

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—wary, 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.

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.”

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, criss-crossing 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 appliquéd 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.

"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 overgrown like this then."

He held the thick shrubbery back to make it easier for Kira to enter, and was pleased to see that her footsteps, 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 splattered 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 down-pour 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 smelled it before. I've come through here a dozen, maybe two dozen, times, but I have never smelled 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.

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