

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.

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.

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.

"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.

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, chattered 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.



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. "Side-kick." 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