

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."

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.

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.



"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.

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,  
Townsmen 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.