of the river, stopped briefly, and looked back. The community where his entire life had been lived lay behind him now, sleeping. At dawn, the orderly, disciplined life he had always known would continue again, without him. The life where nothing was ever unexpected. Or inconvenient. Or unusual. The life without color, pain, or past.

He pushed firmly again at the pedal with his foot and continued riding along the road. It was not safe to spend time looking back. He thought of the rules he had broken so far: enough that if he were caught, now, he would be condemned.

First, he had left the dwelling at night. A major transgression.

Second, he had robbed the community of food: a very

serious crime, even though what he had taken was leftovers, set out on the dwelling doorsteps for collection.

Third, he had stolen his father's bicycle. He had hesitated for a moment, standing beside the bikeport in the darkness, not wanting anything of his father's and uncertain, as well, whether he could comfortably ride the larger bike when he was so accustomed to his own.

But it was necessary because it had the child seat attached to the back.

And he had taken Gabriel, too.

He could feel the little head nudge his back, bouncing gently against him as he rode. Gabriel was sleeping soundly, strapped into the seat. Before he had left the dwelling, he had laid his hands firmly on Gabe's back and transmitted to him the most soothing memory he could: a slow-swinging hammock under palm trees on an island someplace, at evening, with a rhythmic sound of languid water lapping hypnotically against a beach nearby. As the memory seeped from him into the newchild, he could feel Gabe's sleep ease and deepen. There had been no stir at all when Jonas lifted him from the crib and placed him gently into the molded seat.

He knew that he had the remaining hours of night before they would be aware of his escape. So he rode hard, steadily, willing himself not to tire as the minutes and miles passed. There had been no time to receive the memories he and The Giver had counted on, of strength and courage. So he relied on what he had, and hoped it would be enough.

He circled the outlying communities, their dwellings

dark. Gradually the distances between communities widened, with longer stretches of empty road. His legs ached at first; then, as time passed, they became numb.

At dawn Gabriel began to stir. They were in an isolated place; fields on either side of the road were dotted with thickets of trees here and there. He saw a stream, and made his way to it across a rutted, bumpy meadow; Gabriel, wide awake now, giggled as the bicycle jolted him up and down.

Jonas unstrapped Gabe, lifted him from the bike, and watched him investigate the grass and twigs with delight. Carefully he hid the bicycle in thick bushes.

"Morning meal, Gabe!" He unwrapped some of the food and fed them both. Then he filled the cup he had brought with water from the stream and held it for Gabriel to drink. He drank thirstily himself, and sat by the stream, watching the newchild play.

He was exhausted. He knew he must sleep, resting his own muscles and preparing himself for more hours on the bicycle. It would not be safe to travel in daylight.

They would be looking for him soon.

He found a place deeply hidden in the trees, took the newchild there, and lay down, holding Gabriel in his arms. Gabe struggled cheerfully as if it were a wrestling game, the kind they had played back in the dwelling, with tickles and laughter.

"Sorry, Gabe," Jonas told him. "I know it's morning, and I know you just woke up. But we have to sleep now."

He cuddled the small body close to him, and rubbed the little back. He murmured to Gabriel soothingly. Then

he pressed his hands firmly and transmitted a memory of deep, contented exhaustion. Gabriel's head nodded, after a moment, and fell against Jonas's chest.

Together the fugitives slept through the first dangerous day.

The most terrifying thing was the planes. By now, days had passed; Jonas no longer knew how many. The journey had become automatic: the sleep by days, hidden in underbrush and trees; the finding of water; the careful division of scraps of food, augmented by what he could find in the fields. And the endless, endless miles on the bicycle by night.

His leg muscles were taut now. They ached when he settled himself to sleep. But they were stronger, and he stopped now less often to rest. Sometimes he paused and lifted Gabriel down for a brief bit of exercise, running down the road or through a field together in the dark. But always, when he returned, strapped the uncomplaining toddler into the seat again, and remounted, his legs were ready.

So he had enough strength of his own, and had not needed what The Giver might have provided, had there been time.

But when the planes came, he wished that he could have received the courage.

He knew they were search planes. They flew so low that they woke him with the noise of their engines, and sometimes, looking out and up fearfully from the hiding places, he could almost see the faces of the searchers.

He knew that they could not see color, and that their

flesh, as well as Gabriel's light golden curls, would be no more than smears of gray against the colorless foliage. But he remembered from his science and technology studies at school that the search planes used heat-seeking devices which could identify body warmth and would hone in on two humans huddled in shrubbery.

So always, when he heard the aircraft sound, he reached to Gabriel and transmitted memories of snow, keeping some for himself. Together they became cold; and when the planes were gone, they would shiver, holding each other, until sleep came again.

Sometimes, urging the memories into Gabriel, Jonas felt that they were more shallow, a little weaker than they had been. It was what he had hoped, and what he and The Giver had planned: that as he moved away from the community, he would shed the memories and leave them behind for the people. But now, when he needed them, when the planes came, he tried hard to cling to what he still had, of cold, and to use it for their survival.

Usually the aircraft came by day, when they were hiding. But he was alert at night, too, on the road, always listening intently for the sound of the engines. Even Gabriel listened, and would call out, "Plane! Plane!" sometimes before Jonas had heard the terrifying noise. When the aircraft searchers came, as they did occasionally, during the night as they rode, Jonas sped to the nearest tree or bush, dropped to the ground, and made himself and Gabriel cold. But it was sometimes a frighteningly close call.

As he pedaled through the nights, through isolated landscape now, with the communities far behind and no sign of human habitation around him or ahead, he was

constantly vigilant, looking for the next nearest hiding place should the sound of engines come.

But the frequency of the planes diminished. They came less often, and flew, when they did come, less slowly, as if the search had become haphazard and no longer hopeful. Finally there was an entire day and night when they did not come at all.

22

Now the landscape was changing. It was a subtle change, hard to identify at first. The road was narrower, and bumpy, apparently no longer tended by road crews. It was harder, suddenly, to balance on the bike, as the front wheel wobbled over stones and ruts.

One night Jonas fell, when the bike jolted to a sudden stop against a rock. He grabbed instinctively for Gabriel; and the newchild, strapped tightly in his seat, was uninjured, only frightened when the bike fell to its side. But Jonas's ankle was twisted, and his knees were scraped and raw, blood seeping through his torn trousers. Painfully he righted himself and the bike, and reassured Gabe.

Tentatively he began to ride in daylight. He had forgotten the fear of the searchers, who seemed to have diminished into the past. But now there were new fears; the unfamiliar landscape held hidden, unknown perils.

Trees became more numerous, and the forests beside the road were dark and thick with mystery. They saw streams more frequently now and stopped often to drink. Jonas carefully washed his injured knees, wincing as he rubbed at the raw flesh. The constant ache of his swollen ankle was eased when he soaked it occasionally in the cold water that rushed through roadside gullies.

He was newly aware that Gabriel's safety depended entirely upon his own continued strength.

They saw their first waterfall, and for the first time wildlife.

"Plane! Plane!" Gabriel called, and Jonas turned swiftly into the trees, though he had not seen planes in days, and he did not hear an aircraft engine now. When he stopped the bicycle in the shrubbery and turned to grab Gabe, he saw the small chubby arm pointing toward the sky.

Terrified, he looked up, but it was not a plane at all. Though he had never seen one before, he identified it from his fading memories, for The Giver had given them to him often. It was a bird.

Soon there were many birds along the way, soaring overhead, calling. They saw deer; and once, beside the road, looking at them curious and unafraid, a small reddish-brown creature with a thick tail, whose name Jonas did not know. He slowed the bike and they stared at one another until the creature turned away and disappeared into the woods.

All of it was new to him. After a life of Sameness and predictability, he was awed by the surprises that lay beyond each curve of the road. He slowed the bike again and again to look with wonder at wildflowers, to enjoy the throaty warble of a new bird nearby, or merely to watch the way wind shifted the leaves in the trees. During his twelve years in the community, he had never felt such simple moments of exquisite happiness.

But there were desperate fears building in him now as well. The most relentless of his new fears was that they would starve. Now that they had left the cultivated fields

behind them, it was almost impossible to find food. They finished the meager store of potatoes and carrots they had saved from the last agricultural area, and now they were always hungry.

Jonas knelt by a stream and tried without success to catch a fish with his hands. Frustrated, he threw rocks into the water, knowing even as he did so that it was useless. Finally, in desperation, he fashioned a makeshift net, looping the strands of Gabriel's blanket around a curved stick.

After countless tries, the net yielded two flopping silvery fish. Methodically Jonas hacked them to pieces with a sharp rock and fed the raw shreds to himself and to Gabriel. They ate some berries, and tried without success to catch a bird.

At night, while Gabriel slept beside him, Jonas lay awake, tortured by hunger, and remembered his life in the community where meals were delivered to each dwelling every day.

He tried to use the flagging power of his memory to re-create meals, and managed brief, tantalizing fragments: banquets with huge roasted meats; birthday parties with thick-frosted cakes; and lush fruits picked and eaten, sun-warmed and dripping, from trees.

But when the memory glimpses subsided, he was left with the gnawing, painful emptiness. Jonas remembered, suddenly and grimly, the time in his childhood when he had been chastised for misusing a word. The word had been "starving." You have never been starving, he had been told. You will never be starving.

Now he was. If he had stayed in the community, he

would not be. It was as simple as that. Once he had yearned for choice. Then, when he had had a choice, he had made the wrong one: the choice to leave. And now he was starving.

But if he had stayed ...

His thoughts continued. If he had stayed, he would have starved in other ways. He would have lived a life hungry for feelings, for color, for love.

And Gabriel? For Gabriel there would have been no life at all. So there had not really been a choice.

It became a struggle to ride the bicycle as Jonas weakened from lack of food, and realized at the same time that he was encountering something he had for a long time yearned to see: hills. His sprained ankle throbbed as he forced the pedal downward in an effort that was almost beyond him.

And the weather was changing. It rained for two days. Jonas had never seen rain, though he had experienced it often in the memories. He had liked those rains, enjoyed the new feeling of it, but this was different. He and Gabriel became cold and wet, and it was hard to get dry, even when sunshine occasionally followed.

Gabriel had not cried during the long frightening journey. Now he did. He cried because he was hungry and cold and terribly weak. Jonas cried, too, for the same reasons, and another reason as well. He wept because he was afraid now that he could not save Gabriel. He no longer cared about himself.

23

Jonas felt more and more certain that the destination lay ahead of him, very near now in the night that was approaching. None of his senses confirmed it. He saw nothing ahead except the endless ribbon of road unfolding in twisting narrow curves. He heard no sound ahead.

Yet he felt it: felt that Elsewhere was not far away. But he had little hope left that he would be able to reach it. His hope diminished further when the sharp, cold air began to blur and thicken with swirling white.

Gabriel, wrapped in his inadequate blanket, was hunched, shivering, and silent in his little seat. Jonas stopped the bike wearily, lifted the child down, and realized with heartbreak how cold and weak Gabe had become.

Standing in the freezing mound that was thickening around his numb feet, Jonas opened his own tunic, held Gabriel to his bare chest, and tied the torn and dirty blanket around them both. Gabriel moved feebly against him and whimpered briefly into the silence that surrounded them.

Dimly, from a nearly forgotten perception as blurred as the substance itself, Jonas recalled what the whiteness was.

"It's called snow, Gabe," Jonas whispered. "Snowflakes. They fall down from the sky, and they're very beautiful."

There was no response from the child who had once been so curious and alert. Jonas looked down through the dusk at the little head against his chest. Gabriel's curly hair was matted and filthy, and there were tearstains out-lined in dirt on his pale cheeks. His eyes were closed. As Jonas watched, a snowflake drifted down and was caught briefly for a moment's sparkle in the tiny fluttering eye-lashes.

Wearily he remounted the bicycle. A steep hill loomed ahead. In the best of conditions, the hill would have been a difficult, demanding ride. But now the rapidly deepening snow obscured the narrow road and made the ride impossible. His front wheel moved forward imperceptibly as he pushed on the pedals with his numb, exhausted legs. But the bicycle stopped. It would not move.

He got off and let it drop sideways into the snow. For a moment he thought how easy it would be to drop beside it himself, to let himself and Gabriel slide into the softness of snow, the darkness of night, the warm comfort of sleep.

But he had come this far. He must try to go on.

The memories had fallen behind him now, escaping from his protection to return to the people of his community. Were there any left at all? Could he hold onto a last bit of warmth? Did he still have the strength to Give? Could Gabriel still Receive?

He pressed his hands into Gabriel's back and tried to remember sunshine. For a moment it seemed that nothing came to him, that his power was completely gone. Then it

flickered suddenly, and he felt tiny tongues of heat begin to creep across and into his frozen feet and legs. He felt his face begin to glow and the tense, cold skin of his arms and hands relax. For a fleeting second he felt that he wanted to keep it for himself, to let himself bathe in sunlight, unburdened by anything or anyone else.

But the moment passed and was followed by an urge, a need, a passionate yearning to share the warmth with the one person left for him to love. Aching from the effort, he forced the memory of warmth into the thin, shivering body in his arms.

Gabriel stirred. For a moment they both were bathed in warmth and renewed strength as they stood hugging each other in the blinding snow.

Jonas began to walk up the hill.

The memory was agonizingly brief. He had trudged no more than a few yards through the night when it was gone and they were cold again.

But his mind was alert now. Warming himself ever so briefly had shaken away the lethargy and resignation and restored his will to survive. He began to walk faster on feet that he could no longer feel. But the hill was treacherously steep; he was impeded by the snow and his own lack of strength. He didn't make it very far before he stumbled and fell forward.

On his knees, unable to rise, Jonas tried a second time. His consciousness grasped at a wisp of another warm memory, and tried desperately to hold it there, to enlarge it, and pass it into Gabriel. His spirits and strength lifted with the momentary warmth and he stood. Again, Gabriel stirred against him as he began to climb.

But the memory faded, leaving him colder than before.

If only he had had time to receive more warmth from The Giver before he escaped! Maybe there would be more left for him now. But there was no purpose in if-onlys. His entire concentration now had to be on moving his feet, warming Gabriel and himself, and going forward.

He climbed, stopped, and warmed them both briefly again, with a tiny scrap of memory that seemed certainly to be all he had left.

The top of the hill seemed so far away, and he did not know what lay beyond. But there was nothing left to do but continue. He trudged upward.

As he approached the summit of the hill at last, something began to happen. He was not warmer; if anything, he felt more numb and more cold. He was not less exhausted; on the contrary, his steps were leaden, and he could barely move his freezing, tired legs.

But he began, suddenly, to feel happy. He began to recall happy times. He remembered his parents and his sister. He remembered his friends, Asher and Fiona. He remembered The Giver.

Memories of joy flooded through him suddenly.

He reached the place where the hill crested and he could feel the ground under his snow-covered feet become level. It would not be uphill anymore.

"We're almost there, Gabriel," he whispered, feeling quite certain without knowing why. "I remember this place, Gabe." And it was true. But it was not a grasping of a thin and burdensome recollection; this was different. This was something that he could keep. It was a memory of his own.

He hugged Gabriel and rubbed him briskly, warming him, to keep him alive. The wind was bitterly cold. The snow swirled, blurring his vision. But somewhere ahead, through the blinding storm, he knew there was warmth and light.

Using his final strength, and a special knowledge that was deep inside him, Jonas found the sled that was waiting for them at the top of the hill. Numbly his hands fumbled for the rope.

He settled himself on the sled and hugged Gabe close. The hill was steep but the snow was powdery and soft, and he knew that this time there would be no ice, no fall, no pain. Inside his freezing body, his heart surged with hope.

They started down.

Jonas felt himself losing consciousness and with his whole being willed himself to stay upright atop the sled, clutching Gabriel, keeping him safe. The runners sliced through the snow and the wind whipped at his face as they sped in a straight line through an incision that seemed to lead to the final destination, the place that he had always felt was waiting, the Elsewhere that held their future and their past.

He forced his eyes open as they went downward, downward, sliding, and all at once he could see lights, and he recognized them now. He knew they were shining through the windows of rooms, that they were the red, blue, and yellow lights that twinkled from trees in places where families created and kept memories, where they celebrated love.

Downward, downward, faster and faster. Suddenly he

was aware with certainty and joy that below, ahead, they were waiting for him; and that they were waiting, too, for the baby. For the first time, he heard something that he knew to be music. He heard people singing.

Behind him, across vast distances of space and time, from the place he had left, he thought he heard music too. But perhaps it was only an echo.

A COMPANION TO THE GIVER

MESSENGER

LOIS LOWRY

MESSENGER

By LOIS LOWRY



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One

Matty was impatient to have the supper preparations over and done with. He wanted to cook, eat, and be gone. He wished he were grown so that he could decide when to eat, or whether to bother eating at all. There was something he needed to do, a thing that scared him. Waiting just made it worse.

Matty was no longer a boy, but not yet a man. Sometimes, standing outside the homeplace, he measured himself against the window. Once he had stood only to its sill, his forehead there, pressing into the wood, but now he was so tall he could see inside without effort. Or, moving back in the high grass, he could see himself reflected in the glass pane. His face was becoming manly, he thought, though childishly he still enjoyed making scowls and frowns at his own reflection. His voice was deepening.

He lived with the blind man, the one they called Seer, and helped him. He cleaned the homeplace, though cleaning bored him. The man said it was necessary. So Matty swept the wooden floor each day and straightened the bedcovers: neatly on the man's bed, with haphazard indifference on his own, in the room next to the kitchen. They shared the cooking. The man laughed at Matty's concoctions and tried to teach him, but Matty was impatient and didn't care about the subtlety of herbs.

"We can just put it all together in the pot," Matty insisted. "It all goes together in our bellies anyway."

It was a long-standing and friendly argument. Seer chuckled. "Smell this," he said, and held out the pale green shoot that he'd been chopping.

Matty sniffed dutifully. "Onion," he said, and shrugged. "We can just throw it in.

"Or," he added, "we don't even need to cook it. But then our breath stinks. There's a girl promised she'd kiss me if I have sweet breath. But I think she's teasing."

The blind man smiled in the boy's direction. "Teasing's part of the fun that comes before kissing," he told Matty, whose face had flushed pink with embarrassment.

"You could trade for a kiss," the blind man suggested with a chuckle. "What would you give? Your fishing pole?"

"Don't. Don't joke about the trading."

"You're right, I shouldn't. It used to be a light-hearted thing. But now—you're right, Matty. It's not to be laughed at anymore."

"My friend Ramon went to the last Trade Mart, with his parents. But he won't talk about it."

"We won't then, either. Is the butter melted in the pan?"

Matty looked. The butter was bubbling slightly and golden brown. "Yes."

"Add the onion, then. Stir it so it doesn't burn."

Matty obeyed.

"Now smell *that*," the blind man said. Matty sniffed. The gently sautéing onion released an aroma that made his mouth water.

"Better than raw?" Seer asked.

"But a bother," Matty replied impatiently. "Cooking's a bother."

"Add some sugar. Just a pinch or two. Let it cook for a minute and then we'll put the rabbit in. Don't be so impatient, Matty. You always want to rush things, and there's no need."

"I want to go out before night comes. I have something to check. I need to eat supper and get out there to the clearing before it's dark."

The blind man laughed. He picked up the rabbit parts from the table, and as always, Matty was

amazed at how sure his hands were, how he knew just where things had been left. He watched while the man deftly patted flour onto the pieces of meat and then added the rabbit to the pan. The aroma changed when the meat sizzled next to the softened onion. The man added a handful of herbs.

"It doesn't matter to *you* if it's dark or light outside," Matty told him, scowling, "but I need the daylight to look at something."

"What something is that?" Seer asked, then added, "When the meat has browned, add some broth so it doesn't stick to the pan."

Matty obeyed, tilting into the pan the bowl of broth in which the rabbit had been boiled earlier. The dark liquid picked up chunks of onion and chopped herbs, and swirled them around the pieces of meat. He knew to put the lid on now, and to turn the fire low. The stew simmered and he began to set the plates on the table where they would have their supper together.

He hoped the blind man would forget that he had asked *what something*. He didn't want to tell. Matty was puzzled by what he had hidden in the clearing. It frightened him, not knowing what it meant. He wondered for a moment whether he could trade it away.

When, finally, the supper dishes were washed and put away, and the blind man sat in the cushioned chair and picked up the stringed instrument that he played in the evening, Matty inched his way to the door, hoping to slip away unnoticed. But the man heard everything that moved. Matty had known him to hear a spider scurry from one side of its web to another.

"Off to Forest again?"

Matty sighed. No escaping. "I'll be back by dark."

"Could be. But light the lamp, in case you're late. After dark it's nice to have window light to aim for. I remember what Forest was like at night."

"Remember from when?"

The man smiled. "From when I could see. Long before you were born."

"Were you scared of Forest?" Matty asked him. So many people were, and with good reason.

"No. It's all an illusion."

Matty frowned. He didn't know what the blind man meant. Was he saying that fear was an illusion? Or that Forest was? He glanced over. The blind man was rubbing the polished wooden side of his instrument with a soft cloth. His thoughts had turned to the smooth wood, though he couldn't see the golden maple with its curly grain. Maybe, Matty thought, *everything* was an illusion to a man who had lost his eyes.

Matty lengthened the wick and checked the lamp to be certain there was oil. Then he struck a match.

"Now you're glad I made you clean the soot from the lamp chimneys, aren't you?" The blind man didn't expect an answer. He moved his fingers on the strings, listening for the tone. Carefully, as he did most evenings, he tuned the instrument. He could hear variations in sounds that seemed to the boy to be all the same. Matty stood in the doorway for a moment, watching. On the table, the lamp flickered. The man sat with his head tilted toward the window so that the summer early-evening light outlined the scars on his face. He listened, then turned a small screw on the back of the instrument's wooden neck, then listened again. Now he was concentrating on the sounds, and had forgotten the boy. Matty slipped away.

Heading for the path that entered Forest at the edge of Village, Matty went by a roundabout way so that he could pass the home of the schoolteacher, a good-hearted man with a deep red stain that

covered half of his face. Birthmark, it was called. When Matty was new to Village, he had sometimes found himself staring at the man because he had never known anyone before with such a mark. Where Matty had come from, flaws like that were not allowed. People were put to death for less.

But here in Village, marks and failings were not considered flaws at all. They were valued. The blind man had been given the true name Seer and was respected for the special vision that he had behind his ruined eyes.

The schoolteacher, though his true name was Mentor, was sometimes affectionately called "Rosy" by the children because of the crimson birthmark that spread across his face. Children loved him. He was a wise and patient teacher. Matty, just a boy when he first came here to live with the blind man, had attended school full time for a while, and still went for added learning on winter afternoons. Mentor had been the one who taught him to sit still, to listen, and eventually to read.

He passed by the schoolteacher's house not to see Mentor, or to admire the lavish flower garden, but in hopes of seeing the schoolteacher's pretty daughter, who was named Jean and who had recently teased Matty with the promise of a kiss. Often she was in the garden, weeding, in the evenings.

But tonight there was no sign of her, or her father. Matty saw a fat spotted dog sleeping on the porch, but it appeared that no one was at home.

Just as well, he thought. Jean would have delayed him with her giggles and teasing promises—which always came to nothing, and Matty knew that she made them to all the boys—and he should not even have made the side trip in hopes of seeing her.

He took a stick and drew a heart in the dirt on the path beside her garden. Carefully he put her name in the heart, and his own below it. Maybe she would see it and know he had been there, and maybe she would care.

"Hey, Matty! What are you doing?" It was his friend Ramon, coming around the corner. "Have you had supper? Want to come eat with us?"

Quickly Matty moved toward Ramon, hiding the heart traced in the dirt behind him and hoping his friend wouldn't notice it. It was always fun, in a way, to go to Ramon's homeplace, because his family had recently traded for something called a Gaming Machine, a large decorated box with a handle that you pulled to make three wheels spin around inside. Then a bell rang and the wheels stopped at a small window. If their pictures matched, the machine spit out a chunk of candy. It was very exciting to play.

Sometimes he wondered what they had sacrificed for the Gaming Machine, but one never asked.

"We ate already," he said. "I have to go someplace before it gets dark, so we ate early."

"I'd come with you, but I have a cough, and Herbalist said I shouldn't run around too much. I promised to go right home," Ramon said. "But if you wait, I'll run and ask . . ."

"No," Matty replied quickly. "I have to go alone."

"Oh, it's for a message?"

It wasn't, but Matty nodded. It bothered him a little to lie about small things. But he always had; he had grown up lying, and he still found it strange that the people in this place where he now lived thought lying was wrong. To Matty, it was sometimes a way of making things easier, more comfortable, more convenient.

"See you tomorrow, then." Ramon waved and hurried on toward his own homeplace.

Matty knew the paths of Forest as if he had made them. And indeed, some of them *were* of his making, over the years. The roots had flattened as he made his way here and there, seeking the shortest, safest route from place to place. He was swift and quiet in the woods, and he could feel the direction of

things without landmarks, in the same way that he could feel weather and was able to predict rain long before the clouds came or there was a shift in wind. Matty simply *knew*.

Others from Village rarely ventured into Forest. It was dangerous for them. Sometimes Forest closed in and entangled people who had tried to travel beyond. There had been terrible deaths, with bodies brought out strangled by vines or branches that had reached out malevolently around the throats and limbs of those who decided to leave Village. Somehow Forest knew. Somehow, too, it knew that Matty's travels were benign and necessary. The vines had never reached out for him. The trees seemed, sometimes, almost to part and usher him through.

"Forest likes me," he had proudly commented once to the blind man.

Seer had agreed. "Maybe it needs you," he pointed out.

The people needed Matty, too. They trusted him to know the paths, to be safe on them, and to do the errands that required traveling through the thick woods with its complicated, mazelike turnings. He carried messages for them. It was his job. He thought that when it came time to be assigned his true name, *Messenger* would be the choice. He liked the sound of it and looked forward to taking that title.

But this evening Matty was not carrying or collecting a message, though he had fibbed and told Ramon so. He headed to a clearing he knew of, a place that lay just beyond a thick stand of bristly pines. Deftly he jumped a small brook, then turned off the worn path to proceed between two trees, pushing his way through. These trees had grown fast in recent years, and now the clearing was completely concealed and had become Matty's private place.

He needed privacy for this thing he was discovering about himself: a place to test it in secret, to weigh his own fear for what it meant.

It was dim in the clearing. Behind him, the sun was starting to set over Village, and the light that reached down through Forest was pinkish and pale. Matty made his way across the mossy ground of the clearing to a thicket of tall ferns near the base of a tree. He squatted there and listened, leaning his head toward the ferns. Softly he made a sound, one he had practiced; a brief moment later, he heard the sound he had both hoped and dreaded to hear, in response.

He reached gently into the undergrowth and lifted out a small frog. From his hand, it looked up at him through bulging, unafraid eyes, and made the sound again: *churrump*.

Churrump.

Churrump.

Matty repeated the frog's throaty sound, as if they were conversing. Though he was nervous, the back-and-forth sounds made him laugh a little. He examined the slick green body carefully. The frog made no effort to leap from his hand. It was passive in his palm, and the deep translucent throat quivered.

He found what he was looking for. In a way, he had hoped he would not. His life would be easier, Matty knew, if the little frog were unmarked and ordinary. But it was not; he had known it would not be; and he knew that things were all shifting for him now. His future had taken a new and secret turn. It was not the frog's fault, he realized, and gently he replaced the small green creature in the tall ferns and watched the fronds tremble as it moved away, unaware. He realized that he was trembling as well.

Returning to Village along the path that was deep in shadows now, Matty heard sounds from the area beyond the marketplace. At first he thought in surprise that people were singing. Singing was common in Village, but usually not outdoors, not in the evening. Puzzled, he paused and listened. It was not

singing at all, Matty realized, but the rhythmic and mournful sound they called keening, the sound of loss. He set aside his other worries and began to hurry through the evening's last light to the homeplace, where the blind man would be waiting and would explain.

Two

Did you hear about what happened to Gatherer last night? He tried to go back but it had been too long." Ramon and Matty, carrying their fishing rods, had met for an excursion to catch salmon, and Ramon was bursting with the news.

Matty winced at what his friend said. So Gatherer had been taken by Forest. He was a cheerful man who loved children and small animals, who smiled often and told boisterous jokes.

Ramon spoke in the self-important tone of one who likes being a conveyor of news. Matty was very fond of his friend but sometimes suspected that his true name might eventually turn out to be Boaster.

"How do you know?"

"They found him last night on the path behind the schoolhouse. After I left you, I heard the commotion. I saw them bring his body in."

"I heard the noise. Seer and I thought it must be someone taken."

Matty had arrived at the homeplace the night before to find the blind man preparing for bed and listening attentively to the low collective moan, clearly a large number of people grieving.

"Someone's been lost," the blind man had said with a worried look, pausing while unbuckling his shoes. He sat on his bed, dressed in his nightshirt.

"Should I take a message to Leader?"

"He'll know already, from the sound. It's a keening."

"Should we go?" Matty asked him. In a way, he had wanted to. He had never attended a keening. But in another way, he was relieved to see the blind man shake his head no.

"They have enough. It sounds like a good-sized group; I can hear at least twelve."

As always, Matty was amazed at the capacity of the blind man's perceptions. He himself heard only the chorus of wails. "Twelve?" he asked, and then teased, "Are you sure it's not eleven, or thirteen?"

"I hear at least seven women," the blind man said, not noticing that Matty had intended it as a joke. "Each has a different pitch. And I think five men, though one is quite young, maybe your age. The voice is not as deep as it will be later. It may be that friend of yours; what's his name?"

"Ramon?"

"Yes. I think I hear Ramon's voice. He's hoarse."

"Yes, he has a cough. He's taking herbs for it."

Now, recalling it, Matty asked his friend, "Did you keen? I think we may have heard you."

"Yes. They had enough. But since I was there, they let me join. I have this cough, though, so my voice wasn't very good. I only went because I wanted to see the body. I've never seen one."

"Of course you have. You were with me when we watched them lay out Stocktender for burial. And you saw that little girl after she fell in the river and they pulled her out drowned. I remember you were there."

"I meant entangled," Ramon explained. "I've seen plenty of dead. But till last night I never saw one entangled."

Neither had Matty. He had only heard of it. Entangling happened so rarely that he had begun to think of it as a myth, something from the past. "What was it like? They say it's hideous."

Ramon nodded. "It was. It looked as if first the vines grabbed him by the neck and pulled tight. Poor Gatherer. He had grabbed at them to pull loose but then they curled around his hands as well. He was completely entangled. The look on his face was fearsome. His eyes were open but twigs and all

had started to enter under the lids. And they were in his mouth, too. I could see something wrapped around his tongue."

Matty shuddered. "He was such a nice man," he said. "He always tossed berries to us when he was out gathering. I would open my mouth wide and he would aim for it. If I caught a berry in my mouth he cheered and gave me extra."

"Me too." Ramon looked sad. "And his wife has a new baby. Someone said that's why he went. He wanted to go tell her family about the baby."

"But didn't he know what would happen? Hadn't he received Warnings?"

Ramon coughed suddenly. He bent over and gasped. Then he straightened up and shrugged. "His wife says not. He went once before, when their first child was born, and had no trouble. No Warning."

Matty thought about it. Gatherer must have overlooked a Warning. The early ones were sometimes small. He felt great sadness for the gentle, happy man who had been so brutally entangled and had left two children fatherless. Forest always gave Warnings, Matty knew. He entered so often himself and always was watchful. If he had one Warning, even the smallest, he would never enter again. The blind man had entered only once, to return to his original village when it needed his wisdom. He had come back safely, but he had had a small Warning on his return: a sudden painful puncture from what had seemed a tiny twig. He couldn't see it, of course, though later he said he had felt it come forward, had perceived it with the kind of knowledge that had made the people designate Seer as his true name. But Matty, still a young boy, had been with him then, as a guide; and Matty had seen the twig grow, expand, sharpen, aim itself, and stab. There was no question. It was a Warning. The blind man could never enter Forest again. His time for going back had ended.

Yet Matty had never been warned. Again and again he entered Forest, moved along its trails, spoke to its creatures. He understood that for some reason, he was special to Forest. He had traveled its paths for years, six years now, since that first time, when he was still very young and had left the home that had been cruel to him.

"I'm never going in," Ramon said firmly. "Not after seeing what it did to Gatherer."

"You don't have a place to go back to," Matty pointed out. "You were born in Village. It's only those who try to go back to someplace that they left once."

"Like you, maybe."

"Like me, except I'm careful."

"I'm not taking the chance. Is this a good place to fish?" Ramon asked, changing the subject. "I don't want to walk any farther. I'm tired all the time lately." They had been ambling toward the river, skirting the cornfield, and had reached the grassy bank where they often fished together. "We caught a lot here last time. My mother cooked some for dinner, but there were so many that I nibbled on leftovers while I was playing the Gaming Machine after dinner."

The Gaming Machine again. Ramon mentioned it so often. Maybe *Gloater* would be his true name, Matty thought. He had already decided on Boaster, but now, in his mind, he decided Gloater was more appropriate. Or Bragger. He was tired of hearing about the Gaming Machine. And a little jealous, too.

"Yes, here," Matty said. He scrambled down the slippery bank to the place where a boulder, large enough to stand on, jutted out. Both boys climbed the huge outcropping of rock and settled at the top to prepare their fishing gear and cast their lines for salmon.

Behind them, Village, quiet and peaceful, continued its daily life. Gatherer had been buried this morning. With her toddler playing on the floor by her feet, his widow now nursed her new baby on the

porch of her homeplace, attended by comforting women who sat with their knitting and embroidery and spoke only of happy things.

In the schoolhouse, Mentor, the schoolteacher, gently tutored a mischievous eight-year-old named Gabe, who had neglected his studies to play and now needed help. His daughter, Jean, sold flower bouquets and loaves of fresh-baked bread in her marketplace stall while she flirted, laughing, with the gangly, self-conscious boys who stopped by.

The blind man, Seer, made his way through the lanes of Village, checking on the populace, assessing the well-being of each individual. He knew each fence post, each crossroad, each voice and smell and shadow. If anything was amiss, he would do his best to make it right.

From a window, the tall young man known as Leader looked down and watched the slow and cheerful pace of Village, of the people he loved, who had chosen him to rule and guard them. He had come here as a boy, finding his way with great difficulty. The Museum held the remains of a broken sled in a glass case, and the inscription explained that it had been Leader's arrival vehicle. There were many relics of arrival in the Museum, because each person who had not been born in Village had his own story of coming there. The blind man's history was told there, too: how he had been carried, near dead, from the place where enemies had left him with his eyes torn out and his future in his own place gone.

In the Museum's glass cases there were shoes and canes and bicycles and a wheeled chair. But somehow the small red-painted sled had become a symbol of courage and hope. Leader was young but he represented those things. He had never tried to go back, never wanted to. This was his home now, these his people. As he did every afternoon, he stood at the window and watched. His eyes were a pale, piercing blue.

He watched with gratitude as the blind man moved through the lanes.

He could see beyond a porch railing to the young woman who rocked an infant and mourned her husband. *Grieve gently*, he thought.

He could see beyond the cornfield to where two young boys named Matty and Ramon were dangling lines into the river. *Good fishing*, he thought.

He could see beyond the marketplace to the cemetery where Gatherer's ruined body had been buried. *Rest in peace*, he thought.

Finally he looked toward the border of Village, to the place where the path entered Forest and became shrouded in shadows. Leader could see beyond the shadows but was not certain what he saw. It was blurred, but there was something in Forest that disturbed Leader's consciousness and made him uneasy. He could not tell whether it was good or bad. Not yet.

Deep in the thick undergrowth near the clearing, at the edge of Leader's puzzled awareness, a small green frog ate an insect it had caught with its sticky, fast-darting tongue. Squatting, it moved its protruding eyes around, trying to sense more insects to devour. Finding nothing, it hopped away. One back leg was oddly stiff but the frog barely noticed.

Three

If we had a Gaming Machine," Matty commented in a studied, offhand manner, "our evenings would never be boring."

"You think our evenings are boring, Matty? I thought you enjoyed our reading together."

Seer laughed, and corrected himself. "Sorry. I meant your reading to me, Matty, and my listening. It's my favorite time of day."

Matty shrugged. "No, I like reading to you, Seer. But I meant it's not *exciting*."

"Well, we should choose a different book, perhaps. That last one—I've forgotten its name, Matty—was a little slow-going. *Moby Dick*. That was the one."

"It was okay," Matty conceded. "But it was too long."

"Well, ask at the library for something that would move along more quickly."

"Did I explain to you how a Gaming Machine works, Seer? It moves very quickly."

The blind man chuckled. He had heard it all before, many times. "Run out to the garden and get a head of lettuce, Matty, while I finish cleaning the fish. Then you can make a salad while the fish cooks."

"And *also*," Matty continued in a loud voice as he headed for the garden just beyond the door, "it would be a nice end to a meal. Something sweet. Sort of a dessert. I did tell you, didn't I, how the Gaming Machine gives you a candy when you win?"

"See if there's a nice ripe tomato while you're out there getting the lettuce. A *sweet* one," Seer suggested in an amused voice.

"You might get a peppermint," Matty went on, "or a gumdrop, or maybe something they call a sourball." Beside the back step he reached into the vegetable garden and uprooted a small head of lettuce. As an afterthought, he pinched a cucumber loose from its vine nearby, and pulled some leaves from a clump of basil. Back in the kitchen, he put the salad things in the sink and halfheartedly began to wash them.

"Sourballs come in different colors, and each color is a flavor," he announced, "but I suppose that wouldn't interest you."

Matty sighed. He looked around. Even though he knew the blind man wouldn't see his gesture, he pointed to the nearby wall, which was decorated by a colorful wall-hanging, a gift from the blind man's talented daughter. Matty stood often before it, looking carefully at the intricate embroidered tapestry depicting a large thick forest separating two small villages far from each other. It was the geography of his own life, and that of the blind man, for they had both moved from that place to this other, with great difficulty.

"The Gaming Machine could stand right there," he decided. "It would be very convenient. *Extremely* convenient," he added, aware that the blind man liked it when he exercised his vocabulary.

Seer went to the sink, moved the washed lettuce to the side, and began to rinse the cleaned salmon steaks. "And so we would give up—or maybe even trade away—reading, and music, in exchange for the *extreme* excitement of pulling a handle and watching sourballs spit forth from a mechanical device?" he asked.

Put that way, Matty thought, the Gaming Machine didn't actually seem such a good trade. "Well," he said, "it's fun."

"Fun," the blind man repeated. "Is the stove ready? And the pan?"

Matty looked at the stove. "In a minute," he said. He stirred the burning wood a bit so that the fire

flared. Then he placed the oiled pan on top. "I'll do the fish," he said, "if you fix the salad.

"I brought some basil in, too," he added, with a grin, "just because you're such a salad perfectionist. It's right there beside the lettuce." He watched while the blind man's deft hands found the basil and tore the leaves into the wooden bowl.

Then Matty took the fish and laid it in the pan, swirling the oil around. In a moment the aroma of the sautéing salmon filled the room.

Outside, it was twilight. Matty adjusted the wick on an oil lamp and lighted it. "You know," he remarked, "when you win a candy, a bell rings and colored lights blink. Of course that wouldn't matter to *you*," he added, "but some of us would really appreciate—"

"Matty, Matty, Matty," the blind man said. "Keep an eye on that fish. It cooks quickly. No bell rings when it's done."

"And don't forget," he added, "that they traded for that Gaming Machine. It probably came at a high cost."

Matty frowned. "Sometimes you get licorice," he said as a last attempt.

"Do you know what they traded? Has Ramon told you?"

"No. Nobody ever tells."

"Maybe he doesn't even know. Maybe his parents didn't tell him. That's probably good."

Matty took the pan from the stove and slid the browned fish onto two plates, one after the other. He placed them on the table and brought the salad bowl from the sink. "It's ready," he said.

The blind man went to the bread container and found two thick pieces of bread that smelled fresh-baked. "I got this at the marketplace this morning," he said, "from Mentor's daughter. She'll make someone a good wife. Is she as pretty as her voice makes her sound?"

But Matty was not going to be diverted by reminders of the schoolteacher's pretty daughter. "When's the next Trade Mart?" he asked, when they were both seated.

"You're too young."

"I heard that there was one coming soon."

"Pay no attention to what you hear. You're too young."

"I won't be always. I ought to watch."

The blind man shook his head. "It would be painful," he said. "Eat your fish now, Matty, while it's warm."

Matty poked at the salmon with his fork. He could tell that there was to be no more discussion of trading. The blind man had never traded, not one single time, and was proud of it. But Matty thought that someday he himself would. Maybe not for a Gaming Machine. But there were other things that Matty wanted. He ought to be allowed to know how the trading worked.

He decided he would find out. But first he had the other thing to worry about, and the troubling awareness that he had not dared to tell the blind man of it.

There were no secrets in Village. It was one of the rules that Leader had proposed, and all of the people had voted in favor of it. Everyone who had come to Village from elsewhere, all of those who had not been born here, had come from places with secrets. Sometimes—not very often, for inevitably it caused sadness—people described their places of origin: places with cruel governments, harsh punishments, desperate poverty, or false comforts.

There were so many such places. Sometimes, hearing the stories, remembering his own childhood, Matty was astounded. At first, having found his way to Village, he had thought his own brutal beginnings—a fatherless hovel for a home; a grim, defeated mother who beat him and his brother

bloody—were unusual. But now he knew that there were communities everywhere, sprinkled across the vast landscape of the known world, in which people suffered. Not always from beatings and hunger, the way he had. But from ignorance. From *not knowing*. From being kept from knowledge.

He believed in Leader, and in Leader's insistence that all of Village's citizens, even the children, read, learn, participate, and care for one another. So Matty studied and did his best.

But sometimes he slipped back into the habits of his earlier life, when he had been a sly and deceitful boy in order to survive.

"I can't help it," he had argued glumly to the blind man, in the beginning of their life together, when he had been caught in some small transgression. "It's what I learnt."

"Learned." The correction was gentle.

"Learned," Matty had repeated.

"Now you are relearning. You are learning honesty. I'm sorry to punish you, Matty, but Village is a population of honest and decent people, and I want you to be one of us."

Matty had hung his head. "So you'll beat me?"

"No, your punishment will be no lessons today. You will help me in the garden instead of going to school."

It had seemed, to Matty then, a laughable punishment. Who wanted to go to school, anyway? Not him!

Yet, when he was deprived of it, and could hear the other children reciting and singing in the schoolhouse, he felt woefully lost. Gradually he had learned to change his behavior and to become one of Village's happy children, and soon a good student. Now half grown and soon to finish school, he slipped only occasionally into old bad habits and almost always caught himself when he did.

It bothered Matty greatly, now, having a secret.

Four

Leader had summoned Matty for message-running.

Matty enjoyed going to Leader's homeplace, because of the stairs—others had stairs, though Matty and the blind man did not, but Leader's stairs were circular, which fascinated Matty, and he liked going up and down—and because of the books. Others had books, too. Matty had a few schoolbooks, and he often borrowed other books from the library so that he could read stories to the blind man in the evenings, a time they both enjoyed.

But Leader's homeplace, where he lived alone, had more books than Matty had ever seen in one place. The entire ground floor, except for the kitchen to one side, was lined with shelves, and the shelves were filled with volumes of every sort. Leader allowed Matty to lift down and look at any one he wanted. There were stories, of course, not unlike the ones he found in the library. There were history books as well, like those he studied at school, the best ones filled with maps that showed how the world had changed over centuries. Some books had shiny pages that showed paintings of landscapes unlike anything Matty had ever seen, or of people costumed in odd ways, or of battles, and there were many quiet painted scenes of a woman holding a newborn child. Still others were written in languages from the past and from other places.

Leader laughed wryly when Matty had opened to a page and pointed to the unknown language. "It's called Greek," Leader said. "I can read a few words. But in the place of my childhood, we were not allowed to learn such things. So in my spare time, I have Mentor come and help me with languages. But . . ." Leader sighed. "I have so little spare time. Maybe when I'm old, I will sit here and study. I'd like that, I think."

Matty had replaced the book and run his hand gently over the leather bindings of the ones beside it.

"If you weren't allowed to learn," he asked, "why did they let you bring the books?"

Leader laughed. "You've seen the little sled," he said.

"In the Museum?"

"Yes. My vehicle of arrival. They've made such a thing of it, it's almost embarrassing. But it is true that I came on that sled. A desperate boy, half dead. No books! The books were brought to me later. I have never been as surprised in my life as I was the day those books arrived."

Matty had looked around at the thousands of books. In his own arms—and Matty was strong—he could have carried no more than ten or twelve at a time.

"How did they come to you?"

"A river barge. Suddenly there it was. Huge wooden crates aboard, and each one filled with books. Until that time I had always been afraid. A year had passed. Then two. But I was still afraid; I thought they would still be looking for me, that I would be recaptured, put to death, because no one had ever fled my community successfully before.

"It was only when I saw the books that I knew that things had changed, that I was free, and that back there, where I had come from, they were rebuilding themselves into something better.

"The books were a kind of forgiveness, I think."

"So you could have gone back," Matty said. "Was it too late? Had Forest given you Warnings?"

"No. But why would I go back? I had found a home here, the way everyone has. That's why we have the Museum, Matty, to remind us of how we came, and why: to start fresh, and begin a new place from what we had learned and carried from the old."

Today Matty admired the books, as he always did in Leader's homeplace, but he didn't linger to touch or examine them. Nor did he stop to admire the staircase, with its intricate risers of crafted, polished wood that ascended in a circle to the next level. When Leader called, "Up here, Matty," he bounded up the stairs to the second floor, into the spacious room where Leader lived and worked.

Leader was at his desk. He looked up from the papers in front of him and smiled at Matty. "How's the fishing?"

Matty shrugged and grinned. "Not too bad. Caught four yesterday."

Leader laid his pen aside and leaned back in his chair. "Tell me something, Matty. You and your friend are out there a lot, fishing. And you've been doing it for a long time—since you came to Village as a little boy. Isn't that so?"

"I don't remember exactly how long. I was only about this high when I came." Matty gestured with his hand, placing it level with the second button of his own shirt.

"Six years," Leader told him. "You arrived six years ago. So you've been fishing for all that time."

Matty nodded. But he stiffened. He was wary. It was too soon for his true name to be bestowed, he thought. Surely it was not going to be *Fisherman!* Was that why Leader had called him here?

Leader looked at him and began to laugh. "Relax, Matty! When you look like that, I can almost read your mind! Don't worry. It was only a question."

"A question about fishing. Fishing's a thing I do just to get food or to fool around. I don't want it to turn into something more." Matty liked that about Leader, that you could say what you wanted to him, that you could tell him what you felt.

"I understand. You needn't worry about that. I was asking because I need to assess the food supply. Some are saying there are fewer fish than there once were. Look here, what I've been writing." He passed a paper over to Matty. There were columns of numbers, lists headed "Salmon" and "Trout."

Matty read the numbers and frowned. "It might be true," he said. "I remember at first I would pull fish after fish from the river. But you know what, Leader?"

"What?" Leader took the paper back from Matty and laid it with others on his desk.

"I was little then. And maybe you don't remember this, because you're older than I am . . ."

Leader smiled. "I'm still a young man, Matty. I remember being a boy." Matty thought he noticed a brief flicker of sadness in Leader's eyes, despite the warm smile. So many people in Village—including Matty—had sad memories of their childhoods.

"What I meant was, I remember all the fish, the feeling that they would never end. I felt that I could drop my line in again and again and again and there would always be fish. Now there aren't. But, Leader . . ."

Leader looked at him and waited.

"Things seem *more* when you're little. They seem bigger, and distances seem farther. The first time I came here through Forest? The journey seemed forever."

"It does take days, Matty, from where you started."

"Yes, I know. It still takes days. But now it doesn't seem as far or as long. Because I'm older, and bigger, and I've gone back and forth again and again, and I know the way, and I'm not scared. So it seems shorter."

Leader chuckled. "And the fish?"

"Well," Matty acknowledged, "there don't seem to be as many. But maybe it's just that I was a little boy back then, when the fish seemed endless."

Leader tapped the tip of his pen on the desk as he thought. "Maybe so," he said after a moment. He stood. From a table in the corner of the room he took a stack of folded papers.

"Messages?" Matty asked.

"Messages. I'm calling a meeting."

"About fish?"

"No. I wish it were just about fish. Fish would be easy."

Matty took the stack of message papers he would be delivering. Before he turned to the staircase to leave, he felt compelled to say, "Fish aren't ever easy. You have to use just the right bait, and know the right place to go, and then you have to pull the line up at just the right moment, because if you don't, the fish can wiggle right off your hook, and not everybody is good at it, and . . ."

He could hear Leader laughing, still, when he left.

It took Matty most of the day to deliver all of the messages. It wasn't a hard task. He liked the harder ones better, actually, when he was outfitted with food and a carrying pack and sent on long journeys through Forest. Although he hadn't been sent to it in almost two years, Matty especially liked trips that took him back to his former home, where he could greet his boyhood pals with a somewhat superior smile, and snub those who had been cruel to him in the past. His mother was dead, he had been told. His brother was still there, and looked at Matty with more respect than he ever had in the past, but they were strangers to each other now. The community where he had lived was greatly changed and seemed foreign, though less harsh than he remembered.

Today he simply made his way around Village, delivering notice of the meeting that would be held the following week. Reading the message himself, he could understand Leader's questioning about the supply of fish, and the concern and worry that Matty had felt from him.

There had been a petition—signed by a substantial number of people—to close Village to outsiders. There would have to be a debate, and a vote.

It had happened before, such a petition.

"We voted it down just a year ago," the blind man reminded Matty when the message had been read to him. "There must be a stronger movement now."

"There are still plenty of fish," Matty pointed out, "and the fields are full of crops."

The blind man crumpled the message and dropped it into the fire. "It's not the fish or crops," he said. "They'll use that, of course. They argued dwindling food supply last time. It's . . ."

"Not enough housing?"

"More than that. I can't think of the word for it. *Selfishness*, I guess. It's creeping in."

Matty was startled. Village had been created out of the opposite: selflessness. He knew that from his studies and from hearing the history. Everyone did.

"But in the message—I could have read it to you again if you hadn't burned it—it says that the group who wants to close the border is headed by Mentor! The schoolteacher!"

The blind man sighed. "Give the soup a stir, would you, Matty?"

Obediently Matty moved the wooden ladle around in the pot and watched beans and chopped tomatoes churn in the thick mixture as it simmered. Thinking still of his teacher, he added, "He's not selfish!"

"I know he isn't. That's why it's puzzling."

"He welcomes everyone to the school, even new ones who have no learning, who can't even speak properly."

"Like you, when you came," the blind man said with a smile. "It couldn't have been easy, but he taught you."

"He had to tame me first," Matty acknowledged, grinning. "I was wild, wasn't I?"

Seer nodded. "Wild. But Mentor loves teaching those who need it."

"Why would he want to close the border?"

"Matty?"

"What?"

"Has Mentor traded, do you know?"

Matty thought about it. "It's school vacation now, so I don't see him as often. But I stop by his homeplace now and then . . ." He didn't mention Jean, the widowed schoolteacher's daughter. "I haven't noticed anything different in his household.

"No Gaming Machine," he added, laughing a little.

But the blind man didn't chuckle in reply. He sat thinking for a moment. Then he said, in a worried voice, "It's much more than just a Gaming Machine."

Five

The schoolteacher's daughter told me that her dog has three puppies. I can have one when it's big enough, if I like."

"Isn't she the one who promised you a kiss? Now a dog as well? I'd settle for the kiss if I were you, Matty." The blind man smiled, loosened a beet from the earth, and placed it in the basket of vegetables. They were in the garden together.

"I miss my dog. He wasn't any trouble." Matty glanced over to the corner of their homeplace's plot of land, beyond the garden, to the small grave where they had buried Branch two years before.

"You're right, Matty. Your little dog was a good companion for many years. It would be fun to have a puppy around." The blind man's voice was gentle.

"I could train a dog to lead you."

"I don't need leading. Could you train a dog to cook?"

"Anything but beets," Matty said, making a face as he threw another into the basket.

But when he went in the afternoon to the schoolteacher's homeplace, Matty found Jean distraught. "Two died last night," she said. "They took sick. Now there's only one puppy left, and it's sick, and the mother as well."

"How have you tended them?"

Jean shook her head in despair. "Same as I would for my father or myself. Infusion of white willow bark. But the puppy's too little to drink, and the mother's too sick. She lapped a bit and then just put her head down."

"Will you take me to see them?"

Jean led him into the small house, and though he was concerned for the dogs, Matty found himself looking around as they walked through, remembering what the blind man had asked. He noticed the sturdy furniture, neatly arranged, and the bookcases filled with Mentor's books. In the kitchen, Jean's baking pans, and the bowls in which she mixed dough, were set out, ready for her wonderful breads to be made.

He saw nothing that hinted of a trade. Nothing silly like a Gaming Machine, nothing frivolous like the soft upholstered furniture decorated with fringe that a foolish young couple down the road had traded for.

Of course there were other kinds of trades, Matty knew, though he didn't fully understand. He had heard murmurs about them. There were trades for things you didn't see. Those were the most dangerous trades.

"They're in here." Jean opened the door to the storage shed attached to the house at the back of the kitchen. Matty entered and knelt beside the mother dog where she lay on a folded blanket. The tiny puppy, motionless but for its labored breathing, lay in the curve of her belly, the way any puppy would. But a healthy pup would have been wiggling and sucking. This one should have been pawing at its mother for milk.

Matty knew dogs. He loved them. Gently he touched the puppy with his finger. Then, startled, he jerked his hand away. He had felt something painful.

Oddly, it made him think of lightning.

He remembered how he had been instructed, even as a small boy back in his old place, to go indoors during a thunderstorm. He had seen a tree split and blackened by a lightning strike, and he

knew that it could happen to a human: the flash and the burning power that would surge through you, looking for a place to enter the earth.

He had watched through the window and seen great fiery bolts split the sky, and he had smelled the sulfurous smell that they sometimes left behind.

There was a man in Village, a farmer, who had stood in the field beside his plow, waiting as dark clouds gathered overhead, hoping the storm would pass by. The lightning had found him there, and though the farmer had survived, he had lost all his memory but for the sensation of raw power that had entered him that afternoon. People tended him now, and he helped with farm chores, but his energy was gone, taken away by the mysterious energy that lived in lightning.

Matty had felt this sensation—the one of pulsating power, as if he had the power of lightning within his own self—in the clearing, on a sunny day with no storm brewing.

He had tried to put it out of his mind afterward, any thoughts of the day it had happened, because it frightened him so and made him have a secret, which he did not want. But Matty knew, pulling his hand from the ailing puppy, that it was time to test it once again.

“Where’s your father?” he asked Jean. He wanted no one to watch.

“He had a meeting to go to. You know about the petition?”

Matty nodded. Good. The schoolteacher was not around.

“I don’t think he really even cares about the meeting. He just wants to see Stocktender’s widow. He’s courting her.” Jean spoke with affectionate amusement. “Can you imagine? Courting, at his age?”

He needed the girl to be gone. Matty thought. “I want you to go to Herbalist’s. Get yarrow.”

“I have yarrow in my own garden! Right beside the door!” Jean replied.

He didn’t need yarrow, not really. He needed her *gone*. Matty thought quickly. “Spearmint? Lemon balm? Catnip? Do you have all of those?”

She shook her head. “No catnip. If cats were attracted to my garden, the dog would make a terrible fuss.

“Wouldn’t you, poor thing?” she said sweetly, leaning down to murmur to the dying mother dog. She stroked the dog’s back but it did not lift its head. Its eyes were beginning to glaze.

“Go,” Matty told her in an urgent voice. “Get those things.”

“Do you think they’ll help?” Jean asked dubiously. She took her hand from the dog and stood, but she lingered.

“Just go!” Matty ordered.

“You needn’t use a rude tone, Matty,” Jean said with an edge in her voice. But she turned with a flounce of her skirt and went. He barely heard the sound of the door closing behind her. Steeling himself against the painful vibrating shock that he knew would go through his entire body, Matty placed his left hand on the mother dog, his right on the puppy, and willed them to live.

An hour later, Matty stumbled home, exhausted. Back at Mentor’s house, Jean was feeding the mother dog and giggling at the antics of the lively puppy.

“Who would have thought of that combination of herbs? Isn’t it amazing!” she had said in delight, watching the creatures revive.

“Lucky guess.” He let Jean believe it was the herbs. She was distracted by the sudden liveliness of the dogs and didn’t even notice how weak Matty was. He sat leaning against the wall in the shed and watched her tend them. But his vision was slightly blurred and his whole body ached.

Finally, when he had regained a little strength, he forced himself to stand and leave. Fortunately his own homeplace was empty. The blind man was out somewhere, and Matty was glad of that. Seer

would have noticed something wrong. He could always feel it. He said the atmosphere in the homeplace changed, as if wind had shifted, if Matty had so much as a cold.

And this was much more. He staggered into his room off the kitchen and lay down on his bed, breathing hard. Matty had never felt so weak, so drained. Except for the frog . . .

The frog was smaller, he thought. But it was the same thing.

He had come across the little frog by chance, in the clearing. He had no reason to be there that day; he had simply wanted to be alone, away from busy Village, and had gone into Forest to get away, as he did sometimes.

Barefoot, he had stepped on the frog, and was startled. "Sorry!" he had said playfully, and reached down to pick the little fellow up. "Are you all right? You should have hopped away when you heard me coming."

But the frog wasn't all right, and couldn't have escaped with a hop. It hadn't been Matty's light step that had injured it; he could see that right away. Some creature—Matty thought probably a fox or weasel—had inflicted a terrible wound upon the small green thing, and the frog was almost dead of it. One leg dangled, torn away from the body, held there only by an oozing bit of ragged tissue. In his hand, the frog drew a shuddering breath and then was still.

"Someone chewed you up and spit you out," Matty said. He was sympathetic but matter-of-fact. The hard life and quick death of Forest's creatures were everyday things. "Well," he said, "I'll give you a nice burial."

He knelt to dig out a spot with his hands in the mossy earth. But when he tried to set the little body down, he found that he was connected to it in a way that made no sense. A painful kind of power surged from his hand, flowing into the frog, and held them bound together.

Confused and alarmed, he tried to scrape the sticky body of the frog off his hand. But he couldn't. The vibrating pain held them connected. Then, after a moment, while Matty knelt, still mystified by what was happening, the frog's body twitched.

"So you're not dead. Get off of me, then." Now he was able to drop the frog to the ground. The stab of pain eased.

"What was that all about?" Matty found himself talking to the frog as if it might be able to reply. "I thought you were dead, but you weren't. You're going to lose your leg, though. And your hopping days are over. I'm sorry for that."

He stood and looked down at the impassive frog. *Churrump*. Its throat made the sound.

"Yes. I agree. Same to you." Matty turned to leave.

Churrump.

The sound compelled him to go back and to kneel again. The frog's wide-open eyes, which had been glazed with death only a few moments before, were now clear and alert. It stared at Matty.

"Look, I'm going to put you over here in the ferns, because if you stay in the open, some other creature will come along and gobble you up. You have a big disadvantage now, not being able to hop away. You'll have to learn to hide."

He picked up the frog and carried it to the thicket of high ferns. "If I had my knife with me," he told it, "I'd probably just slice through those threads that are holding your leg. Then maybe you could heal more quickly. As it is, you'll be dragging that leg around and it will burden you. But there's nothing I can do."

He leaned down to turn it loose, still thinking about how best to help it. "Maybe I can find a sharp rock and slice through. It's just a tiny bit of flesh and it probably wouldn't even pain you if I did it."

"You stay right here," Matty commanded, and placed the frog on the earth beside the ferns. *As if it*

could hop, he thought.

Back at the edge of the small stream he had crossed, Matty found what he needed as a tool: a bit of rock with a sharp edge. He took it back to where the wounded frog lay, immobilized by its wound.

"Now," Matty told the frog, "don't be scared. I'm going to spread you out a bit and then carefully cut that dead leg away. It's the best thing for you." He turned the frog onto its back and touched the shredded leg, meaning to arrange it in a way that would make the amputation simple and fast. There were only a few sticky strands of flesh to slice through.

But he felt a sudden jolt of painful energy enter his arm, concentrated in his fingertips. Matty was unable to move. His hand grasped the nearly severed leg and he could feel his own blood moving through its vessels. His pulse thrummed and he could hear the sound of it.

Terrified, Matty held his breath for what seemed forever. Then it all stopped. The thing that had happened ended. He lifted his hand tentatively from the wounded frog.

Churrump.

Churrump.

"I'm leaving now. I don't know what happened, but I'm leaving now." He dropped the sharp rock and tried to rise, but his knees were weak and he felt dizzy and sick. Still kneeling beside the frog, Matty took a few long breaths, trying to get his strength again so that he could flee.

Churrump.

"Stop it. I don't want to hear that."

As if it understood what Matty had said, the frog turned, flopping itself over from its belly-up position, and moved toward the ferns. But it was not dragging a useless leg. Both legs were moving—awkwardly, to be sure, but the frog was propelling itself with both legs. It disappeared into the clump of quivering ferns.

After a moment Matty was able to stand. Desperately tired, he had made his way out of Forest and stumbled home.

Now, lying on his bed, he felt the same exhaustion, magnified. His arms ached. Matty thought about what had happened. *The frog was very small. This was two dogs.*

This was bigger.

I must learn to control it, Matty told himself.

Then, surprisingly, he began to cry. Matty had a boyish pride in the fact that he never cried. But now he wept, and it felt as if the tears were cleansing him, as if his body needed to empty itself. Tears ran down his cheeks.

Finally, shuddering with exhaustion, he wiped his eyes, turned on his side, and slept, though it was still midday. The sun was high in the sky over Village. Matty dreamed of vague, frightening things connected to pain, and his body was tense even as he slept. Then his dream changed. His muscles relaxed and he became serene in his sleep. He was dreaming now of healed wounds, new life, and calm.

Six

New ones coming! And there's a pretty girl among them!"

Ramon called to Matty but didn't stop. He was hurrying past, eager to get to Village's entrance place, where new ones always came in. There was, in fact, a Welcome sign there, though many new ones, they had discovered, could not read. Matty had been one of those. The word welcome had meant nothing to him then.

"I saw it but couldn't read it," he had said to Seer once, "and you could have read it but you couldn't see it."

"We're quite a pair, aren't we? No wonder we get along so well together." The blind man had laughed.

"May I go? I'm almost done here." When Ramon ran past and called to them, Matty and the blind man had been clearing out the garden, pulling up the last of the overgrown pea vines. Their season was long past. Soon summer would end. They would be storing the root vegetables soon.

"Yes, of course. I'll go, too. It's important to welcome them."

They wiped their dirty hands quickly and left the garden, closing the gate behind them and following the same path Ramon had rushed along. The entrance was not far, and the new ones were gathered there. In the past, new ones had mostly arrived alone or in pairs, but now they seemed to come in groups: whole families, often, looking tired, for they had come great distances, and frightened, because they had left fearsome things behind and usually their escape had been dangerous and terrifying. But always they were hopeful, too, and clearly relieved to be greeted by the smiles. The people of Village prided themselves on the welcome, many of them leaving their regular work to go and be part of it.

Frequently the new ones were damaged. They hobbled on canes or were ill. Sometimes they were disfigured by wounds or simply because they had been born that way. Some were orphans. All of them were welcomed.

Matty joined the crowded semicircle and smiled encouragingly at the new ones as the greeters took their names, one by one, and assigned them to helpers who would lead them to their living spaces and help them settle in. He thought he saw the girl Ramon had mentioned, a thin but lovely girl about their age. Her face was dirty and her hair uncombed. She held the hand of a younger child whose eyes were thick with yellow mucus; it was a common ailment of new ones, quickly healed with herbal mixtures. He could tell that the girl was worried for the child, and he tried to smile at her in a way that was reassuring.

There were more than usual this time. "It's a big group," Matty whispered to the blind man.

"Yes, I can hear that it is. I wonder if somehow they have begun to hear rumors that we may close."

As he spoke, they both heard something and turned. Approaching the welcoming entrance and the busy processing of the new ones, a small group of people Matty recognized—with Mentor leading them—came forward, chanting, "Close. Close. No more. No more."

The welcoming group was uncertain how to react. They continued to smile at the new ones and to reach forward to take their hands. But the chant made everyone uncomfortable.

Finally, in the confusion, Leader appeared. Someone had sent for him, apparently. The crowd parted to allow him through and the chanters fell silent.

Leader's voice was, as always, calm. He spoke first to the new ones, welcoming them. He would have done this later in the day, after they had been fed and settled. But now, instead of waiting, he

reassured them briefly.

"We were all of us new ones once," he said with a smile, "except for the youngsters who have been born here."

"We know what you have been through."

"You will no longer be hungry. You will no longer live under unfair rule. You will never be persecuted again."

"We are honored to have you among us. Welcome to your new home. Welcome to Village."

He turned to the greeters and said, "Do the processing later. They are tired. Take them to their living spaces so they can have baths and food. Let them rest for a while."

The greeters encircled the new ones and led them away.

Then Leader turned to those who remained. "Thank you, those of you who came to give welcome. It is one of the most important things we do in Village."

"Those of you who object? Mentor? You and the others?" He looked at the small group of dissenters. "You have that right, as you know. The right to dissent is one of our most important freedoms here."

"But the meeting is in four days. Let me suggest that instead of worrying and frightening these new ones, who have just come and are weary and confused, let us wait and see what the meeting decides."

"Even those of you who want to close Village to new ones—even you value the peace and kindness we have always embraced here. Mentor? You seem to be leading this. What do you say?"

Matty turned to look at Mentor, the teacher who meant so much to him. Mentor was thinking, and Matty was accustomed to seeing him deep in thought, for it was part of his classroom demeanor. He always thought over each question carefully, even the most foolish question from the youngest student.

Odd, Matty thought. The birthmark across Mentor's cheek seemed lighter. Ordinarily it was a deep red. Now it seemed merely pink, as if it were fading. But it was late summer. Probably, Matty decided, Mentor's skin had been tanned by the sun, as his own was; and this made the birthmark less visible.

Still, Matty was uneasy. Something *else* was different today about Mentor. He couldn't name the difference, not really. Was it that Mentor seemed slightly *taller*? How strange that would be, Matty thought. But the teacher had always walked with a bit of a stoop. His shoulders were hunched over. People said that he had aged terribly after his beloved wife's death, when Jean was just a small child. Sadness had done it.

Today he stood erect and his shoulders were straight. So he *seemed* taller, but wasn't, Matty decided with relief. It was simply a changed posture.

"Yes," Mentor said to Leader, "we will see what the meeting decides."

His voice sounded different, Matty noticed.

He saw that Leader, too, was noticing something about Mentor and was puzzled. But everyone was turning away now, the crowd dispersing, people returning to their usual daily tasks. Matty ran to catch up with the blind man, who had started walking the familiar path home.

Behind him he heard an announcement being made. "Don't forget!" someone was calling out. "Trade Mart tomorrow night!"

Trade Mart. With the other things that had consumed Matty's thoughts recently, he had almost forgotten about Trade Mart.

Now he decided he would attend.

Trade Mart was a very old custom. No one remembered its beginnings. The blind man said that he

had first known of it when he was a newcomer to Village, still an invalid with wounds to be tended. He had lain on a bed in the infirmary, in pain, unseeing, his memory slow to return, and half listened to the conversations of the gentle folk who took care of him.

"Did you go to the last Trade Mart?" he had heard one person ask another.

"No, I have nothing to trade. Did you?"

"Went and watched. It all seems foolishness to me."

He had put it from his mind, then. He had nothing to trade, either. He owned nothing. His torn, blood-stained clothes had been taken from him and replaced. From a cord around his neck dangled an amulet of some sort, and he felt its importance but could not remember why. Certainly he would not trade it for some trinket; it was all he had left of his past.

The blind man had described all of that to Matty.

"Later I went, just to watch," he told him.

Matty laughed at him. They were close, by then, and he could do that. "*Watch?*" he hooted.

The blind man laughed in reply. "I have my own kind of watching," he said.

"I know you do. That's why they call you Seer. You see more than most. Can anyone go to Trade Mart and watch?"

"Of course. There are no secrets here. But it was dull stuff, Matty. People called out what they wanted to trade for. Women wanted new bracelets, I remember, and they traded their old bracelets away. Things like that."

"So it's like Market Day."

"It seemed so to me. I never went back."

Now, speaking of it the evening of the new ones' arrival, the blind man expressed concern. "It's changed, Matty. I hear people talk of it now, and I feel the changes. Something's wrong."

"What kind of talk?"

The blind man was sitting with his instrument on his lap. He played one chord. Then he frowned. "I'm not sure. There's a secrecy to it now."

"I got up my nerve and asked Ramon what his parents traded for the Gaming Machine. But he didn't know. He said they wouldn't tell him, and his mother turned away when he asked, as if she had something to hide."

"I don't like the sound of it." The blind man stroked the strings and played two more chords.

"The sound of your own music?" Matty asked with a laugh, trying to lighten the conversation.

"Something's happening at Trade Mart," Seer said, ignoring Matty's attempt at humor.

"Leader said the same."

"He would know. I'd be wary of it, Matty, if I were you."

The next evening, while they prepared supper, he told the blind man he was planning to go.

"I know you said I was too young, Seer. But I'm not. Ramon's going. And maybe it's important for me to go. Maybe I can figure out what's happening."

Seer sighed and nodded. "Promise me one thing," he told Matty.

"I will."

"Make no trade. Watch and listen. But make no trade. Even if you're tempted."

"I promise." Then Matty laughed. "How could I? I have nothing to trade. What could I give for a Gaming Machine? A puppy too young to leave its mother? Who'd want that?"

The blind man stirred the chicken that simmered in a broth. "Ah, Matty, you have more than you know. And people will want what you have."

Matty thought. Seer was correct, of course. He had the thing that troubled him—the *power*, he

thought of it—and perhaps there were those who would want it. Maybe he should find a way to trade it away. But the thought made him nervous. He turned his thoughts to other, less worrying things.

He had a fishing pole, but he needed that and loved it. He had a kite, stored in the loft, and perhaps one day he would trade it for a better kite.

But not tonight. Tonight he would only watch. He had promised the blind man.

Seven

It was early evening, just past supper, and others were hurrying, as Matty was, along the lane to the place where Trade Mart was held. He nodded to neighbors as he passed them, and waved to some he saw farther along. People nodded back or waved in reply, but there was none of the light-hearted banter that was ordinarily part of Village. There was an intentness to everyone, an odd seriousness, and a sense of worry—unusual in Village—pervaded the atmosphere.

No wonder Seer didn't want me to come, Matty thought as he approached. *It doesn't feel right.*

He could hear the noise. A murmur. People whispering to each other. It was not at all like Market Day, with its sounds of laughter, conversation, and commerce: good-natured bargaining, the squealing of pigs, the motherly cluck of hens with their cheeping broods. Tonight it was simply a low hum, a nervous whisper through the crowd.

Matty slipped into a group that had gathered and was standing nearest to the platform, a simple wooden structure like a stage that was used for many occasions when the people came together. The coming meeting to discuss the proposal to close Village would be held here, too, and Leader would stand on the stage to direct things and keep them orderly.

A large wooden roof covered the area so that rain would not prevent a gathering, and in the cold months the enclosing sides would be slid into place. Tonight, though, with the weather still warm, it was open to the evening. A breeze ruffled Matty's hair. He could smell the scent of the pine grove that bordered the area.

He found a place to stand next to Mentor, hoping that perhaps Jean would join her father, though she was nowhere to be seen. Mentor glanced down and smiled at him. "Matty!" he said. "It's a surprise to see you here. You've never been before."

"No," Matty said. "I have nothing to trade."

The schoolteacher put his arm affectionately over Matty's shoulders, and Matty noticed for the first time that the teacher had lost weight. "Ah," Mentor said, "you'd be surprised. Everyone has something to trade."

"Jean has her flowers," Matty said, hoping to turn the conversation to Mentor's daughter. "But she takes them to the market stall. She doesn't need Trade Mart for that."

"And," he added, "she already promised the puppy to me. She'd better not trade him away."

Mentor laughed. "No, the puppy is yours, Matty. And the sooner the better. He's full of mischief, and he chewed my shoes just this morning."

For a moment everything seemed as it had always been. The man was warm and cheerful, the same loving teacher and father he had been for years. His arm over Matty's shoulders was familiar.

But Matty found himself wondering suddenly why Mentor was there. Why, in fact, *any* of these people were here. None of them had brought any goods to trade. He looked around to confirm what he had noticed. People stood tensely, their arms folded or at their sides. Some of them were murmuring to one another. Matty noticed the young couple who were neighbors down the road from the house he shared with the blind man. They were conversing in low voices, perhaps arguing, and the young wife appeared worried at what her husband was saying. But their arms, too, like Matty's, like Mentor's, like everyone's, were empty. No one had brought anything to trade.

A silence fell and the crowd parted to make way for the tall, dark-haired man who was now striding toward the stage. He was called Trademaster. People said that he had come, already named, as a new one some years before, and had brought with him what he knew about trading from the place

he had left. Matty had often seen him around Village and knew that he was in charge of Trade Mart and that he checked on things after, stopping at houses where trades had been made. He had come to Ramon's after his parents acquired the Gaming Machine. Tonight he carried nothing but a thick book that Matty had never seen before.

Mentor's arm fell from Matty's shoulders and the schoolteacher's attention turned eagerly toward the stage, where Trademaster was now standing.

"*Trade Mart begins,*" Trademaster called. He had a loud voice with a slight accent, as many in Village had, the traces of their former languages lingering with them. The crowd fell absolutely silent now. Even the slightest whispering ceased. But over on the edge, Matty heard a woman begin to weep. He stood on tiptoe and peered toward her in time to see several people lead her away.

Mentor didn't even look toward the commotion of the weeping woman. Matty watched him. He noticed suddenly that Mentor's face looked slightly different, and he could not identify what the difference was. The evening light was dim.

More than that, the teacher, usually so calm, was now tense, alert, and appeared to be waiting for something.

"Who first?" Trademaster called, and while Matty watched, Mentor raised his hand and waved it frantically, like a schoolboy hoping for a reward. "Me! Me!" the schoolteacher called out in a demanding voice, and as Matty watched, Mentor shoved the people standing in front of him aside so that he would be noticed.

Late that night, the blind man listened with a concerned look on his face while Matty described Trade Mart.

"Mentor was first, because he raised his hand so fast. And he completely forgot me, Seer. He had been standing with me and we were talking, just as we always have. Then, when they started, it was as if I didn't exist. He pushed ahead of everyone and went first."

"What do you mean, went first? Where did he go?"

"To the stage. He pushed through everyone. He shoved and jostled them aside, Seer. It was so odd. Then he went to the stage when Trademaster called his name."

The blind man rocked back and forth in his chair. Tonight he had not played music at all. Matty knew he was distressed.

"It used to be different. People just called out. There was a lot of laughter and teasing the time I went."

"No laughter tonight, Seer. Just silence, as if people were very nervous. It was a little scary."

"And what happened when Mentor got to the stage?"

Matty thought. It had been a little difficult to see through the crowd. "He just stood there. Then Trademaster asked him something, but it was as if he already knew the answer. And then everyone laughed a bit, as if they did, too, but it wasn't a having-fun kind of laughter. It was a *knowing* kind."

"Could you hear what he asked?"

"I couldn't hear that first time, but I know what it was because he asked it of everyone who came up. It was the same each time. Just three words. *Trade for what?* That's what he asked each time."

"And was the answer the same from everyone?"

Matty shook his head, then remembered that he had to reply aloud. "No," he said. "It was different."

"Could you hear Mentor's reply?"

"Yes. It made everyone laugh in that odd way. Mentor said, 'Same as before.'"

The blind man frowned. "Did you get a feel for what that meant?"

"I think so, because everyone looked at Stocktender's widow, and she blushed. She was near me, so I could see it. Her friends poked at her, teasing, and I heard her say, 'He needs a few more trades first.'"

"Then what happened?"

Matty tried to remember the sequence of things. "Trademaster seemed to say yes, or at least to nod his head, and then he opened his book and wrote it in."

"I'd like to see that book," the blind man said, and then, laughing at himself, added, "or have you see it, and read it to me.

"What came next?"

"Mentor stood there. He seemed relieved that Trademaster had written something down for him."

"How could you tell?"

"He smiled and seemed less nervous."

"Then what?"

"Then everyone got very silent and Trademaster asked, 'Trade away what?'"

The blind man thought. "Another three words. Was it the same for each? The same 'Trade for what?' and then 'Trade away what?'"

"Yes. But each one said the answer to the first quite loudly, the way Mentor did, but they whispered the answer to the second, so no one could hear."

"So it became public, what they were trading for . . ."

"Yes, and sometimes the crowd called out in a scornful way. They *jeered*. I think that's the right word."

"And he wrote each down?"

"No. Ramon's mother went up, and when Trademaster asked, 'Trade for what?' she said, 'Fur jacket.' But Trademaster said no."

"Did he give a reason for the no?"

"He said she got a Gaming Machine already. Maybe another time, he said. Keep trying, he told her."

The blind man stirred restlessly in his chair. "Make us some tea, Matty, would you?"

Matty did so, going to the woodstove where the iron kettle was already simmering. He poured the water over tea leaves in two thick mugs and gave one to Seer.

"Tell me again the second three-word thing," the blind man said after he had taken a sip.

Matty repeated it. "*'Trade away what?'*" He tried to make his voice loud and important, as Trademaster's had been. He tried to imitate the slight accent.

"But you couldn't hear any of the answers that people gave, is that right?"

"That's right. They whispered, and he wrote the whispers in his book."

Matty straightened in his chair with a sudden idea. "How about if I steal the book and read you what it says?"

"Matty, Matty . . ."

"Sorry," Matty replied immediately. Stealing had been so much a part of his previous existence that he sometimes still, even after years, forgot that it was not acceptable behavior in Village.

"Well," said the blind man after they had sipped their tea in silence for a moment, "I wish I could figure out what things people are trading away. You say they came empty-handed. Yet each one whispered something that was written down."

"Except for Ramon's mother," Matty reminded him. "Trademaster said no to her. But others got

their trades. Mentor got his."

"But we don't know what."

"No. 'Same as before,' he asked for."

"Tell me this, Matty. When Mentor left the Trade Mart, he hadn't been given anything, had he? He wasn't carrying anything?"

"No. Nothing."

"Was anyone given anything to take away?"

"Some were told delivery times. Someone got a Gaming Machine."

"I'd really like a Gaming Machine, Seer," Matty added, though he knew it was hopeless.

But the blind man paid no attention to that. "One more question for you, Matty. Think hard about this."

"All right." Matty prepared himself to think hard.

"Try to remember if people *looked different* when it was over. Not everyone, but those who had made trades."

Matty sighed. It had been crowded, and long, and he had begun to be uncomfortable and tired by the time it ended. He had seen Ramon and waved, but Ramon was standing with his mother, who was angry at having been turned down by Trademaster. Ramon hadn't waved back.

He had looked for Jean, but she wasn't there.

"I can't remember. I wasn't paying attention by the end."

"What about the person who got a Gaming Machine? You told me someone did. Who was it?"

"That woman who lives over near the marketplace. You know the one? Her husband walks hunched over because he has a twisted back. He was with her but he didn't go up for a trade."

"Yes, I know who you mean. They're a nice family," the blind man said. "So she traded for a Gaming Machine. Did you see her when she was leaving?"

"I think so. She was with some other women and they were laughing as they walked away."

"I thought you said she was with her husband."

"She was, but he walked behind."

"How did she seem?"

"Happy, because she got a Gaming Machine. She was telling her friends that they could come play with it."

"But anything else? Was there anything else about her that you remember, from *after* the trade, not before?"

Matty shrugged. He was beginning to be bored by the questioning. He was thinking about Jean, and that he might go to see her in the morning. Maybe his puppy would be ready. At least the puppy would be an excuse for a visit. It was healthy now, and growing fast, with big feet and ears; recently he had watched, laughing, when the mother dog had growled at it because it was nipping at her own ears in play.

Thinking of the puppy's behavior reminded Matty of something.

"Something *was* different," he said. "She's a nice woman, the one who got the Gaming Machine."

"Yes, she is. Gentle. Cheerful. Very loving to her husband."

"Well," said Matty slowly, "when she was leaving, walking and talking with the other women, and her husband behind trying to keep up, she whirled around suddenly and scolded him for being slow."

"Slow? But he's all twisted. He can't walk any other way," the blind man said in surprise.

"I know. But she made a sneering face at him and she imitated his way of walking. She made fun of him. It was only for a second, though."

Seer was silent, rocking. Matty picked up the empty mugs, took them to the sink, and rinsed them.

"It's late," the blind man said. "Time to go to bed." He rose from his chair and put his stringed instrument on the shelf where he kept it. He began to walk slowly to his sleeping room. "Good night, Matty," he said.

Then he said something else, almost to himself.

"So now she has a Gaming Machine," the blind man murmured. His voice sounded scornful.

Matty, at the sink, remembered something. "Mentor's birthmark is completely gone," he called to Seer.

Eight

The puppy was ready. So was Matty. The other little dog, the one who had been his childhood companion for years, had lived a happy, active life, died in his sleep, and had been buried with ceremony and sadness beyond the garden. For a long time Matty, missing Branch, had not wanted a new dog. But now it was time, and when Jean summoned him—her message was that Matty had to come right away to pick up the puppy, because her father was furious at its mischief—he hurried to her house.

He had not been to Mentor's homeplace since Trade Mart the previous week. The flower garden, as always, was thriving and well tended, with late roses in bloom and fall asters fat with bud. He found Jean there, kneeling by her flower bed, digging with a trowel. She smiled up at him, but it was not her usual saucy smile, fraught with flirtatiousness, the smile that drove Matty nearly mad. This morning she seemed troubled.

"He's shut in the shed," she told Matty, meaning the puppy. "Did you bring a rope to lead him home?"

"Don't need one. He'll follow me. I have a way with dogs."

Jean sighed, set her trowel aside, and wiped her forehead, leaving a smear of earth that Matty found very appealing. "I wish I did," she said. "I can't control him at all. He's grown so fast, and he's very strong and determined. My father is beside himself, wanting such a wild little thing gone."

Matty grinned. "Mentor deals with lots of wild little things in the schoolhouse. I myself was a wild little thing once, and it was he who tamed me."

Jean smiled at him. "I remember. What a ragged, naughty thing you were, Matty, when you came to Village."

"I called myself the Fiercest of the Fierce."

"You were that," Jean agreed with a laugh. "And now your puppy is."

"Is your father home?"

"No, he's off visiting Stocktender's widow, as usual," Jean said with a sigh.

"She's a nice woman."

Jean nodded. "She is. I like her. But, Matty . . ."

Matty, who had been standing, sat down on the grass at the edge of the garden. "What?"

"May I tell you something troubling?"

He felt himself awash with affection for Jean. He had for a long time been attracted to her girlish affectations, her silly charms and wiles. But now, for the first time, he felt something new. He perceived the young woman behind all those superficial things. With her curly hair tumbling over her dirt-streaked forehead, she was the most beautiful person Matty had ever seen. And now she was talking to him in a way that was not foolish and childlike, designed to entrance, but instead was human and pained and adult. He felt suddenly that he loved her, and it was a feeling he had never known before.

"It's about my father," she said in a low voice.

"He's changing, isn't he?" Matty replied, startling himself, because he had not spelled it out in his mind before, had not said it aloud yet, yet here it was, and he was saying it to Jean. He felt an odd sense of relief.

Jean began to cry softly. "Yes," she said. "He has traded his deepest self."

"Traded?" That part took Matty by surprise because he had not thought it through to there. "Traded

for what?" Matty asked in horror, and realized he was repeating the phrase from Trade Mart.

"For Stocktender's widow," she said, weeping. "He wanted her to love him, so he traded. He's becoming taller and straighter. The bald spot at the back of his head has grown over with hair, Matty. His birthmark has disappeared."

Of course. That was it. "I saw it," Matty told her, "but I didn't understand." He put his arm around the sobbing girl.

She caught her breath finally. "I didn't know how lonely he was, Matty. If I had known . . ."

"So that's why . . ." Matty was trying to sort through it in his head.

"The puppy. Once he would have loved a naughty puppy, Matty, the way he loved you when you were a raggedy boy. I knew it all for certain yesterday when he kicked the puppy. Till then I only suspected." Jean wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and left another endearing streak of dirt.

"And the petition!" Matty added, thinking of it suddenly.

"Yes. Father always welcomed new ones. It was the most wonderful part of Father, how he cared for everyone and tried to help them learn. But now . . ."

They heard a loud whimpering from the shed, and a scratching sound.

"Let him out, Jean, and I'll take him home before your father gets back."

She went to the shed door, opened it, and though her face was tear-streaked now, she smiled at the eager, ungainly puppy who bounded forth, jumped into Matty's arms, and licked his cheeks. The white tail was a whir.

"I need time to think," Matty said, subduing the puppy with a rhythmic scratch below his chin.

"What's to think about? There's nothing to be done. Trades are forever. Even if a stupid thing like a Gaming Machine breaks down, or if you tire of it—you don't get to reverse."

He wondered if he should tell her. She had seen the effect of his power on the puppy and its mother, but hadn't understood. Now, if he chose, perhaps he could explain. But he was uncertain about this. He did not know how far his power went and he did not want to promise this beloved girl something impossible. To repair a man's soul and deepest heart—to reverse an irreversible trade—might be far, far more than Matty could possibly undertake.

So he stayed silent, and took his lively puppy away.

"Look! He sits now when I tell him to." Then Matty groaned and said, "Oh, sorry."

When would he ever learn to stop saying "Look" to a man who had no eyes?

But the blind man laughed. "I don't need to be able to look. I can hear that he sits. The sounds of his feet stop. And I don't feel his teeth on my shoes."

"He's smart, I think," Matty said optimistically.

"Yes, I think you're right. He's a good little puppy, Matty. He'll learn quickly. You don't need to worry about his mischief." The blind man reached out his hand and the puppy scampered to it and licked his fingers.

"And he's quite beautiful." In truth, Matty was trying to convince himself. The puppy was a combination of several colors, big feet, a whirligig of a tail, and lopsided ears.

"I'm sure he is."

"He'll need a name. I haven't thought of the right one yet."

"His true name will come to you."

"I hope I get my own soon," Matty said.

"It will come when the time comes."

Matty nodded and turned back to the dog. "First I thought of Survivor, because he was the only one

of the puppies that did. But it's too long. It doesn't sound like the right one." Matty picked up the puppy and scratched its belly as it lay on his lap.

"So then . . ." Matty began to laugh. "Since he was the one that lived? I thought of Liver for a name."

"Liver?" The blind man laughed as well.

"I know, I know. It was a stupid idea. Liver with onions." Matty made a face.

He set the puppy on the floor again and it dashed off, tail wagging, to growl at the logs piled beside the stove and to chew at their edges where raw wood curled.

"You could ask Leader," the blind man suggested. "He's the one who gives true names to people. Maybe he'd do it for a puppy."

"That's a good idea. I have to go see Leader anyway. It's time to take messages around for the meeting. I'll take the puppy with me."

Clumsy with his stubby legs and oversized feet, the puppy couldn't manage the stairs at Leader's homeplace. Matty picked him up and carried him, then set him on the floor in the upper room where Leader was waiting at his desk. The stacks of messages were ready. Matty could have taken them and left on his errand without pausing. But he lingered. He enjoyed Leader's company. There were things he wanted to tell him. He began to put them in order in his mind.

"Do you want to put a paper down for him?" Leader asked, watching with amusement as the little thing scampered about the room.

"No, he's fine. He never has an accident. It was the first thing he learned."

Leader leaned back in his chair and stretched. "He'll be good company for you, Matty, the way Branch was."

"Do you know," he went on, "in the place where I was a child, there were no dogs? No animals at all."

"No chickens? Or goats?"

"No, nothing."

"What did you eat, then?" Matty asked.

"We had fish. Lots of fish, from a hatchery. And plenty of vegetables. But no animal meat. And no pets at all. I never knew what it meant to have a pet. Or even to love something and be loved back."

His words made Matty think of Jean. He felt his face flush a little. "Did you never love a girl?" he asked.

He thought Leader would laugh. But instead the young man's face became reflective.

"I had a sister," Leader said, after a moment. "I think of her still, and hope she's happy."

He picked up a pencil from the desk, twirled it in his fingers, and gazed through the window. His clear blue eyes seemed to be able to see great distances, even into the past, or perhaps the future.

Matty hesitated. Then he explained, "I meant a *girl*. Not like a sister. But a—well, a *girl*."

Leader put the pencil down and smiled. "I understand what you mean. There was a girl once, long ago. I was younger than you, Matty, but I was at the age when such things begin."

"What happened to her?"

"She changed. And I did too."

"Sometimes I think I want nothing to change, ever," Matty said with a sigh. Then he remembered what he had wanted to tell Leader.

"Leader, I went to Trade Mart," he said. "I hadn't been before."

Leader shrugged. "I wish they'd vote to end it," he said. "I never go anymore, but I did in the past.

It seemed folly and time-wasting. Now it seems worse."

"It's the only way to get something like a Gaming Machine."

Leader made a face. "A Gaming Machine," he commented with disdain.

"Well, I'd like one," Matty grumbled. "But Seer says no."

The puppy wandered to a corner of the room, sniffed, made a circle of himself, collapsed, and fell asleep. Matty and Leader, together, watched it and smiled.

"It isn't just Gaming Machines and such." Matty had wondered how to say it, how to describe it.

Now, into the silence, as they watched the sleeping puppy, he found himself simply blurting it out.

"Something else is happening at Trade Mart. People are changing, Leader. Mentor is."

"I've seen the changes in him," Leader acknowledged. "What are you telling me, Matty?"

"Mentor has traded away his deepest self," Matty said, "and I think that others are, too."

Leader leaned forward and listened intently as Matty described what he had seen, what he suspected, and what he knew.

"Leader gave me a name for him, but I don't know if I like it."

Matty was back home by lunchtime, after delivering the last of the messages. The blind man was at the sink, washing some clothes.

"And what is it?" he asked, turning toward Matty's voice.

"Frolic."

"Hmmmm. It has a nice sound to it. How does the puppy feel about it?"

Matty lifted the puppy from where it had been riding, curled up inside his jacket. For most of the morning it had followed him, scampering at his heels, but eventually its short legs had tired, and Matty had carried it the rest of the way.

The puppy blinked—he had been asleep in the jacket—and Matty set him on the floor.

"Frolic?" Matty said, and the puppy looked up. His tail churned.

"*Sit, Frolic!*" Matty said. The puppy sat instantly. He looked intently at Matty.

"He did!" Matty told the blind man in delight.

"*Lie down, Frolic!*"

After a flicker of a pause, the puppy reluctantly sank to the floor and touched the rug with his small nose.

"He knows his true name already!" Matty knelt beside the puppy and stroked the little head. "Good puppy," he said. The big brown eyes gazed up at him and the spotted body, still sprawled obediently on the floor, quivered with affection.

"Good Frolic," Matty said.

Nine

There was much talk in Village about the coming meeting. Matty heard it everywhere, people arguing about the petition.

By now, some of the latest group of new ones were out and about, their sores clearing up, their clothes clean and hair combed, frightened faces eased, and their haunted, desperate attitudes changing to something more serene. Their children played, now, with other children of Village, racing down the lanes and paths in games of tag and hide-and-seek. Watching them, Matty remembered his own child self, his bravado and the terrible anguish it had concealed. He had not believed anyone would want him, ever, until he came to Village, and even then he had not trusted in its kindness for a long time.

With Frolic scampering at his heels, Matty made his way toward the marketplace to buy some bread.

“Good morning!” he called cheerfully to a woman he encountered on the path. She was one of the new ones, and he remembered her from the recent welcome. Her eyes had been wide in her gaunt face that day. She was scarred, as if by untended wounds, and one arm was held crookedly, so that it was awkward for her to do things.

But today she looked relaxed, and was making her unhurried way along the path. She smiled at Matty’s greeting.

“Stop it, Frolic! *Down!*” Matty scolded his puppy, who had jumped to grab and tug at the frayed edge of the woman’s skirt. Grudgingly Frolic obeyed him.

The woman leaned down to pat Frolic’s head. “It’s all right,” she said softly. “I had a dog once. I had to leave him behind.” She had a slight accent. Like so many of the people in Village, she had brought her way of speaking from her old place.

“Are you settling in?”

“Yes,” she told him. “People are kind. They’re patient with me. I’ve been injured, and I have to relearn some things. It will take time.”

“Patience is important here, because we have so many in Village who have difficulties,” Matty explained. “My father . . .”

He paused and corrected himself. “I mean the man I live with. He is called Seer. You’ve probably met him. He’s blind. He strides around everywhere on the paths without a problem. But when he first arrived and had just lost his eyes . . .”

“I have a concern,” the woman said suddenly, and he knew it was not a concern about the condition of the paths or directions to the buildings. He could see that she was worried.

“You can take any concern to Leader.”

She shook her head. “Maybe you can answer. It’s about the closing of Village. I hear talk of a petition.”

“But you’re already here!” Matty reassured her. “You needn’t worry! You’re part of us now. They won’t send you away, even if they close Village.”

“I brought my boy with me. Vladik. He’s about your age. Maybe you’ve noticed him?”

Matty shook his head. He hadn’t noticed the boy. There had been a large crowd of new ones. He wondered why the woman would be worried for her son. Perhaps he was having trouble adjusting to Village. Some new ones did. Matty himself had.

“When I came,” he told her, “I was scared. Lonely, too, I think. And I behaved badly. I lied and stole. But look—now I am fine. I’m hoping to get my true name soon.”

"No, no. My boy's a good boy," she said. "He doesn't lie or steal. And he's strong and eager. They have him working in the fields already. And soon he'll go to school."

"Well, then, no need to worry about him."

She shook her head. "No, I don't worry about him. It's my others. I brought Vladik but I had to leave my other children behind. We came first, my boy and I, to find the way. It was such a long, hard trip."

"The others are to come later. The little ones. My sister will bring them after I have made a place here."

Her voice faltered. "But now I hear people saying that the border will close. I don't know what to do. I think maybe I should go back. Leave Vladik here, to make a life, and go back to my little ones."

Matty hesitated. He didn't know what to say to her. Could she go back? She had been here only briefly, so it was not yet too late. Surely Forest would not entangle the poor woman yet. But if she did, what would she go back to? He didn't know how the woman had been injured. But he knew that in some places—it had been true, too, in Matty's old place—people were punished in terrible ways. He glanced at her scars, at her unset broken arm, and wondered if she had been stoned.

Of course she wanted to bring her children to the safety of Village.

"They'll be voting tomorrow," Matty explained. "You and I can't vote because we don't yet have our true names. But we can go and listen to the debate. We can speak if we want. And we can watch the vote."

He told her how to find the platform before which the people would gather. Using her good hand, the woman grasped Matty's hands with a warm gesture of thanks as she turned away.

At the market stall he bought a loaf of bread from Jean, who tucked a chrysanthemum blossom into the wrapping. She smiled at Frolic and leaned down to let him lick some crumbs from her fingers.

"Are you going to the meeting tomorrow?" he asked her.

"I suppose so. It's all my father talks about." Jean sighed and began to rearrange her wares on the table.

"Once it was books and poetry," she said with sudden and passionate anguish. "I remember when I was small, after my mother died, he would tell me stories and recite poems at dinner. Then, later, he told me about the people who had written them."

"By the time we studied it in school—you remember, Matty, studying literature?—it was all so familiar to me, because of the way he had taught me when I didn't even know he was teaching."

Matty remembered. "He used different voices. Remember Lady Macbeth? '*Out, damn'd spot! Out, I say!*'" He tried to repeat the lines with the sinister yet regal voice Mentor had used.

Jean laughed. "And Macduff! I cried when my father recited Macduff's speech about the deaths of his wife and children."

Matty remembered that speech as well. Standing by the bakery stall with Frolic scampering about at their feet, Matty and Jean recited the lines together.

All my pretty ones?

Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?

What! all my pretty chickens and their dam

At one fell swoop? . . .

I cannot but remember such things were,

That were most precious to me.

Then Jean turned away. She continued restacking the loaves on her table, but clearly her thoughts were someplace else. Finally she looked up at Matty and said in a puzzled voice, "It was so important to him, and he made it important to me: poetry, and language, and how we use it to remind ourselves of how our lives should be lived . . ."

Then her tone changed and became embittered. "Now he talks of nothing but Stocktender's widow, and of closing Village to new ones. What has happened to my father?"

Matty shook his head. He did not know the answer.

The recitation of Macduff's famous speech had reminded him of the woman he had spoken to on the path, the woman who feared for her lost children's future. *All my pretty ones.*

Suddenly he felt that they were all of them doomed.

He had forgotten completely about his own power. He had forgotten the frog.

Ten

The meeting to discuss and vote on the petition began in the orderly, careful way such meetings had always been handled. Leader stood on the platform, read the petition in his strong, clear voice, and opened the meeting to debate. One by one the people of Village stood and gave their opinions.

The new ones had come. Matty could see the woman he had met on the path, standing beside a tall, light-haired boy who must be Vladik. The two were with a group of new ones who had a place apart, since they could not vote.

Small children, bored, played along the edge of the pine grove. Matty had once been like them, when he was new here and hadn't liked meetings or debates. But now he stood with Seer and the other adults. He paid attention. He had not even brought Frolic, who usually accompanied Matty everywhere. Today the puppy was left at home, whimpering behind the closed door as they walked away.

It was frighteningly obvious now, with the population gathered, that something terrible was happening. At Trade Mart it had been evening, dark, and Matty had been so interested in the proceedings that he had not noticed many individuals, only those who went to the platform, like Mentor, and the woman who had been so oddly cruel to her husband as they started home.

Now, though, it was bright daylight. Matty was able to watch everyone, and to his horror he could see the changes.

Near him stood his friend Ramon, with his parents and younger sister. It was Ramon's mother who had asked to trade for a fur jacket and been denied. But they had had a Gaming Machine for quite a while, and so a trade had been made in the past. Matty looked carefully at his friend's family. He had not seen Ramon since the day recently when he had suggested a fishing expedition and been told that Ramon was not well.

Ramon glanced at Matty and smiled. But Matty held his breath for a moment, dismayed to see that indeed his friend was ill. Ramon's face was no longer tanned and rosy-cheeked but instead seemed thin and gray. Beside him, his little sister seemed sick, too; her eyes were sunken and Matty could hear her cough.

Once, he knew, her mother would have leaned down to tend the little girl at the sound of such a cough. Now, while Matty watched, the woman simply shook the child roughly by a shoulder and said, "Shhhh."

One by one the people spoke, and one by one Matty identified those who had traded. Some of those who had been among the most industrious, the kindest, and the most stalwart citizens of Village now went to the platform and shouted out their wish that the border be closed so that "we" (Matty shuddered at the use of "we") would not have to share the resources anymore.

We need all the fish for ourselves.

Our school is not big enough to teach their children, too; only our own.

They can't even speak right. We can't understand them.

They have too many needs. We don't want to take care of them.

And finally: We've done it long enough.

Now and then a lone citizen, untouched by trade, would go to the platform and try to speak. They spoke of the history of Village, how each of them there had fled poverty and cruelty and been welcomed at this new place that had taken them in.

The blind man spoke eloquently of the day he had been brought here half dead and been tended for

months by the people of Village until, though he was still without sight, it had become his true home. Matty had been wondering whether he, too, would go up and speak. He wanted to, for surely Village had also become his true home, and saved him, but he felt a little shy. Then he heard the blind man begin to speak on his behalf.

"My boy came here six years ago as a child. Many of you remember the Matty he was then. He fought and swore and stole."

Matty liked the sound of the phrase "my boy," which he had never heard the blind man use before. But he was embarrassed to see people turn and look at him.

"Village changed him and made him what he is now," the blind man said. "He will receive his true name soon."

For a moment Matty hoped that Leader, who was still standing on the platform, would hold up his hand to call for silence, would call Matty, place his hand on Matty's forehead, then announce the true name. It happened that way, sometimes.

Messenger: Matty held his breath, hoping for that.

But instead he heard another voice, not Leader's.

"I remember what he was like! If we close the border, we won't have to do that anymore! We won't have to deal with thieves and braggarts and people who have lice in their hair, the way Matty did then, when he came!"

Matty turned to look. It was a woman. He was stunned, as if someone had slapped him. It was his own neighbor, the very woman who had made clothes for him when he came. He remembered standing there in his rags while she measured him and then put on her thimble to stitch the clothing for him. She had a soft voice then, and talked gently to him while she sewed.

Now she had a sewing machine, a very fancy one, and bolts of fabric with which she created fine clothing. Now the blind man stitched the simple things that he and Matty needed.

So she, too, had traded, and was turning not only on him, but on all new ones.

Her voice incited others, and now large numbers of people were calling out, "Close Village! Close the border!"

Matty had never seen Leader look so sad.

When it was over, and the vote to close Village had been finalized, Matty trudged home beside the blind man. At first they were silent. There was nothing to be said. Their world had changed now.

After a bit Matty tried to talk, to be cheerful, to make the best of things.

"I suppose he'll send me out now to all the other villages and communities with the message. I'll be doing a lot of traveling. I'm glad it isn't winter yet. It's hard in snow."

"He came in snow," the blind man said. "He knows what it's like."

Matty wondered for a moment what he was talking about. Who? *Oh yes*, he thought. *The little sled.*

"Leader knows better than anyone about things," Matty remarked. "And he's still younger than many."

"He sees beyond," Seer said.

"What?"

"He has a special gift. Some people do. Leader sees beyond."

Matty was startled. He had noticed the quality of Leader's pale blue eyes, how they seemed to have a kind of vision most people didn't have. But he had not heard it described that way before.

It made him think of what he had only recently come to know about himself.

"So some people, like Leader, have a special gift?"

"It's true," Seer replied.

"Is it always the same? Is it always—what did you say?—seeing beyond?"

They were nearing the curve in the path where it branched off and led to their homeplace. Matty watched in awe, as he always did, how the blind man felt the coming curve and knew even in his darkness where to turn.

"No. It's different for different people."

"Do you have it? Is that how you know where to walk?"

The blind man laughed. "No. I've learned that. I've been without eyes for many years. At first I stumbled and bumped into things. People had to help me all the time. Of course in the old days in Village, people were quick to help and guide."

His voice became bitter. "Who knows what will happen now?"

They had arrived at the house and could hear Frolic scratching at the door and woofing in excitement at the sound of their approach.

Matty didn't want the conversation to end here. He wanted to tell the blind man about himself, about his secret.

"So you don't have a special gift, like Leader, but other people do?"

"My daughter does. She told me of it that night, the night you took me to her."

"Kira? She has a special gift?"

"Yes, your old friend Kira. The one who taught you manners."

Matty ignored that. "She must be all grown up now. I saw her last time I was there, but it's been almost two years. But, Seer, what do you mean . . . ?"

The blind man stopped unexpectedly on the steps leading to the door. "*Matty!*" he said with sudden urgency.

"What?"

"I've just realized. The border will be closing in three weeks."

"Yes."

Seer sat down on the steps. He put his head in his hands. Sometimes he did that when he was thinking. Matty sat beside him and waited. He could hear Frolic inside, throwing himself against the door in frustration.

Finally the blind man spoke. "I want you to go to your old village, Matty. Leader will be sending you anyway, with the message.

"He'll no doubt send you to several places. But, Matty, I want you to go to your old village first. Leader will understand."

"But I don't."

"My daughter. She said some day she would come here to live, when the time was right. You know her, Matty. You know she had things to accomplish there first."

"Yes. And she has, Seer. I could tell when I was last there. Things have changed. People take good care of their children now. And . . . ?"

He hesitated, unable to speak for a moment, because the memory of his own abuse had returned. Then he added simply, "Kira made things change. Things are better now."

"There are only three weeks left, Matty. After the border closes it will be too late. She won't be allowed to come. You must bring her here before that happens."

"If you don't, Matty, I will never see her again."

"It always seems strange to me when you say 'see.'"

The blind man smiled. "I see in my heart, Matty."

Matty nodded. "I know you do. I'll bring her to you. I'll leave here tomorrow."
Together they rose. Evening was coming. Matty opened the door and Frolic leaped into his arms.

Eleven

"Tuck it inside your shirt, Matty, so it won't get rumpled. You have a long journey ahead."

Matty took the packet of folded messages in the thick envelope, and placed it where Leader indicated, inside his shirt next to his chest. He didn't say so to Leader, but he thought that later, when he gathered his traveling things, he would probably find a different place for the envelope. He would put it with his food supplies and blanket. It was true that here, inside his shirt, was the safest and cleanest place. But he had planned to carry Frolic there, against his chest.

There was not time, in three weeks, to make journeys to all the other places and communities. Some of them were many days away, and a few places could be reached only by riverboat. Matty was not qualified to go by river; the man called Boater was always the one who took messages and trading goods by that route.

But it had been decided that the message would be posted on every path throughout Forest, so that any new ones coming would see it and turn back. Matty was the only one who knew all the paths, who was not afraid to enter Forest and travel in that dangerous place. He would post the messages there. And he would go on to his own old place as well. There had been ongoing communication between that place and Village for years; now they must be told of the new ruling.

Leader was standing now at the window, as he so often did, looking down at Village and the people below. Matty waited. He was in a hurry to be off, to begin his long journey, but he had a feeling there was something that Leader wanted to tell him, something still unsaid.

Finally Leader turned to Matty, standing beside him. "He's told you that I see beyond, hasn't he?"

"Yes. He says you have a special gift. His daughter does, too."

"His daughter. That would be the girl called Kira, the one who helped you leave your old place. He never talks about her."

"It makes him too sad. But he thinks about her all the time."

"And you say she has a gift, too?"

"Yes. But hers is different. Each gift is different, Seer said."

Do you know about mine? Matty thought. But he did not need to ask.

As if he had read Matty's mind, Leader told him, "I know of yours."

Matty shuddered. The gift still frightened him so. "I kept it secret," he said apologetically. "I haven't even told Seer. I didn't want to be secretive. But I'm still trying to understand it. I try to put it out of my mind. I try to forget that it's there inside me. But then it just appears. I can feel it coming. I don't know how to stop it."

"Don't try. If it comes without your summoning it, it is because of need. Because someone needs your gift."

"A frog? It was a frog first!"

"It was to show you. It always starts with a small thing. For me? The very first time I saw beyond? It was an apple."

Despite the solemnity of the conversation, Matty chuckled. A frog and an apple. *And a puppy*, he realized.

"Wait for the true need, Matty. Don't spend the gift."

"But how will I know?"

Leader smiled. He rubbed Matty's shoulder affectionately. "You'll know," he said.

Matty looked around for Frolic and saw that he was curled in the corner, asleep. "I should go. I

haven't packed my things yet. And I want to stop by and tell Jean I'm going, so she won't wonder where I am."

Leader kept him there within the comfortable curve of his arm. "Matty, wait," he said. "I want to . . ." Then he gazed through the window again. Matty stood there, wondering what he was to wait for. Then he felt something. The weight of the young man's arm took on a quality of something beyond human flesh. It came alive with power. Matty felt it from the arm, but he knew, as well, that it was pervading all of Leader's being. He understood that it was Leader's gift at work.

Finally, after what seemed an unendurable few moments, Leader lifted his arm away from Matty. He exhaled. His body sagged slightly. Matty helped him to a chair and he sat there, exhausted, breathing hard.

"Forest is thickening," Leader said when he could speak.

Matty didn't know what he meant. It sounded ominous. But when he looked through the window, to the row of underbrush and pines that was the border of Forest, it looked no different to him.

"I don't understand it exactly," Leader said. "But I can see a thickening to Forest, like a . . ." He hesitated.

"I was going to say like a clotting of blood. Things turning sluggish and sick."

Matty looked through the window again. "The trees are just the same, Leader. There's a storm coming, though. You can hear the wind. And look. The sky is turning dark. Maybe that's what you saw."

Leader shook his head skeptically. "No. It was Forest I saw. I'm sure. It's hard to describe, Matty, but I was trying to look *through* Forest in order to get a feeling for Seer's daughter. And it was very, very hard to push through. It was—well, *thick*."

"I think you had better not go, Matty, I'm sorry. I know you love making your journeys, and that you take pride in being the only one who can. But I think there may be danger in Forest this time."

Matty's heart sank. He had hoped to be given his true name, Messenger, because of this trip. At the same time, something told him that Leader might be right.

Then he remembered. "Leader, I *have* to!"

"No. We can post the messages at the entrance to Village. It will mean new ones will have to turn back after terribly long journeys, and that's tragic. But—"

"No, it's not the messages! It's Seer's daughter! I promised him I would go and bring Kira home. It will be her last chance to come. His last chance to be with her."

"And she will want to come?"

"I'm sure she will. She always intended to someday. And she has no family there. She's old enough to marry, but no one would want her. Her leg is crooked. She walks with a stick."

Leader took several deep breaths. "Matty," he said, "I'm going to try again to see beyond Forest. I'm going to try to see Seer's daughter and her needs. You may stay with me now, because whether you make this journey will depend on what I learn. But be aware that it is very hard for me to do this twice in a row. Don't be distressed as you watch."

He stood again and went to the window. Matty, knowing he could be of no help, went to the corner where Frolic was asleep and sat down beside his puppy. From there he watched Leader's body tense, as if he were in pain. He heard Leader gasp and then moan slightly.

The young man's blue eyes remained open but no longer seemed to be looking at the ordinary things in the room or through the window. He had gone, eyes and whole being, far into a place that Matty could not perceive and where no one could follow him.

He seemed to shimmer.

Finally he slumped into the chair, shaking, and tried to catch his breath.

Matty went to him, stood beside him, and waited while Leader rested. He remembered how he felt after he had healed the puppy and its mother. He remembered the desperate need to sleep.

"I reached where she is," Leader said when he could speak again.

"Did she know you were there? Could she feel you there?"

Leader shook his head. "No. To make her aware of me would have taken more energy than I had. It's so very far, and Forest is so thick now, to go through."

Matty had a sudden thought. "Leader? Do you think two gifts could *meet*?"

Leader, still breathing hard, stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure. But what if you could go halfway—and she could, too? So you could meet in the middle with your gifts? It wouldn't be so hard if you only went halfway. If you *met*."

Leader's eyes were closed, now. "I don't know, Matty," he said.

Matty waited but Leader said nothing more, and after a while Matty feared he was asleep. "Frolic?" he called, and the puppy woke, stirred, and came to him.

"Leader," Matty said, leaning close to him, "I'm going to go. I'm going to get the blind man's daughter."

"Be very careful," Leader murmured. His eyes were closed. "It is dangerous now."

"I will. I always am."

"Don't waste your gift. Don't spend it."

"I won't," Matty replied, though he was not certain what the words meant.

"Matty?"

"Yes?" He was at the top of the stairs now, holding Frolic, who still couldn't manage the staircase on his own.

"She's quite lovely, isn't she?"

Matty shrugged. He understood that Leader was referring to Kira but the blind man's daughter was older than he. She had been like a big sister to him. No one in the old place had thought her lovely. They had been contemptuous of her weakness.

"She has a crooked leg," Matty reminded Leader. "She leans on a stick to walk."

"Yes," Leader said. "She's very lovely." But his voice was hard to hear now, and in a second he was asleep. Matty, holding Frolic, hurried down the stairs.

It was late in the day by the time Matty was ready to go. It had rained heavily, and though the rain had stopped, wind still blew, and the leaves of the trees fluttered and revealed their pale undersides. The sky was dark, from the storm and from the approach of evening.

He placed the packet of messages inside his rolled blanket. By the sink, the blind man was putting food into Matty's backpack. He could not carry enough for the entire journey; it was too long. But Matty was accustomed to living on the food that Forest provided. He would feed himself along the way when what Seer packed was gone.

"While you're away, I'll be fixing the spare room for her. Tell her that, Matty. She'll have a comfortable place to live. And she can have a garden. I know that's important to her. She's never been without a garden."

"I won't need to convince her. She's always said she'd come when the time was right. Now it is. Leader could tell. So she'll know, too. You said she has a gift." Matty, folding a sweater, tried to reassure the blind man.

"It's hard to leave the only place you've known."

"You did it," Matty reminded him.

"I had no choice. I was brought here when they found me in Forest with my eyes gone."

"Well, I did it. Many have."

"Yes. That's true. But I hope it won't be hard for her."

Matty glanced over. "Don't put those beets in. I hate beets."

"They're good for you."

"Not if they're thrown on the ground. And that's what they'll be if you put them in."

The blind man chuckled and dropped the beets into the sink. "Well," he said, "they're heavy anyway. They'd weigh you down. But I'm putting carrots in."

"Anything but beets."

There was a knock on the door, and it was Jean, her hair curlier than usual from the dampness that remained after the rain. "Are you still going, Matty, in this weather?"

Matty laughed at her concern. "I've gone through Forest in snow," he boasted. "This weather is nothing. Yes, I'm about to leave. I'm just packing food."

"I've brought you some bread," she said, and took the wrapped loaf from the basket she carried. He noticed that she had decorated it with a leafy sprig and a yellow chrysanthemum blossom.

Matty took the loaf and thanked her, though secretly he wondered how he would ever fit it in. Finally the blind man found a way to tuck it inside the rolled blanket.

"I want to stop on my way out of Village and see Ramon," Matty said. "I'd better hurry or I'll never get started."

"Oh, Matty," Jean said. "You don't know? Ramon's very sick. His sister, too. They've put a sign on the door to their house. No one can enter."

Troubling though the news was, Matty was not surprised. Ramon had been coughing, feverish-looking, and increasingly unwell for days now. "What does Herbalist say?"

"That's why they put the sign up. Herbalist is afraid it may be contagious. That an epidemic could come."

What was happening to Village? Matty felt a terrible unease. There had never been an epidemic here. He remembered the place he had come from, where many had died, from time to time, and all of their belongings had been burned, after, in hopes of destroying the illnesses carried by filth or fleas or, some thought, sorcery. But it had never happened here. People had always been so careful here, so clean.

He could see that the blind man's face had taken on a worried look, too, at the news.

For a moment, Matty stood there thinking while Seer arranged his pack on his back and attached the rolled blanket below it. He thought of the frog first, then the puppy, and wondered if his gift could save his friend. He could go to Ramon's house now, and place his hands upon the feverish body. He knew it would be indescribably hard, would take all of his strength, but he thought there might be a chance.

But what then? If he himself survived such an attempt, he would be desperately weakened, he knew, and would have to recover. He could not possibly make the journey through Forest if he first weakened himself on Ramon's behalf. Forest was already thickening, he knew, whatever that meant. It would soon become impassable. The blind man's daughter would be lost to them forever.

And, most important, Leader had told him to save his gift. *Don't spend it*, Leader had said.

So Matty decided with regret that he would have to leave Ramon to his illness.

"Look," Jean said suddenly. "Look at this. It's *different*."

Matty glanced over and saw that she was standing in front of the tapestry Kira had made for her

father. Even from where he stood, he could see what Jean meant. The entire forest area, the hundreds of tiny stitches in shades of green, had darkened, and the threads had knotted and twisted in odd ways. The peaceful scene had changed into something no longer beautiful. It had an ominous feel to it, a feel of impenetrability.

He went near to it and stared at it, puzzled and alarmed.

"What is it, Matty?" Jean asked.

"Nothing. It's all right." He indicated with his eyes that she should not speak aloud of the odd change in the tapestry. Matty did not want Seer to know.

It was time to go.

He wriggled his shoulders to adjust the pack comfortably on his back, and leaned forward to hug the blind man, who murmured to him, "Be safe."

To his surprise, Jean kissed him. So often in the past, teasing, she had said she would, one day. Now she did, and it was a quick and fragrant touch to his lips that gave him courage and, even before he started out, made him yearn to come back home.

Twelve

Frolic was afraid of the dark. Matty had never noticed it before, because always they had been indoors, with the oil lamp glowing, at night. He laughed a little to hear the puppy whimper in fear when night fell and Forest turned black. He picked him up and murmured words of reassurance but could feel the dog's body tremble, still, in his arms.

Well, thought Matty, it was time to sleep, anyway. He was quite near the clearing where the frog had been and perhaps still was. Carefully he made his way across the soft moss, holding Frolic against his chest and feeling the way with his feet. Then he knelt in the gnarled root bed of a tall tree and removed his pack. He unrolled the blanket, fed Frolic a few pieces torn from the loaf of bread, nibbled at it himself, and then curled up with his puppy and drifted off.

Churrump.

Churrump.

Frolic raised his head. His nose twitched and he flicked his ears curiously at the sound. But then he buried his head again under the curve of Matty's arm. Soon he too slept.

The days of the journey passed, and after the fourth night, the food was gone. But Matty was strong and unafraid, and to his surprise, little Frolic did not need to be carried. The puppy followed him and sat watching patiently as he posted the messages along divergent paths. Doing so lengthened the journey considerably. If he had gone straight through, he would be approaching Kira's village, his own home in the past, quite soon. But he reminded himself that being a messenger was his most important task, and so he took the side paths, walked great distances, and left the message of Village's closure at each place where new ones coming could be advised to turn back.

The scarred woman and her group had come from the east, he knew. There was a look that identified the easterners. He could see, on the path to the east, remaining bits of evidence that they had come through not long before: crushed underbrush where they had huddled to sleep, chunks of charcoal where a fire had been, a pink ribbon that had fallen, Matty thought, from a child's hair. He picked it up and put it in his backpack.

He wondered if the woman had left her son behind and returned alone to her other children by now. There was no sign of her.

The weather remained clear and he was grateful for that, because although he had bragged about past journeys through snow, in truth it was very hard to fight the elements, and almost impossible to find food in bad weather. Now there were early-fall berries and many nuts; he laughed at the chattering squirrels who were storing their own provisions, and with little guilt robbed a nest he found that was half filled with winter fare.

He knew places to fish, and the best way to catch them. Frolic turned up his nose at fish, even after Matty had grilled one on his small fire.

"Go hungry, then," Matty told him, laughing, and finished the browned, glistening fish himself. Then, as he watched, Frolic cocked his ears, listening, and dashed off. Matty heard a squawk, then a flurry of wings and rustling leaves and growls. After a bit, Frolic returned, looking satisfied, and with a bit of feather stuck to his whiskers.

"So? I had fish, you had bird." It amused Matty to talk to Frolic as if he were human. Since his other puppy had died, he had always traveled the paths alone. Now it was a treat to have company, and sometimes he felt that Frolic understood every word he said.

Although it was a subtle change, he understood what Leader had meant when he said that Forest was thickening. Matty knew Forest so well that he could anticipate changes that came with the seasons. Ordinarily, at summer's end, as now, some leaves would be falling, and by the time snow came, later, many trees would be bare. In the heart of winter, he needed to find water at the places where streams rushed quickly and didn't freeze; many of the quiet pools he knew well would be coated with ice. In spring there would be irritating insects to brush from his face, but there would be fresh, sweet berries then, too.

Always, though, it was familiar.

But on this journey, something was different. For the first time, Matty felt hostility from Forest. The fish were slow to come to his hook. A chipmunk, usually an amiable companion, chittered angrily and bit his finger when he held his hand toward it. Many red berries, of a kind he had always eaten, had black spots on them and tasted bitter; and for the first time he noticed poison ivy growing across the path again and again, where it had never grown before.

It was darker, too. The trees seemed to have moved at their tops, leaning toward each other to create a roof across the path; they would protect him from rain, he realized, and perhaps that was a good thing. But they didn't seem benevolent. They created darkness in the middle of day, and shadows that distorted the path and made him stumble from time to time on roots and rocks.

And it smelled bad. There was a stench to Forest now, as if it concealed dead, decaying things in the new thick darkness.

Camping in a clearing that he knew well from previous journeys, Matty sat on a log that he had often used as a seat while he cooked his meal. Suddenly it crumbled under him, and he had to pick himself up and brush rotting bark and slimy, foul-smelling material from his clothing. The piece of log that had been there so long, sturdy and useful, had simply fallen into chunks of dead vegetative matter; never again would it provide Matty a place to rest. He kicked it away and watched countless dislodged beetles scurry to new hiding places.

He began to have trouble sleeping. Nightmares tormented him. His head ached suddenly, and his throat was sore.

But he was not far, now, from his destination. So he trudged on. To divert himself from the discomfort that Forest had become, he thought about himself as a little boy. He remembered his earliest days when he had called himself the Fiercest of the Fierce, and his friendship then with the girl named Kira who was the blind man's daughter.

Thirteen

Such a swaggering, brash little boy he had been! With no father, and only an impoverished, embittered mother to try to make a life for children she had not wanted and did not love, Matty had turned to a life of small crimes and spirited mischief. Most of his time had been spent with a ragtag band of dirty-faced boys who carried out whatever schemes they could to survive. The harshness of his homeplace led him to thievery and deceit; had he been grown, he would have been imprisoned or worse.

But there had always been a gentle side to Matty, even when he had disguised it. He had loved his dog, a mongrel he had found injured and had nursed back to health. And he had come, eventually, to love the crippled girl called Kira, who had never known her father, and whose mother had died suddenly and left her alone.

“Mascot,” Kira had called him, laughing. “Sidekick.” She had made him wash, taught him manners, and told him stories.

“I be the Fiercest of the Fierce!” he had bragged to her once.

“You are the dirtiest of the dirty faces,” she had said, laughing, in reply, and given him the first bath he ever had. He had struggled and protested, but in truth had loved the feel of warm water. He had never learned to love soap, though Kira gave him some for his own. But he felt the years of grime slip from him and knew that he could turn into someone cleaner, better.

Roaming as he always had, Matty had learned the intricate paths of Forest. One day he had found his way to Village for the first time, and had met the blind man there.

“She lives?” the blind man had asked him, unbelieving. “My daughter is alive?”

It was very dangerous for the blind man to return. Those who had tried to kill him, who had left him for dead years before, thought they had succeeded. They would have slain him instantly had he found his way back. But Matty, a master of stealth, had brought him secretly, at night, to meet his daughter for the first time. He watched from a corner of the room as Kira recognized the broken stone that Seer wore as an amulet, and matched it to her own, fitting it to the fragment given to her by her dying mother. Matty saw the blind man touch his daughter’s face, to learn her, and he watched in silence as they mourned Kira’s mother together, their hearts connected by the loss.

Then, when darkness came the next night, he had led the blind man back again. But Kira would not come. Not then.

“Someday,” she had told Matty and her father when they begged her to return with them to Village. “I’ll come someday. There’s time still. And I have things to do here first.”

“I suppose there’s a young man,” the blind man had said to Matty as they traveled back without her. “She’s the age for it.”

“Nah,” Matty had said scornfully. “Not Kira. She has better stuff on her mind.

“Anyways,” he had added, referring to her twisted leg, “she has that horrid gimp. No one can marry iffen they got a gimp. She’s lucky they didn’t feed her to the beasts. They wanted to. They only kept her ’cause she could do things they needed.”

“What things?”

“She grows flowers, and—”

“Her mother did, too.”

“Yes, her mum taught her, and to make the colors from them.”

“Dyes?”

"Yes, she dyes the threads and then she makes pictures from them. No one else can do it. She has like a magic touch, they say. And they want her for that."

"She would be honored in Village. Not only for her talent but for her twisted leg."

"Turn here." Matty took the blind man's arm and guided him to the right side of a turning in the path. "Watch the roots there." He noticed that a root lifted itself and stabbed slightly at the man's sandaled foot. It made him very nervous, guiding on this return trip, because he could feel, being familiar with it, that Forest was giving small Warnings to the blind man. He would not be allowed to come through again.

"She'll come when she's ready," he reassured Kira's father. "And till then, I'll go back and forth between."

But it had been two years since he had last seen Kira.

Matty emerged from Forest with a stumble, blinking at the sudden sunshine, for he had been in the dim thickness of trees for many days now and felt that he had almost forgotten light.

He fell on the path and sat there panting, slightly dizzy, with Frolic pawing worriedly at his leg. In the past he had always—what would the word be? *strolled*—from Forest, sometimes whistling. But this was different. He felt that he had been expelled. Chewed up and spat out. When he looked back toward the trees, in the direction he had come, it seemed inhospitable, unwelcoming, locked down.

He knew he would have to reenter Forest and return by those same dark paths that now seemed so ominous. He would have to lead Kira through, to the safety of her future with her father. And he knew suddenly that it would be his last journey in that place.

There was not much time left, and he would not be able to linger here, to look up his boyhood pals, to reminisce with them about their pranks, or to brag a little about his status now. He usually did that when he came. He would not even have time to say good-bye to the stranger his brother had become.

Village would close in three weeks from the time of the proclamation. Matty had calculated very carefully. He had counted the days of his journey, adding in the extra days it took for his side trips to tack the messages in place. Now he had just enough time to rest, which he badly needed to do, collect food for the return journey, and persuade Kira to come with him. If they moved steadily and without interruption through Forest (though he knew it would be slower with the girl, who had to lean on her stick) they would arrive in time.

Matty blinked, took a deep breath, got to his feet, and hurried on to the small cottage around the next turning, the place where Kira lived.

The gardens were larger than he remembered; since his last visit almost two years before, she had expanded them, he saw. Thick clumps of yellow and deep pink flowers fringed the edge of the small dwelling with its hand-hewn beams and thatched roof. Matty had never paid attention to the names of flowers—boys generally disdained such things—but now he wished he knew them, so that he could tell Jean.

Frolic went to the base of a wooden post that was entwined with a purple-blossomed vine, and lifted his leg to proclaim his presence and authority here.

The door to the cottage opened and Kira appeared there. She was wearing a blue dress and her long dark hair was tied back with a matching ribbon.

"Matty!" she cried in delight.

He grinned at her.

"And you've got yourself a new pup! I hoped you would. You were so sad, I remember, after

Branchie died."

"His name is Frolic, and I'm afraid he's watering your . . ."

"Clematis. It's all right," she said, laughing. She reached for Matty and embraced him. Ordinarily uncomfortable with hugs, he would have stiffened his shoulders and drawn back; but now, from exhaustion and affection, he held Kira and to his own amazement felt his eyes fill with tears. He blinked them back.

"All right, stand back now and let me see you," she said. "Are you taller yet than I am?"

He stood back grinning and saw that they were eye to eye.

"Soon you will be. And your voice is almost a man's."

"I can read Shakespeare," he told her, swaggering.

"Hah! So can I!" she said, and he knew then for certain how changed this village was, for in the earlier days, girls had not been allowed to learn.

"Oh, Matty, I remember when you were such a tiny thing, and so wild!"

"The Fiercest of the Fierce!" he reminded her, and she smiled fondly at him.

"You must be very tired. And hungry! You've just made such a long journey. Come inside. I have soup on the fire. And I want news of my father."

He followed her into the familiar cottage and waited while she reached for her walking stick that leaned against a wall and arranged it under her right arm. Dragging the useless leg, she took a thick earthen bowl from a shelf and went to the fire where a large pot simmered and smelled of herbs and vegetables.

Matty looked around. No wonder she had not wanted to leave this place. From the sturdy ceiling beams dangled the countless dried herbs and plants from which she made her dyes. Shelves on the wall were bright with rolls of yarn and thread arranged by color, white and palest yellow at one end, gradually deepening into blues and purples and then browns and grays at the other. On a threaded loom in the corner between two windows, a half-finished weaving pictured an intricate landscape of mountains, and he could see that she was now working on the sky and had woven in some feathery clouds of pink-tinged white.

She set the bowl of steaming soup on the table in front of Matty and then went to the sink to pump water into a bowl for Frolic.

"Now. Tell me of Father," she asked. "He's well?"

"He's fine. He sends you his love."

He watched as Kira leaned her stick against the sink and knelt with difficulty to place the bowl on the floor. Then she called to Frolic, who was industriously chewing a broom in the corner.

When the puppy had come to her and turned his attention to the bowl of water, Kira rose again, sliced a thick piece from a loaf of bread, wedged her stick under her shoulder again, and brought the bread to the table. Matty watched the way she walked, the way she had always walked. Her right foot twisted inward, pulling the entire leg with it. The leg had not grown as the other had. It was shorter, turned, and useless.

He thanked her and dipped one end of the slice into his soup.

"He's a sweet puppy, Matty." He half listened as she chattered cheerfully about the dog. His thoughts had turned to Frolic's birth and how close to death the pup and his mother had been.

He glanced down at her twisted leg. How much more easily she would be able to walk—how much more steadily and quickly she would be able to travel—if the leg were straight, if the foot could be planted firmly on the ground.

He remembered the afternoon after the puppy and his mother had been saved. Today he was tired,

very tired, from the long journey through Forest. But on that day, he had felt near death.

He tried to recall how long it had taken him to recover. He had slept, he knew. Yes. He remembered that he had slept for the afternoon, glad that the blind man had not been at home to ask why. But he had arisen before dinner—weary, still, but able to hide it, to eat and talk as if nothing had happened.

So his recovery had taken only a few hours, really. Still, it had been a puppy. Well, a puppy and its mother. *Two dogs*. He had fixed—cured? saved?—two dogs in late morning, and recovered from it by the end of the day.

“Matty? You’re not listening! You’re half asleep!” Kira’s laughter was warm and sympathetic.

“I’m sorry.” He put the last bit of bread into his mouth and looked apologetically at her.

“You’re both tired. Look at Frolic.”

He glanced over and saw the puppy sound asleep, curled into a mound of undyed yarn heaped near the door, as if the soft pile were a mother to doze against.

“I have work to do in the garden, Matty. The coreopsis needs staking and I’ve not had a chance to get to it. You lie down and get some rest, now, while I’m outside. Later we can talk. And you can go into the village and find your friends, for a visit.”

He nodded and went to the couch to lie down on top of the knitted blanket that she had thrown across it. In his mind, he was counting the days they had left. He would explain to her that there was no time to visit with old pals.

He watched, his eyes heavy with exhaustion, as she took his bowl to the sink, placed it there, and then, leaning on her stick, gathered some stakes from a shelf, and a ball of twine. With her garden tools she turned to go outdoors. The twisted foot dragged in its familiar way. He had known everything about Kira for so long: her smile, her voice, her merry optimism, the amazing strength and skill of her hands, and the burden of her useless leg.

I must tell you this, Matty thought before he slept. *I can fix you.*

Fourteen

To his amazement, Kira said no. Not no to leaving—he hadn't suggested that to her, not yet—but a definite, unarguable no to the idea of a straightened, whole leg.

"This is who I am, Matty," she said. "It is who I have always been."

She looked at him fondly. But her voice was firm. It was evening. The fire glowed in the fireplace and she had lit the oil lamps. Matty wished that the blind man were in the room with them, playing his instrument, because the soft, intricate chords always brought a peace to their evenings together and he wanted Kira to hear the music, to feel the comfort it brought.

He had not yet told her that she was to return with him. During their supper together, as Kira chattered about the changes in the old village, how much better things were now, he had only half listened. In his mind he had been weighing what to tell her and when and how. There was so little time; and he needed, Matty knew, to present it to her in a decisive and convincing way.

But suddenly he heard her make a casual comment about her handicap. She was describing a small tapestry she had embroidered as a wedding gift for her friend Thomas, the woodcarver, who had recently been married.

"It was all finished and rolled up, and I decorated it with flowers," she said, "and on the morning of the wedding I set out, carrying it. But it had rained, and the path was wet, and I slipped and dropped the tapestry right into a mud puddle!" Kira laughed. "Luckily it was still early, so I came back here and was able to clean it. No one ever knew."

"My leg and stick are a nuisance when it's wet outdoors," she said. "My stick has never learned to navigate mud." She reached over to the pot and began to pour more tea into their mugs.

Surprising himself, he blurted it out. "I can fix your leg."

The room fell completely silent except for the hiss and crackle of the fire. Kira stared at Matty.

"*I can,*" he said after a moment. "I have a gift. Your father says that you do, too, so you'll understand."

"I do," Kira agreed. "I always have. But my gift doesn't fix twisted things."

"I know. Your father told me yours is different."

Kira looked down at her hands, wrapped around her mug of tea. She opened her fingers, spread her hands upon the table, and turned them over. Matty could see the slender palms and the strong fingers, calloused at their tips from the garden work, the loom, and the needles that she used for her complicated, beautiful tapestries. "Mine is in my hands," she said softly. "It happens when I make things. My hands . . ."

He knew he shouldn't interrupt. But time was so short. So he cut her off, and apologized for it. "Kira, I want you to tell me all about your gift. But later. Right now there are important things to do and decide."

"I'm going to show you something," he told her. "Watch this. My gift is in my hands, too."

He had not planned this. But it seemed necessary. On the table lay the sharp knife with which she had sliced bread for their supper. Matty picked it up. He leaned down, and pulled the left leg of his trousers up. Kira watched, her eyes confused. Quickly, without flinching, he punctured his own knee. Dark red blood trickled in a thin crooked line down his lower leg.

"Oh!" Kira gasped. She stared at him and held her hand to her mouth. "What . . . ?"

Matty swallowed, took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and placed both of his hands on his wounded knee. He felt it coming. He felt his veins begin to pulsate; then the vibration coursed through

him, and he felt the power leave his hands and enter his wound. It lasted no more than a few seconds and ended.

He blinked, and took his hands away. They were smeared slightly with blood. The trickled line on his leg had already begun to dry there.

"Matty! Whatever are you . . . ?" When he gestured, Kira leaned forward and looked carefully at his knee. After a moment she reached for the woven napkin on the table, dipped it into her tea, and wiped his leg with the damp cloth. The line of blood disappeared. His knee was smooth, unblemished. There was no wound at all. She looked intently at it, then bit her lip, reached out, and pulled the hem of his trouser leg down over his knee.

"I see." It was all she said.

Matty shook himself free of the wave of fatigue it had caused. "It was a very small wound," he explained. "I just did it to show you I could. It didn't take much out of me. But I've done it with bigger things, Kira. With other creatures. With much larger wounds."

"Humans?"

"Not yet. But I can do it. I can feel it, Kira. With a gift, you *know*."

She nodded. "Yes. That's true." She glanced at her own hands, resting there on the table, still holding the damp cloth.

"Kira, your leg will take a great deal out of me. I'll have to sleep, after, maybe for a whole day or even longer. And I don't have much time."

She looked at him quizzically. "Time for what?"

"I'll explain. But for now, I think we should start. If I do it right away, I can sleep completely through the night and almost all of the morning. You can use that time to become accustomed to being whole . . ."

"I *am* whole," she said defiantly.

"I meant to having two strong legs. You'll be amazed at how it feels, at how much more easily you can move around. But it will take a little while to adjust to it."

She stared at him. She looked down at her twisted leg.

"Why don't you lie down over there on the couch? I'll pull this chair over and sit beside you."

Matty began kneading his hands in preparation. He took several deep breaths and felt energized. He could tell that his full strength was back. The knee wound had been such a small thing, really.

He rose, lifted his wooden chair, and moved it over beside the couch where he had napped that afternoon. He arranged the cushions so that she would be comfortable. Behind him he heard Kira rise from her chair as well, lift her stick from where it leaned against the table, and walk across the room. To his surprise, when he turned, he saw that she had taken the mugs to the sink and was beginning to wash them, as if it were an ordinary evening.

"Kira?"

She looked over at him. She frowned slightly. Then she said no.

There was no arguing with her, none at all. After a while Matty gave up the attempt.

Finally he moved his chair again so that he could sit in front of the fire. It was chilly in the evenings now, with summer ending. Forest had been downright cold at night, and he had woken in the mornings during his journey aching and chilled. It was comforting to sit here by the warm fire now.

Kira picked up a small wooden frame with a half-finished piece of embroidery stretched taut across it. She brought it to her chair, and moved a basket filled with bright threads to the floor beside her. Then she leaned her stick against the fireplace wall, sat down, and picked up the needle that was waiting, threaded with green, attached to the fabric.

"I will go with you," she said quite suddenly in her soft voice. "But I will go as I am. With my leg. With my stick."

Matty, puzzled, stared at her. How had she known, before he asked it, what he was planning to ask of her?

"I was going to explain," he said after a long moment. "I was going to persuade you. How . . . ?"

"I started to tell you earlier," she said, "about my gift. What my hands do. Move your chair closer and I'll show you now."

He did so, pulling the crude wooden chair near to where she was. She tilted the embroidery frame so that he could see. Like the colorful tapestry on the wall of the blind man's house, this was a landscape. The stitches were tiny and complicated, and each section a subtle variation in color, so that deep green moved gradually into a slightly lighter shade, and then again lighter, until at the edges it was a pale yellow. The colors combined to form an exquisite pattern of trees, with the tiniest of individual leaves outlined in countless numbers.

"It's Forest," Matty said, recognizing it.

Kira nodded. "Look beyond it," she said, and extended her finger to point to a section in the upper right, where Forest opened and tiny houses were patterned around curved paths.

He thought he could almost make out the house he shared with the blind man, though it was infinitely small on the fabric.

"Village," he said, examining with awe the meticulousness of her craft.

"I embroider this scene again and again," Kira said, "and sometimes—not always—my hands begin to move in ways I don't understand. The threads seem to take on a power of their own."

He leaned closer to look more carefully at the embroidery. It was astounding, the detail of it, how tiny it was.

"Matty?" she said. "I've never done this with anyone watching. But I can feel it in my hands right now. Watch."

He peered intently as her right hand picked up the needle threaded with green. She inserted it into the fabric at an unfinished place near the edge of Forest. Suddenly both of her hands began to vibrate slightly. They *shimmered*. He had seen this once before, on the day that Leader stood at the window, gathered himself, and saw beyond.

He looked up at her face and saw that her eyes were closed. But her hands were moving very quickly now. They reached into the basket again and again, changed threads in a motion so fast he could barely follow it, and the needle entered the cloth, and entered the cloth, and entered the cloth.

Time seemed to stop. The fire continued to crackle and sputter. Frolic sighed in his sleep at the edge of the hearth. Matty sat speechless, watching the shimmering hands dart; hours and days and weeks seemed to go by, yet oddly, only a blink, an instant, of time passed. Today and tomorrow and yesterday were all spun together and held in those hands that moved and moved and moved, yet her eyes were closed, and the fire still flickered and the dog still slept.

Then it ended.

Kira opened her eyes, sat up straighter, and stretched her shoulders. "It tires me," she explained, though he already knew it.

"Look now," she said. "Quickly, because it will fade."

He leaned forward and saw that now, in the embroidered scene, at the bottom, two tiny people were entering Forest. He recognized one as himself, backpack on his back; he could even see, amazingly, the torn place on the sleeve of his jacket. Behind him, meticulously stitched in shades of brown, was Frolic, his tail high. And beside Frolic he saw Kira, her blue dress, her stick wedged

under her arm, her dark hair tied back.

The top edge of the embroidery had changed as well. Now, beside the house he had recognized as his, he could see the blind man standing. His posture was that of someone waiting for something.

And suddenly Matty could see, too, crowds of people at the edge of Village. They were dragging huge logs. Someone—it looked like Mentor—was giving directions. They were preparing to build a wall.

Matty sat back. He blinked, astounded, then leaned forward to look at it again. He realized he wanted to search the scene for a glimpse of Jean. But now the details were gone. He could still see the colored stitches, but it was a simple—exquisitely beautiful, but simple—landscape again. For a moment he saw the people, flat now, with no detail, but then they faded abruptly and were gone.

Kira set the embroidery frame down on the floor and rose from her chair. “We must leave in the morning,” she said. “I’ll prepare food.”

Matty was still stunned by what he had just seen. “I don’t understand,” he said.

“Do you understand what happened when you stabbed your knee with that knife and then closed and cured the wound with your hands?”

“No,” he admitted. “I don’t. It’s my gift. That’s all.”

“Well,” Kira said matter-of-factly, “this is mine. My hands create a picture of the future. Yesterday morning I held that same fabric and saw you come out of Forest. In the afternoon I opened the door and there you were.”

She chuckled. “I hadn’t seen Frolic, though. He was a nice surprise.” The dog awoke and looked up at the sound of his name. He came to her to be patted.

“While you napped,” she went on, “I stitched again and saw Father waiting for me. That was just this afternoon. Now they have started to move the logs into place for the wall. And—did you notice the change in Forest, Matty?”

He shook his head. “I was looking at the people.”

“Forest is thickening. So we must hurry, Matty.”

Odd. It was the same thing that Leader had seen. “Kira?” Matty asked.

“Yes?” She was taking food from a cupboard.

“Did you see a young man with blue eyes? About your age? We call him Leader.”

She stood still for a moment, thinking. A strand of dark hair fell across her face, and she brushed it back with her hand. Then she shook her head. “No,” she said. “But I *felt* him.”

Fifteen

They woke early. The sun was just rising, and through the window Matty could see that the gardens were bathed in amber light. Thick around a tall trellis, a vine that had been simply green when he arrived the day before was now profuse with opened blue and white morning glories. Beyond the trellis, on tall stalks, tiny aster blossoms, deep pink with golden centers, trembled in the dawn breeze.

He felt her presence, suddenly, and turned to see Kira standing behind him, looking out.

"It will be hard for you to leave this," he said.

But she smiled and shook her head. "It's time. I always knew the time would come. I told my father that long ago."

"He says you'll have a garden there. He wanted me to tell you that."

She nodded. "Eat quickly, Matty, and we'll go. I've fed Frolic already."

"Do you need help?" Matty asked, his mouth full of the sweet muffin she had given him, as he watched her arrange a wrapped bundle on her back, crisscrossing the straps that held it around her chest. "What's in it?"

"No, I can do it just fine. It's my frame and some needles and thread."

"Kira, the journey's hard and long. There won't be time to sit and sew." Then Matty fell quiet. Of course she needed this. It was the way her gift came.

She had put food inside Matty's pack as well as in his rolled blanket. It was heavier than it had been coming, for there were two of them now. But Matty felt strong. He was almost relieved that she had not allowed him to mend her leg, for it would have weakened him badly, cost them perhaps several days as he rested from it, and sent them out less prepared and more vulnerable.

He could see, too, that she was accustomed to her stick and twisted leg. A lifetime of walking in that way had made it, as she had pointed out, part of her. It was who she was. To become a fast-striding Kira with two straight legs would have been to become a different person. This was not a journey Matty could undertake with a stranger.

"Frolic, if you were a little bigger and less frisky, I would strap a pack to your back," Kira said, laughing, to the eager puppy, who stood beside the door with his tail churning in the air. He could tell they were leaving. He was not going to be left behind.

Soon they were loaded with everything they had packed so carefully the night before.

"We're ready, then," Kira announced, and Matty nodded in agreement. From the open doorway, with Frolic already outside sniffing the earth, they looked back to the large room that had been Kira's home since she had been a young girl. She was leaving the loom, the baskets of yarn and thread, the dried herbs on the rafters, the wall-hangings, the earthen mugs and plates made for her by the village potter, and a handsome wooden tray that had been a gift long ago from her friend Thomas, who had carved it with intertwined, complicated designs. From hooks along the wall hung her clothes, things she had made, some of them skirts and jackets rich with embroidered and appliqued designs. Today she was wearing her simple blue dress and a heavy knitted sweater with buttons made from small flat stones.

She closed the door on all of it. "Come, Frolic," Matty called, unnecessarily. The dog scampered to them and raised his leg one last time against the doorsill, saying, in his way, "I have been here."

Then Matty moved toward the place where the path entered Forest. Kira, leaning on her stick, followed him, and Frolic, ears up, came behind.

"You know," Kira said, "I've walked the forest path between this cottage and the center of my village so many times." Then she laughed. "Well, of course you know that, Matty. You did it with me when you were a little boy."

"I did. Again and again."

"But I have never once entered Forest. There was no need, of course. And it always seemed frightening somehow."

They had barely entered, and behind them the light of the clearing still showed, and a corner of Kira's little house. But ahead, Matty could see, the path was oddly dark. He didn't remember it being so dark.

"Are you frightened now?" he asked her.

"Oh, no, not with you. You know Forest so well."

"That's true. I do." It was true, but even as he said it, Matty felt a sense of discomfort, though he hid it from Kira. The path ahead did not seem to be as familiar as it had always been. He could tell that it was the same path—the turnings were the same; as he led her around the next one, the clearing behind them was no longer visible—but things that had seemed easy and accustomed no longer did. Now everything felt a little different: slightly darker, and decidedly hostile.

But he said nothing. He led the way, and Kira, strong despite her handicap, trudged after him.

"They have entered."

Leader turned from the window. He had stood there for a long moment, intent, focused, while beside him the blind man waited. They had been doing this for several days.

Leader sat to rest. He breathed hard. He was accustomed to this, the way his body temporarily lost its vigor and needed to restore itself after he had looked beyond.

The blind man gave a sigh that was clearly one of relief. "So she came with him."

Leader nodded, still not ready to talk.

"I worried that she wouldn't. It meant leaving so much behind. But Matty convinced her. Good for him."

Leader stretched, and sipped from the glass of water on his desk. Then he was able to speak. "She didn't need convincing. She could tell that it was time. She has that gift."

The blind man went to the window and stood there listening. Heavy dragging sounds and thuds were accompanied by shouts:

"Over here!"

"Put it down there!"

"Watch out!"

They could hear Mentor's voice, loud above the others. "Stack them right there," he directed. "Five to a stack. You! You idiot! Stop that! If you aren't going to help, go someplace else!"

Leader winced. "It was such a short time ago that he was so patient and soft-spoken. Listen to him now."

"Tell me how he looks," the blind man said.

Leader went to the window and looked down at the place where they were preparing to build the wall. He found Mentor in the crowd. "His bald spot is completely gone," he said. "He's taller. Or at least stands straighter. He's lost weight. And his chin is firmer than it was."

"A strange trade for him to have made," the blind man commented.

Leader shrugged. "For a woman," he pointed out. "People do strange things."

"I suppose it's too soon for you to look beyond again." The blind man was still at the window. His posture was uneasy.

Leader smiled. "You know it is. They've only just entered. They're fine."

"How much time do they have?"

"Ten days. The wall can't go up for ten days, according to the edict. It's enough time."

"Matty's like a son to me. It's as if both my children are out there."

"I know." Leader put a reassuring arm across the blind man's shoulders. "Come back here tomorrow morning and we'll look again."

"I'll go work in my garden. I'm preparing flower beds for Kira."

"Good idea. It'll take your mind from the worry."

But when Seer had gone, Leader stood at the window for a while, listening to the wall builders at their preparations. He was very worried himself. He had not told the blind man. But while he had watched Matty, Kira, and the puppy enter Forest, he had been able to see, too, that Forest was shifting, moving, thickening, and preparing to destroy them.

Sixteen

"I'll catch fish farther along," Matty said. "Frolic won't eat it, but you and I can. And there are berries and nuts. So we don't have to save this. Eat all you want."

Kira nodded and took a bite from the deep red apple he had given her. "It will be good to reduce the weight in your pack," she pointed out. "We can move more quickly then."

They were seated on the blanket in the place Matty had chosen to spend the first night. They had covered quite a distance during the day. He was surprised at how well she was able to keep up the pace.

"No, Frolic, not my stick." Kira scolded the little dog affectionately when he tried to use her cane as a plaything to chew. "Here," she said to him, and picked up a stick from the ground. She threw it to him and he dashed away with it, growling playfully, hoping that someone would chase him. When no one did, he lay down and attacked the stick like a warrior, tearing its bark with his small sharp teeth.

Matty tossed some dead twigs onto the fire he had built. It was close to dark now, and chilly. "We walked a long way today," he told Kira. "I'm amazed at how well you manage. I thought that because of your leg . . ."

"I'm so accustomed to it. I've always walked like this." Kira untied her leather sandals and began to rub her feet. "I'm tired, though. And look. I'm bleeding." She leaned forward with the hem of her skirt bunched in her hand, and wiped blood from the sole of her foot. "I'll throw this dress away when we arrive." She laughed. "Will there be fabric there so that I can make new clothes?"

Matty nodded. "Yes. There's plenty in the marketplace. And you can borrow clothes, too, from my friend Jean. She's about your size."

Kira looked at him. "Jean?" she said. "You've not mentioned her before."

He grinned and was glad it was dark so she wouldn't see his face turning crimson. It startled him that he had blushed. What was happening? He had known Jean for years. They had played together as children after his arrival in Village. He had tried, once, to tease and frighten her with a snake, only to discover that she loved garden snakes.

To Kira, now, he just shrugged. "She's my friend.

"She's pretty," he added, then cringed, embarrassed that he had said that, and waited for Kira to tease him. But she wasn't really listening. She was examining her feet, and he could see, even in the flickering light of the fire, that the soles were badly cut and bleeding.

She dipped the hem of her dress into the bowl of water they had set out for Frolic, and wiped the wounds. Watching her in the firelight, Matty could see her wince.

"How bad is it?" he asked.

"It will be all right. I've brought some herbal salve and I'll rub it in." He watched as she opened a pouch she took from her pocket and began to treat the punctures and cuts.

"Is there something wrong with your shoes?" he asked, glancing at the soft leather sandals set side by side on the ground. They had firm soles and she had seemed to walk comfortably in them.

"No. My shoes are fine. It's strange, though. While we were walking, I kept having to stop to pull twigs out of my shoes. You probably noticed." She laughed. "It was as if the underbrush was actually *reaching in* to poke at me."

She rubbed a little more ointment into the wounds on her feet. "It poked me *hard*, too. Maybe tomorrow I'll wrap some cloth around my feet before I put my sandals back on."

"Good idea." Matty didn't let her see how uneasy this made him feel. He fed the fire again and then

arranged some rocks around it so that it couldn't escape from the little cleared space where he had built it. "We should sleep now, and get an early start tomorrow."

Soon, curled on the ground beside her, with Frolic between them and the blanket thrown across all three, Matty listened. He heard Kira's even breathing; she had fallen asleep immediately. He felt Frolic stir and turn in his light puppyish slumber, probably dreaming of birds and chipmunks to chase. He heard the last shifting of the sticks in the fire as it died and turned to ash. He heard the whoosh and flutter of an owl as it dived, and then the tiny squeal of a doomed rodent caught in its talons.

From the direction toward which they were traveling, he perceived a hint of the stench that permeated the deep center of Forest. By Matty's calculations, they would not reach the center for three days. He was surprised that already the foul smell of decay drifted to where they were resting. When finally he slept, his dreams were layered over with an awareness of rot and the imminence of terrible danger.

In the morning, after they had eaten, Kira wrapped both of her feet in fabric torn from her petticoat, and when the wrappings were thick and protective, she loosened the straps of her sandals and fit her bandaged feet carefully into them.

Then she picked up her stick and walked a bit around the fire to test the arrangement. "Good," she said after a moment. "It's quite comfortable. I won't have a problem."

Matty, rolling the blanket around the remains of their food, glanced over. "Tell me if it happens again, the sticks and twigs poking at you."

She nodded. "Ready, Frolic?" she called, and the puppy scampered to her from the bushes where he had been pawing at a rodent's hole. Kira adjusted her wrapped bundle of embroidery tools on her back and prepared to follow Matty as he set off.

To his surprise, he had some difficulty finding the path this second morning. That had never happened before. Kira waited patiently behind him as he investigated several apparent entrances from the clearing where they had slept.

"I've come through here so often," he told her, puzzled. "I've slept in this same place so many times before. And I've always kept the path clear and easy to find. But now . . ."

He pushed back some bushes with his hand, stared for a moment at the ground he had revealed, then took his knife from his pocket and pruned back the branches. "Here," he said, pointing. "Here's the path. But the bushes have somehow grown across and hidden it. Isn't that strange? I just came through here a day and a half ago. I'm sure it wasn't over-grown like this then."

He held the thick shrubbery back to make it easier for Kira to enter, and was pleased to see that her foot-steps, despite her injured feet, seemed firm and without pain.

"I can push things with my stick," she told him. "See?" She raised her stick and used it to force up a thick vine that had reached from one tree to another on the other side of the path, making a barrier at the height of their shoulders. Together they ducked and went under the vine. But immediately they could see that there were others ahead, barring their approach.

"I'll cut them," Matty said. "Wait here."

Kira stood waiting, Frolic suddenly quiet and wary at her feet, while Matty sliced through the vines at eye level ahead of them.

"Ow," he said, and winced. An acidic sap dripped from the cut vines and burned where it landed on his arm. It seemed to eat through the thin cotton fabric of his sleeve. "Be careful not to let it drip on you," he called to Kira, and motioned to her to come forward.

They made their way carefully through the passageway, which was a maze of vines, Matty in front

with his knife. Again and again the sap spattered onto his arms until his sleeves were dotted with holes and the flesh beneath was burned raw. Their progress was very slow, and when finally the path widened, opened, and was free of the glistening growth—which they could see had already, amazingly, regrown and reblocked the path they had just walked—they stopped to rest. It had begun to rain. The trees were so thick above them that the downpour barely penetrated, but the foliage dripped and was cold on their shoulders.

“Do you have more of that herbal salve?” Matty asked.

Kira took it from her pocket and handed it to him. He had pushed back his sleeves and was examining his arms. Inflamed welts and oozing blisters had made a pattern on his skin.

“It’s from the sap,” he told her, and rubbed the salve onto the lesions.

“I guess my sweater was thick enough to protect me. Does it hurt?”

“No, not much.” But it wasn’t true. Matty didn’t want to alarm her, but he was in excruciating pain, as if his arms had been burned by fire. He had to hold his breath and bite his tongue to keep from crying out as he applied the salve.

For a brief moment, he thought that he might try to use his gift, to call forth the vibrating power and eradicate the stinging poisonous rash on his arms. But he knew he must not. It would take too much out of him—it would, in Leader’s words, *spend his gift*—and it would hamper their progress. They had to keep moving. Something so terrifying was happening that Matty did not even try to assess it.

Kira did not know. She had never made this journey before. She could feel the difficulties of this second day but did not realize they were unusual. She found herself able to laugh, not aware of the incredible pain that Matty was feeling in his singed and blistered arms. “Goodness,” she said, chuckling, “I’m glad my clematis doesn’t grow that fast or that thick. I’d never be able to open my front door.”

Matty rolled his sleeves back down over the painful burns and returned the salve to Kira. He forced himself to smile.

Frolic was whimpering and trembling. “Poor thing,” Kira said, and picked him up. “Was that path scary? Did some of the sap drip on you?” She handed him to Matty.

He saw no wounds on the puppy, but Frolic was unwilling to walk. Matty tucked him inside his jacket, curling the ungainly legs and feet, and the puppy nestled there against his chest. He felt the little heart beat against his own.

“What’s that smell?” Kira asked, making a face. “It’s like compost.”

“There’s a lot of decaying stuff in the center of Forest,” he told her.

“Does it get worse?”

“I’m afraid it will.”

“How do you get through it? Do you tie a cloth around your nose and mouth?”

He wanted to tell her the truth. *I’ve never smelted it before. I’ve come through here a dozen, maybe two dozen, times, but I have never smelted it before. The vines have never been there. It has never been like this before.*

Instead, he said, “That’s the best method, I suppose. And your salve has a nice herbal odor. We’ll rub some of it on our upper lips, so it will block that foul smell.”

“And we’ll hurry through,” she suggested.

“Yes. We’ll go through as quickly as we can.”

The searing sensation in his arms had subsided, and now they simply throbbed and ached.

But his body felt hot and weak, as if he were ill. Matty wanted to suggest that they stop here and rest, that they spread the blanket and lie down for a while. But he had never rested at midday on

previous journeys. And now they could not afford the time. They had to move forward, toward the stench. At least the vines were behind them now, and he didn't see any ahead.

The cold rain continued to fall. He remembered, suddenly, how Jean's hair curled and framed her face when it was damp. In contrast to the horrible stench that was growing stronger by the minute, he remembered the fragrance of her when she had kissed him goodbye. It seemed so long ago.

"Come," he said, and gestured to Kira to follow.

Leader told the blind man that Matty and Kira had made it through the first night and were well into the second day. He murmured it from the chair where he was resting, lacking the strength to talk in his usual firm voice.

"Good," the blind man said cheerfully, unsuspecting. "And the puppy? How's Frolic? Could you see him?"

Leader nodded. "He's fine."

The truth was that the puppy was in better condition than Matty himself, Leader knew. So was Kira. Leader could see that Kira had had problems the first day, when Forest had punctured and wounded her. His gift had given him a glimpse of her bleeding feet. He had watched her rub on the salve and wince, and he had winced in sympathy. But she was managing well now. He could see, but did not tell the blind man, that now Forest was attacking Matty instead.

And he could see as well that they had not yet approached the worst of it.

Seventeen

By the second afternoon Matty was in agony, and he knew there was still a day to go before the worst of it. His arms, poisoned by the sap, had festered and were seeping, swollen, and hot. The path was almost entirely overgrown now, and the bushes clawed at him, scraping at the infected burns until he was close to sobbing with the pain.

He could no longer delude Kira into thinking this was an ordinary journey. He told her the truth.

"What should we do?" she asked him.

"I don't know," he said. "We could try to go back, I suppose, but you can see that the path back is blocked already. I don't think we could find the way, and I know I can't go through those vines again. Look at my arms."

He gingerly pulled back his ruined sleeve, and showed her. Kira gasped. His arms no longer looked like human limbs. They had swollen until the skin itself had split and was oozing a yellowish fluid.

"We're close to the center now," he explained, "and once we get through that, we'll be on the way out. But we still have a long way to go, and it will most likely get a lot worse than it is already."

She followed him, uncomplaining, for there was no other choice, but she was pale and frightened.

When they came, finally, to the pond where he ordinarily refilled his water container and sometimes caught some fish, he found it stagnant. Once clear and cool, the water was now dark brown, clogged with dead insects, and it smelled of kinds of filth he could only guess at.

So they were thirsty now.

The rain had stopped, but it left them clammy and cold.

The smell was much, much worse.

Kira smoothed the herbal salve on their upper lips and wrapped cloth around their noses and mouths to filter the stench. Frolic huddled, head down, inside Matty's shirt.

Suddenly the path, the same path he had always followed, ended abruptly at a swamp that had never been there before. Sharp, knifelike reeds grew from glistening mud. There was no way around. Matty stared at it and tried to make a plan.

"I'm going to cut a thick piece of vine, Kira, to use as rope. Then I'll tie us together, so that if one of us should get stuck in some way . . ."

Bending his grotesquely swollen arm with difficulty, he reached with his knife and severed a length of heavy vine.

"I'll tie it," Kira said. "I'm good at that. I've knotted so much yarn and thread." Deftly she circled his waist, and then her own, with the length of supple vine. "Look," she told him, "it's quite fast." She tugged at the knots, and he could see that she had done a masterly job of connecting them to each other, leaving a length of vine between.

"I'll go first," Matty said, "to test the mud. The thing I'm most concerned about . . ."

Kira nodded. "I know. There are muds called quicksand."

"Yes. If I start to sink, you must pull hard to help me get out. I'll do the same for you."

Inch by inch they moved through the swamp, looking for thickets of growth on which to place their feet, testing the suction when they were forced into the thick mud. The razor-sharp reeds sliced mercilessly into their legs and mosquitoes feasted on the fresh blood. From time to time they pulled each other free when they were caught by the suction. Kira's sandals, first one and then the other, were sucked from her feet and disappeared.

Miraculously, Matty's shoes remained, coated with the slippery mud so that he appeared to be wearing heavy wet boots by the time he dragged himself from the other side of the swamp. He waited there, holding the vine rope steady, easing Kira through the mud and up the bank.

Then he used the knife and cut through the vine that had held them together in the swamp. "Look!" he said, pointing to his feet, encased in mud that was already drying into a crust. For a moment he had an odd desire to laugh at the grotesque thick boots.

Then he saw Kira's bare feet and shuddered. They were raw, dripping with blood from the reopened cuts she had previously suffered, and from new lacerations caused by the sharp swamp reeds. Matty climbed back down the bank, scooped wet mud with his hands, and gently coated her feet and legs, stopping the bleeding and trying to ease her pain with the thick cool paste.

He looked up through the tree growth to the sky, trying to assess the time of day. It had taken them a long time to cross the swamp. His arms were unusable, but he could still hold the knife in his swollen hands. Kira, her legs and feet in muddied shreds, knelt beside him, trying to catch her breath. The stench made it difficult for them to breathe, and he could feel the puppy choking from it inside his shirt.

He forced himself to speak with optimism.

"Follow me," he said. "I think the center is just ahead. And night is coming soon. We'll find a place to sleep, and then in the morning we'll start the final bit. Your father's waiting."

Slowly he moved forward, and Kira rose onto her ruined feet and followed him.

Matty felt his reason leave him now and again, and he began to imagine that he was outside of his own body. He liked that, escaping the pain. In his mind he drifted overhead, looking down on a struggling boy who pushed relentlessly through the dark, thorny undergrowth, leading a crippled girl. He felt sorry for the pair and wanted to invite them to soar and hover comfortably with him. But his bodiless self had no voice, and he was unable to call down to where they were.

These were daydreams, escapes, and they didn't last long.

"Can we stop for a minute? I need to rest. I'm sorry." Kira's voice was weak, and muffled by the cloth covering her mouth.

"Up here. There's a little opening. We'll have room to sit down." Matty pointed, and pushed ahead to the place he had seen. When they reached it, he shook his rolled blanket from his back and set it on the ground as a cushion. They sank down beside each other.

"Look." Kira pointed to the skirt of her dress, to show him. The blue fabric, discolored now, was in shreds. "The branches seem to reach for me," she said. "They're like knives. They cut my clothes"—she examined the ruined dress, with its long ragged tears—"but they don't quite reach my flesh. It's as if they're waiting. Teasing me."

For a terrible instant Matty remembered how Ramon had described poor Stocktender, who had been entangled by Forest and whose body had been found strangled by vines. He wondered if Forest had teased Stocktender first, burning and cutting him before the final moments of his hideous death.

"Matty? Say something."

He shook himself. He had let his mind drift again. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know what to say.

"How are your feet?" he thought to ask her.

He saw her shudder, and looked down. The encrusted mud he had applied as balm had fallen away. Her feet were nothing more than ragged flesh.

"And look at your poor arms," she said. His torn sleeves were stained with seepage from his wounds.

He remembered the days of Village in the past, when a person who had difficulty walking would be helped cheerfully by someone stronger. When a person with an injured arm would be tended and assisted till he healed.

He heard sounds all around them and thought them to be the sounds of Village: soft laughter, quiet conversation, and the bustle of daily work and happy lives. But that was an illusion born of memory and yearning. The sounds he heard were the rasping croak of a toad, the stealthy movement of a rodent in the bushes, and foamy bubbles belching from some slithery malevolent creature in the dark waters of the pond.

"I'm really having trouble breathing," Kira said.

Matty realized that he was, too. It was the heaviness of the air with its terrible smell. It was like a foul pillow held tightly to their faces, cutting off their air, choking them. He coughed.

He thought of his gift. Useless now. Probably he still had the strength and power to repair his own wounded arms or Kira's tortured feet. But then the next onslaught would come, and the next, and he would be too weakened to resist it. Even now, looking listlessly down, he saw a pale green tendril emerge from the lower portion of a thorny bush and slide silently toward them. He watched in a kind of fascination. It moved like a young viper: purposeful, silent, and lethal.

Matty took his knife from his pocket again. When the sinister, curling stem—in appearance not unlike the pea vines that grew in early summer in their garden—reached his ankle, it began to curl tightly around his flesh. Quickly he reached down and severed it with the small blade. Within seconds it turned brown and fell away from him, lifeless.

But there seemed no victory to it. Only a pause in a battle he was bound to lose.

He noticed Kira reaching for her pack and spoke sharply to her. "What are you doing? We have to move on a minute. It's dangerous here." She hadn't seen the deadly thing that had grabbed at Matty, but he knew there would be more; he watched the bushes for them.

It had come for him first, he realized. He did not want to be the first to die, to leave her alone.

To his dismay, she was removing her embroidery tools. "Kira! There's no time!"

"I might be able to . . ." Then she deftly threaded a needle.

To what? he wondered bitterly. *To create a handsome wall-hanging depicting our last hours?* He remembered that in the art books he had leafed through at Leader's, many paintings depicted death. A severed head on a platter. A battle, and the ground strewn with bodies. Swords and spears and fire; and nails being pounded into the tender flesh of a man's hands. Painters had preserved such pain through beauty.

Perhaps she would.

He watched her hands. They flew over the small frame, moving in and out with the needle. Her eyes were closed. She was not directing her own fingers. They simply moved.

He waited, his eyes vigilant, watching the surrounding bushes for the next attack. He feared the coming dark. He wanted to move on, out of this place, before evening came. But he waited while her hands moved.

Finally she looked up. "Someone is coming to help us," she said. "It's the young man with the blue eyes."

Leader.

"Leader's coming?"

"He has entered Forest."

Matty sighed. "It's too late, Kira. He'll never find us in time."

"He knows just where we are."

"He can see beyond," he said, and coughed. "Have I already told you that? I can't remember."

"See beyond?" She had begun to pack her things away.

"It's his gift. You see ahead. He sees beyond. And I . . ." Matty fell silent. He raised one hideously swollen arm and looked listlessly at the pus that seeped through the fabric of his sleeve. Then he laughed harshly. "I can fix a frog."

Eighteen

The blind man was alone now, with his fear, since Leader had gone. He had returned to his own house to wait, passing as he did the workers still preparing to build a wall surrounding Village.

In the yard beside the small homeplace he had shared happily with Matty for so long, he could smell the newly turned earth. Yesterday he had begun to dig a flower garden for his daughter, pushing in the spade and loosening the weeds for pulling.

Jean had stopped by to ask about Matty. She had admired Seer's work and told him she would bring seeds from her own flowers. They could have twin gardens, she said. She was looking forward to meeting the blind man's daughter. She had never had a big sister, and perhaps Kira would be that for her. He could hear the smile in her voice.

But that had been yesterday, and he had told Jean then, believing it to be true, that the travelers were fine, and on their way home.

This morning Leader, after standing motionless at the window for a long time, had told him the truth.

The blind man had cried out in anguish. "Both of them? *Both of my children?*"

Ordinarily Leader needed to rest after he looked beyond. But now he did not take the time. The blind man could hear him moving about the room, gathering things.

"Don't let Village know I'm gone," Leader told him.

"Gone? Where are you going?" The blind man was still reeling with the news of what was happening in Forest.

"To save them, of course. But I don't trust the wall builders. If they realize I'm not here to remind everyone of the proclamation, I think they'll start early. I don't want to get back here and not be able to reenter."

"Can you slip past them?"

"Yes, I know a back way. And they're all so absorbed in their work that they won't be looking for me. I'm the last person they want to see, anyway. They know how I feel about the wall."

The blind man was encouraged out of his despair by the optimism in Leader's voice. *To save them, of course.* He had said that. Maybe it could be true.

"Do you have food? A warm jacket? Weapons? Maybe you'll need weapons. I hate the thought of it."

But Leader said no. "Our gifts are our weaponry," he said. Then he hurried down the stairs.

Now, alone in his homeplace, a feeling of hopelessness returned to the blind man. He reached for the wall beside the kitchen and felt the edges of the tapestry hanging there, the one Kira had made for him. He let his fingers creep across it, feeling their way through the embroidered landscape. He had felt the tiny, even stitches often before, because he went to it and touched it when he was missing her. Now, on this shattered morning, he felt nothing but knots and snarls under his fingertips. He felt death, and smelled its terrible smell.

Nineteen

Night was ending and they were still alive. Matty woke at dawn to find himself still curled next to Kira in the place where they had collapsed together after struggling as far as they could into the evening.

"Kira?" His voice was hoarse from thirst, but she heard him and stirred. She opened her eyes.

"I can't see very well," she whispered. "Everything is blurred."

"Can you sit up?" he asked.

She tried, and groaned. "I'm so weak," she said. "Wait." She took a deep breath and then painfully pushed herself into a sitting position.

"What's that on your face?" she asked him. He touched his upper lip where she pointed, and brought his hand away smeared with bright blood. "My nose is bleeding," he said, puzzled.

She handed him the cloth she had worn around her face the day before, and he held it against his nose to try to stem the flow of blood. "Do you think you can walk?" he asked her after a moment.

But she shook her head. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Matty."

He wasn't surprised. After the thorny branches had shredded her dress, they had reached for her legs as night fell, and now he could see that she was terribly lacerated. The wounds were deep, and he could see exposed muscles and tendons glisten yellow and pink in a devastating kind of beauty where the ragged flesh gaped open.

Matty himself could probably still stumble along. But his arms were completely useless now, and his hands seemed no more than huge paws. He could no longer even hold the knife with any strength.

As for Frolic, he didn't know. The little dog lay motionless against his chest.

He watched dully as a brown lizard with a darting tongue scrambled across their blanket with its tail flicking.

"You go on," Kira murmured. She lay back down and closed her eyes. "I'll just sleep."

He moved his damaged arms with some difficulty to her pack, which lay beside her where she had dropped it the night before. Through a haze of pain he realized that his fingers still moved awkwardly at his will, and he used them to open her pack and remove the embroidery frame. Painstakingly, slowly, he threaded her needle. Then he shook her awake.

"Don't. I don't want to wake up."

"Kira," he said to her, "take this." He handed her the frame. "Just try one more time. Please. See where Leader is, if you can."

She blinked and looked at the frame as if it were unfamiliar. Matty put the threaded needle into her right hand. He was remembering something. It was something he had said once, to Leader, about meeting halfway.

But she had closed her eyes again. He spoke loudly to her. "Kira! Put the needle into the fabric. And try to *meet* him. Try, Kira!"

Kira sighed, and with a feeble gesture she inserted the needle into the cloth as he held the frame for her. He watched her hands. Nothing happened. Nothing changed. "Again," he implored.

He saw her hands flutter, and the shimmer came.

Leader felt Forest's attack begin when he was two days in. Probably it had started earlier, with sharp twigs—he remembered now that one had barely missed his eye—but he had been so intent, then, on finding and following the path that he had not paid attention to the little wounds inflicted on him. He

had strode through the deep woods with no thought of danger; he concentrated only on finding the pair that he had seen so close to death. He didn't eat or sleep.

He had begun to perceive the stench on the morning of the second day, and it served to hurry his steps. Without flinching, he brushed aside the grasping branches and ignored the thorns that scraped his arms and face.

He encountered a place where the path seemed simply to end. He stopped, puzzled, and examined the undergrowth. From somewhere nearby a shiny green frog emerged from the base of a bush.

Churrump.

Churrump.

It hopped and skittered toward him in the mud, then turned itself around and went forward. To his surprise, Leader followed the frog, pushing his way through thick bushes, and found that it had led him to the place where the path resumed. Relieved, for he had thought briefly that he was lost, he continued on. But now he recognized the attacks. Now he saw that it was not random thorny branches and his own clumsiness in walking into them, but rather an assault from Forest itself.

Suddenly the air surrounding him was abuzz with stinging insects. They flew at his face and bit mercilessly. He remembered, from his reading, descriptions of besieged medieval castles, and armies of men with bows sending so many arrows that the sky seemed thick with them. This felt like that. He felt pierced in a thousand places, and he cried out.

Then, just as suddenly, they were gone: regrouping, he thought, for another attack. He rushed forward, thinking to move away from this swampy area which harbored and bred such creatures. Indeed, the path did turn and led to drier ground, but here a sharp rock flung itself up and split the skin on his knee; then another sliced his hand so badly that he had to wrap the cut tightly in cloth for fear the loss of blood would weaken him beyond repair.

Stumbling and bleeding, he wished briefly that he had brought some kind of weapon. But what would have protected him against Forest itself? It was a force too huge to fight with a knife or a club.

Our gifts are our weaponry, he remembered saying to the blind man. It seemed so long ago that he had said it. He had felt certain of it at the time, but now he could not even think what he had meant.

He stood silently for a moment. His face was disfigured now, swollen from bites that oozed a dark fluid. Blood ran from his left ear, which had been gashed by a razor-sharp stone. One of his ankles was entangled by a vine that grew so quickly he could see it move, snaking its way toward his knee; he knew he would soon be immobilized by it, and the insects would return, then, to finish him off.

He faced what he knew to be the center of Forest, the place where Matty and Kira were trapped, and he willed himself to look beyond. It seemed the only thing left to do.

Twenty

"What are you seeing?" Matty asked her in a hoarse voice.

But she didn't reply at first. Her eyes were closed. Her fingers moved as if in a dream. The needle went in and out, in and out.

He lifted his head to try to see. But his eyes were swollen, and when he raised himself, blood still flowed from his nose. So he lay back down, groaning from the effort, and in doing so felt the limp body of the puppy shift inside his shirt.

Matty had never experienced such an enormous sadness. His other dog had died in old age, peaceful and ready. But Frolic was only a puppy, new to life, and had been such a spirited creature, so curious and playful. It seemed impossible that he would have become a lifeless thing in such a short time.

But it was true of everything, he thought. His sadness was for all of it: for Village, no longer the happy place it had been; for Kira, no longer the sturdy, eager young woman he had always known. And Leader? He wondered what was happening to Leader now.

Suddenly Kira seemed to come awake. She whispered, "He's coming. He's close." Her voice was right beside him, very near to Matty's ear as he lay curled next to her. But it sounded, at the same time, far away, as if she were moving someplace distant.

The vine around his ankle tugged at him, bit into his flesh, anchored itself there, and sent a new shoot upward. Another snaked itself out of the bushes and curled around his foot. Leader didn't notice. He stood immobile, alert. His eyes were open but he was no longer seeing the vermin-ridden trees around him, their blighted leaves, or the foul dark mud under his feet. He was looking beyond, and he was seeing something beautiful.

"Kira," he said, though it was his mind that spoke, for his human voice was inaudible now and his mouth was painfully swollen with open sores.

"We need you," she replied, and it was her mind speaking, too. Matty, beside her, heard nothing but the soft flutter of her fingers moving on the fabric.

In the place called Beyond, Leader's consciousness met Kira's, and they curled around each other like wisps of smoke, in greeting.

"We are wounded," she told him, "and lost."

"I am hurt, too, and captured here," he replied.

With the exchange, they drifted dangerously apart. Where he stood, Leader could feel the vine now. His knee buckled as the sharp-toothed stem bit. He tried to reach for it but his hands were entangled, too.

With great effort, his consciousness touched hers again. "Ask the boy for help," he told her.

"Do you mean Matty?"

"Yes, though it is not his true name. Tell him we need his gift now. Our world does."

Matty felt Kira stir beside him. She opened her eyes. He watched as her tongue moved to moisten her blistered lips. When she spoke, her voice was so weak that he could not make out the words.

With difficulty he leaned painfully toward her, so that his ear was near her mouth.

"We need your gift," she whispered.

Matty fell back in despair. He had followed Leader's instructions. He had not spent the gift. He had

not made Ramon well, had not fixed Kira's crooked leg, or even tried to save his little dog. But it was too late now. His body was so damaged he could barely move. He could no longer bend his ravaged arms. How could he place his hands on anything? And what, in any case, did she want him to touch? So much was ruined.

In agony and hopelessness, he turned away from her and rolled off the blanket and into the thick foul-smelling mud. With his arms outstretched, his hands touching the earth, he lay there waiting to die.

He felt his fingers begin to vibrate.

Twenty-one

It began with the tiniest sensation. It was different from the larger feelings that still racked his body: the searing agony in his arms and hands, the almost unendurable ulceration of his parched mouth, the feverish pounding of his head.

This was a whispered hint of power. He felt it in the tips of his fingers, in the whorls and crevices of his outer skin. It moved across his hands as they lay motionless in the mud.

Though he shivered from illness and anguish, he could sense his blood beginning to warm and flow. He lay still. Inside him the thick dark liquid slid sinuously through his veins. It entered his heart and throbbed there, moving with purpose through the labyrinth of muscle, collecting energy that came faintly to it from his collapsing lungs. He could feel it surge into his arteries. Within the blood itself he could perceive its separate cells, and see their colors in his consciousness, and the prisms of their molecules, and all of it was awake now, gathering power.

He could feel his own nerves, each one, millions of them, taut with energy waiting to be released. The fibers of his muscles tightened.

Gasping, Matty called for his gift to come. There was no sense of how to direct it. He simply clawed at the earth, feeling the power in his hands enter, pulsating, into the ruined world. He became aware, suddenly, that he had been chosen for this.

Near him, Kira began to breathe more easily. What had been close to coma turned now to sleep.

Not far away, Leader tentatively lifted one foot and found it free of the entangling vine. He opened his eyes.

Back in Village, a breeze came up. It came through the windows of the homeplace where Ramon lived with his family. Ramon sat up suddenly in the bed, where he had lain ill for days, and felt the fever begin to seep from him.

The blind man sensed the breeze entering the open windows and lifting an edge of the tapestry on the wall. He felt the fabric, and found the stitches as even and smooth as they had been in the past.

Matty groaned and pressed his hands harder into the ground. All of his strength and blood and breath were entering the earth now. His brain and spirit became part of the earth. He rose. He floated above, weightless, watching his human self labor and writhe. He gave himself to it willingly, traded himself for all that he loved and valued, and felt free.

Leader walked forward. He wiped his face with his hands and felt the lesions fade, as if they had been cleansed away. He could see the path clearly now, for the bushes had drawn back, their leaves bright with new green growth and dappled with buds. A yellow butterfly lit on a bush, paused, and darted off. Rounded stones bordered the path, and sunlight filtered down through the canopy of trees. The air was fresh, and he could hear a stream flowing nearby.

Matty could see and hear everything. He saw Jean, beside her garden, call out in happy greeting to her father; and he saw Mentor, stooped once more, and balding, wave to her from the path where he was walking toward the schoolhouse with a book in his hand. His face was stained again with the birthmark, and poetry had returned to him. Matty heard him recite:

*Today, the road all runners come,
Shoulder-high we bring you home,*

*And set you at your threshold down,
Townsman of a stiller town.*

He saw the wall builders walk away from their work.

He heard the new ones singing in their own languages—a hundred different tongues, but they understood one another. He saw the scarred woman standing proudly in their midst beside her son, and the people of Village gathered to listen.

He saw Forest and understood what Seer had meant. It was an illusion. It was a tangled knot of fears and deceits and dark struggles for power that had disguised itself and almost destroyed everything. Now it was unfolding, like a flower coming into bloom, radiant with possibility.

Drifting there, he looked down and saw his own self becoming motionless. He felt his breathing slow. He sighed, let go, and felt a sense of peace.

He watched Kira wake, and he saw Leader find her there.

Kira took a cloth to the stream and brought it back, moistened, to wash Matty's still face. Leader had turned him over. She sobbed at the sight of him but was glad that his terrible wounds were gone. She bathed his arms and hands. The skin was firm and unblemished, without scars.

"I knew him when he was a little boy," she said, weeping. "He always had a dirty face and a mischievous spirit."

She smoothed his hair. "He called himself the Fiercest of the Fierce."

Leader smiled. "He was that. But it was not his true name."

Kira wiped her eyes. "He so hoped to receive his true name at the end of this journey."

"He would have."

"He wanted to be *Messenger*," Kira confided.

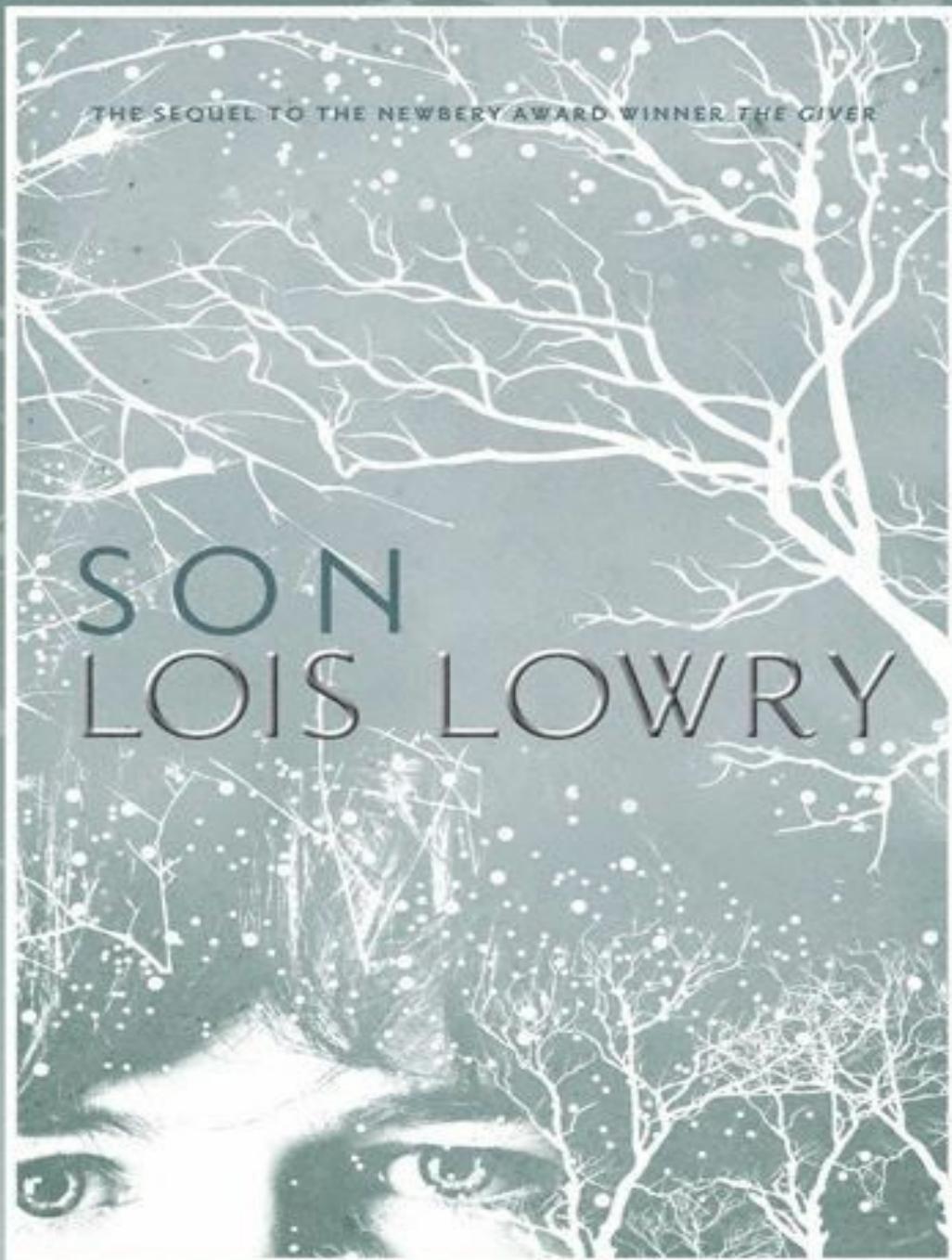
Leader shook his head. "No. There have been other messengers, and there will be more to come." He leaned down and placed his hand solemnly on Matty's forehead above the closed eyes. "Your true name is *Healer*," he said.

A sudden rustling in the bushes startled them both. "What's that?" Kira asked in alarm. At her voice, the puppy, his fur matted with twigs, emerged from the place where he had been hiding.

"It's Frolic!" Kira took him into her arms and he licked her hand.

Beside her, tenderly, Leader picked up what remained of the boy and prepared to carry him home. In the distance, the sound of keening began.

Thrust again into the dark, claustrophobic world of *The Giver*, readers will meet an intriguing new heroine, fourteen-year-old Claire. Jonas from *The Giver* is here too, and Kira, the heroine of *Gathering Blue*. In a final clash between good and evil, a new hero emerges. The whole Quartet has been redesigned in honor of this long-awaited grand finale!



Keep reading for a sample of

SON

by Lois Lowry

Before

One

The young girl cringed when they buckled the eyeless leather mask around the upper half of her face and blinded her. It felt grotesque and unnecessary, but she didn't object. It was the procedure. She knew that. One of the other Vessels had described it to her at lunch a month before.

"Mask?" she had asked in surprise, almost chuckling at the strange image. "What's the mask for?"

"Well, it's not really a mask," the young woman seated on her left corrected herself, and took another bite of the crisp salad. "It's a blindfold, actually." She was whispering. They were not supposed to discuss this among themselves.

"Blindfold?" she had asked in astonishment, then laughed apologetically. "I don't seem to be able to converse, do I? I keep repeating what you say. But: blindfold? Why?"

"They don't want you to see the Product when it comes out of you. When you birth it." The girl pointed to her bulging belly.

"You've produced already, right?" she asked her.

The girl nodded. "Twice."

"What's it like?" Even asking it, she knew it was a somewhat foolish question. They had had classes, seen diagrams, been given instructions. Still, none of that was the same as hearing it from someone who had already gone through the process. And now that they were already disobeying the restriction about discussing it—well, why not ask?

"Easier the second time. Didn't hurt as much."

When she didn't respond, the girl looked at her quizzically. "Hasn't anyone told you it hurts?"

"They said 'discomfort.'"

The other girl gave a sarcastic snort. "Discomfort, then. If that's what they want to call it. Not as much discomfort the second time. And it doesn't take as long."

"Vessels? VESSELS!" The voice of the matron, through the speaker, was stern. "Monitor your conversations, please! You know the rules!"

The girl and her companion obediently fell silent then, realizing they had been heard through the microphones embedded in the walls of the dining room. Some of the other girls giggled. They were probably also guilty. There was so little else to talk about. The process—their job, their mission—was the thing they had in common. But the conversation shifted after the stern warning.

She had taken another spoonful of soup. Food in the Birthmothers' Dormitory was always plentiful and delicious. The Vessels were all being meticulously nourished. Of course, growing up in the community, she had always been adequately fed. Food had been delivered to her family's dwelling each day.

But when she had been selected Birthmother at twelve, the course of her life had changed. It had been gradual. The academic courses—math, science, law—at school became less demanding for her group. Fewer tests, less reading required. The teachers paid little attention to her.

Courses in nutrition and health had been added to her curriculum, and more time was spent on exercise in the outdoor air. Special vitamins had been added to her diet. Her body had been examined, tested, and prepared for her time here. After that year had passed, and part of another, she

was deemed ready. She was instructed to leave her family dwelling and move to the Birthmothers' Dormitory.

Relocating from one place to another within the community was not difficult. She owned nothing. Her clothing was distributed and laundered by the central clothing supply. Her schoolbooks were requisitioned by the school and would be used for another student the following year. The bicycle she had ridden to school throughout her earlier years was taken to be refurbished and given to a different, younger child.

There was a celebratory dinner her last evening in the dwelling. Her brother, older by six years, had already gone on to his own training in the Department of Law and Justice. They saw him only at public meetings; he had become a stranger. So the last dinner was just the three of them, she and the parental unit who had raised her. They reminisced a bit; they recalled some funny incidents from her early childhood (a time she had thrown her shoes into the bushes and come home from the Childcare Center barefoot). There was laughter, and she thanked them for the years of her upbringing.

"Were you embarrassed when I was selected for Birthmother?" she asked them. She had, herself, secretly hoped for something more prestigious. At her brother's selection, when she had been just six, they had all been very proud. Law and Justice was reserved for those of especially keen intelligence. But she had not been a top student.

"No," her father said. "We trust the committee's judgment. They knew what you would do best."

"And Birthmother is very important," Mother added. "Without Birthmothers, none of us would be here!"

Then they wished her well in the future. Their lives were changing too; parents no longer, they would move now into the place where Childless Adults lived.

The next day, she walked alone to the dormitory attached to the Birthing Unit and moved into the small bedroom she was assigned. From its window she could see the school she had attended, and the recreation field beyond. In the distance, there was a glimpse of the river that bordered the community.

Finally, several weeks later, after she was settled in and beginning to make friends among the other girls, she was called in for insemination.

Not knowing what to expect, she had been nervous. But when the procedure was complete, she felt relieved; it had been quick and painless.

"It that all?" she had asked in surprise, rising from the table when the technician gestured that she should.

"That's all. Come back next week to be tested and certified."

She had laughed nervously. She wished they had explained everything more clearly in the instruction folder they had given her when she was selected. "What does 'certified' mean?" she asked.

The worker, putting away the insemination equipment, seemed a little rushed. There were probably others waiting. "Once they're sure it implanted," he explained impatiently, "then you're a certified Vessel."

"Anything else?" he asked her as he turned to leave. "No? You're free to go, then."

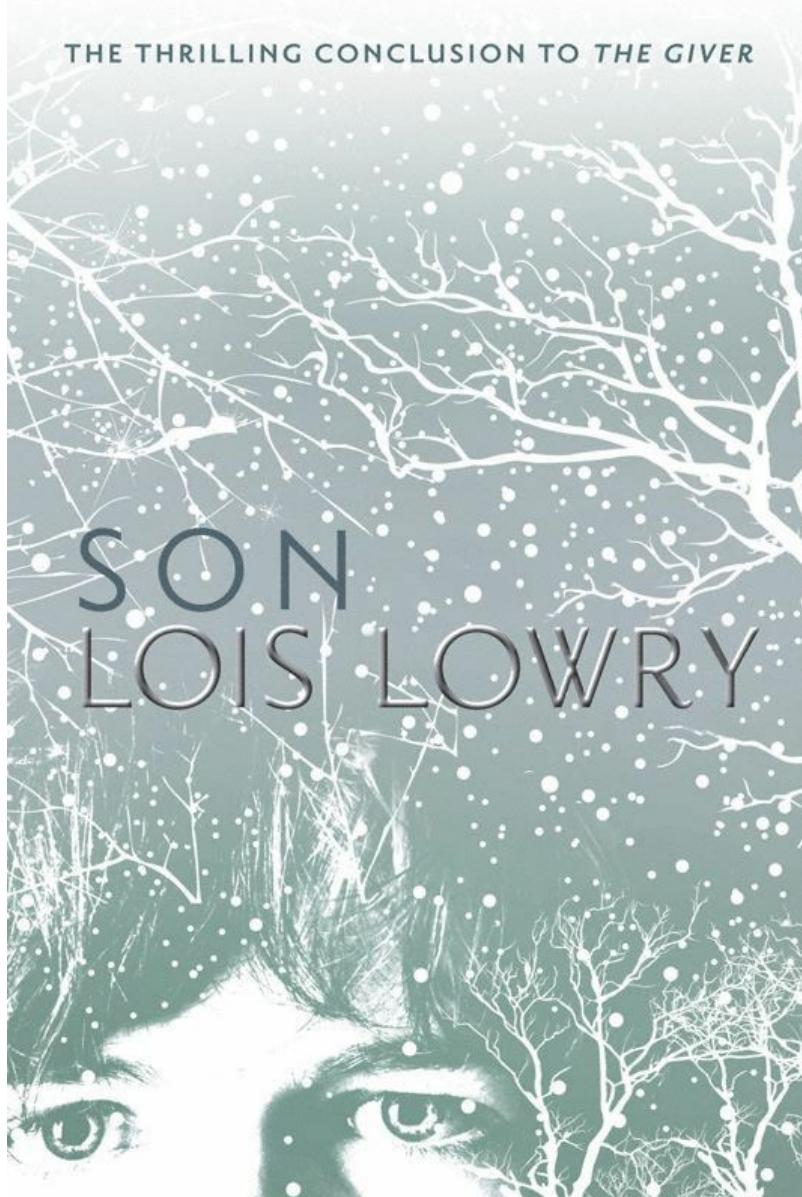
That all seemed such a short time ago. Now here she was, nine months later, with the blindfold strapped around her eyes. The discomfort had started some hours before, intermittently; now it was nonstop. She breathed deeply as they had instructed. It was difficult, blinded like this; her skin was hot inside the mask. She tried to relax. To breathe in and out. To ignore the discom—*No*, she thought. *It is pain. It really is pain.* Gathering her strength for the job, she groaned slightly, arched her back,

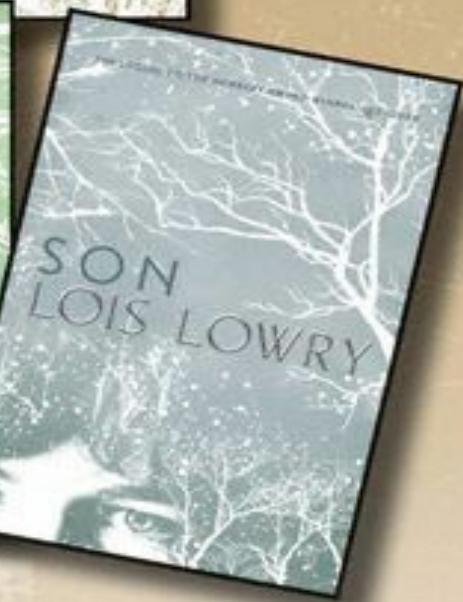
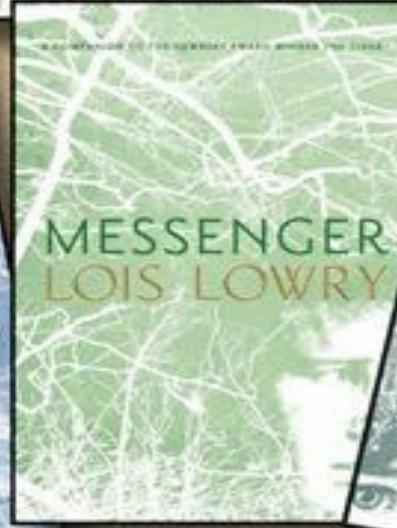
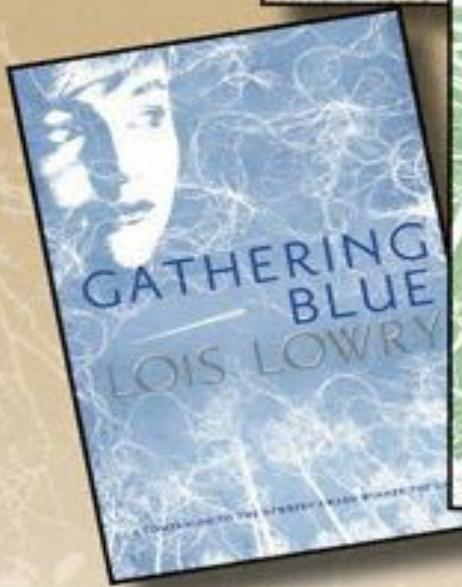
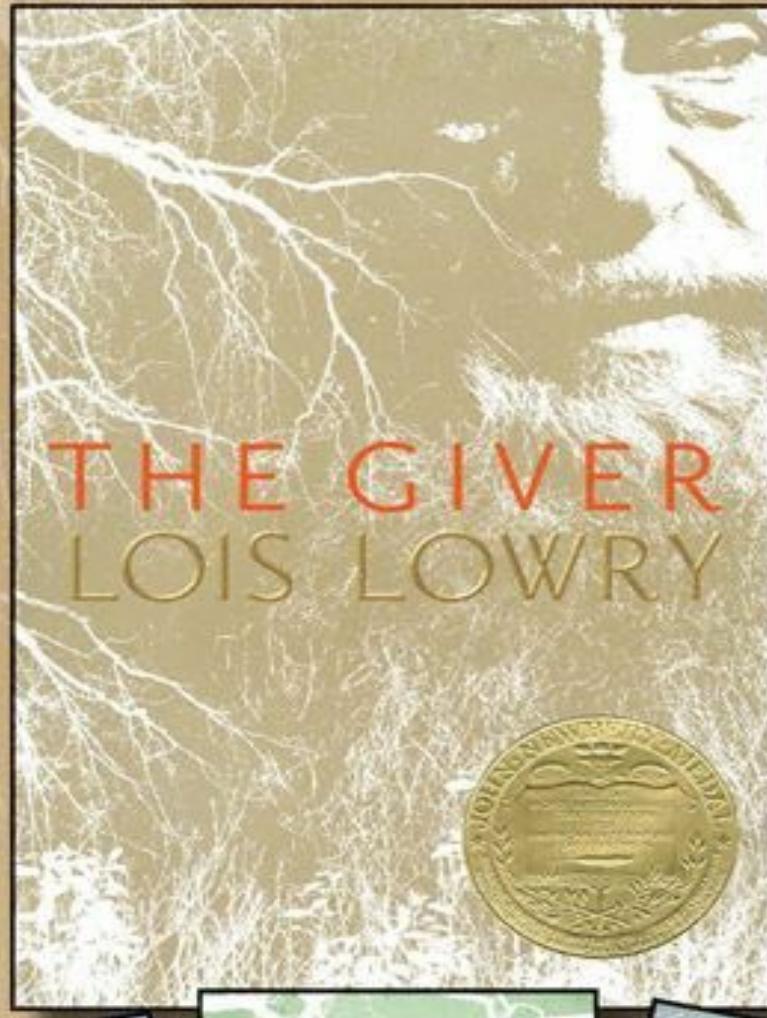
and gave herself up to the darkness.

Her name was Claire. She was fourteen years old.

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About the Author



Lois Lowry is known for her versatility and invention as a writer. She was born in Hawaii and grew up in New York, Pennsylvania, and Japan. After several years at Brown University, she turned to her family and to writing. She is the author of more than thirty books for young adults, including the popular Anastasia Krupnik series. She has received countless honors, among them the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, the Dorothy Canfield Fisher Award, the California Young Reader's Medal, and the Mark Twain Award. She received Newbery Medals for two of her novels, *Number the Stars* and *The Giver*. Her first novel, *A Summer to Die*, was awarded the International Reading Association's Children's Book Award. Ms. Lowry now divides her time between Cambridge and an 1840s farmhouse in Maine. To learn more about Lois Lowry, see her website at www.loislowry.com.