

CHAPTER 8

The alarm finally stopped after blaring for a full two minutes. A crowd was gathered in the middle of the courtyard around the steel doors through which Thomas was startled to realize he'd arrived just yesterday. *Yesterday?* he thought. *Was that really just yesterday?*

Someone tapped him on the elbow; he looked over to see Chuck by his side again.

"How goes it, Greenbean?" Chuck asked.

"Fine," he replied, even though nothing could've been further from the truth. He pointed toward the doors of the Box. "Why is everyone freaking out? Isn't this how you all got here?"

Chuck shrugged. "I don't know—guess it's always been real regular-like. One a month, every month, same day. Maybe whoever's in charge realized you were nothing but a big mistake, sent someone to replace you." He giggled as he elbowed Thomas in the ribs, a high-pitched snicker that inexplicably made Thomas like him more.

Thomas shot his new friend a fake glare. "You're annoying. Seriously."

"Yeah, but we're buddies, now, right?" Chuck fully laughed this time, a squeaky sort of snort.

"Looks like you're not giving me much choice on that one." But truth was, he needed a friend, and Chuck would do just fine.

The kid folded his arms, looking very satisfied. "Glad that's settled, Greenie. Everyone needs a buddy in this place."

Thomas grabbed Chuck by the collar, joking around. “Okay, *buddy*, then call me by my name. Thomas. Or I’ll throw you down the hole after the Box leaves.” That triggered a thought in his head as he released Chuck. “Wait a minute, have you guys ever—”

“Tried it,” Chuck interrupted before Thomas could finish.

“Tried what?”

“Going down in the Box after it makes a delivery,” Chuck answered. “It won’t do it. Won’t go down until it’s completely empty.”

Thomas remembered Alby telling him that very thing. “I already knew that, but what about—”

“Tried it.”

Thomas had to suppress a groan—this was getting irritating. “Man you’re hard to talk to. Tried what?”

“Going through the hole *after* the Box goes down. Can’t. Doors will open, but there’s just emptiness, blackness, nothing. No ropes, nada. Can’t do it.”

How could that be possible? “Did you—”

“Tried it.”

Thomas did groan this time. “Okay, what?”

“We threw some things into the hole. Never heard them land. It goes on for a long time.”

Thomas paused before he replied, not wanting to be cut off again. “What are you, a mind reader or something?” He threw as much sarcasm as he could into the comment.

“Just brilliant, that’s all.” Chuck winked.

“Chuck, never wink at me again.” Thomas said it with a smile. Chuck *was* a little annoying, but there was something about him that made things seem less terrible. Thomas took a deep breath and looked back toward the crowd around the hole. “So, how long until the delivery gets here?”

“Usually takes about half an hour after the alarm.”

Thomas thought for a second. There *had* to be something they hadn’t tried. “You’re sure about the hole? Have you ever . . .” He paused, waiting for the interruption, but none came. “Have you ever tried making a rope?”

“Yeah, they did. With the ivy. Longest one they could possibly make. Let’s just say that little experiment didn’t go so well.”

“What do you mean?” *What now?* Thomas thought.

“I wasn’t here, but I heard the kid who volunteered to do it had only gone down about ten feet when something swooshed through the air and cut him clean in half.”

“What?” Thomas laughed. “I don’t believe that for a second.”

“Oh, yeah, smart guy? I’ve seen the sucker’s bones. Cut in half like a knife through whipped cream. They keep him in a box to remind future kids not to be so stupid.”

Thomas waited for Chuck to laugh or smile, thinking it had to be a joke—who ever heard of someone being cut in half? But it never came. “You’re serious?”

Chuck just stared back at him. “I don’t lie, Gree—uh, Thomas. Come on, let’s go over and see who’s coming up. I can’t believe you only have to be the Greenbean for one day. Klunkhead.”

As they walked over, Thomas asked the one question he hadn’t posed yet. “How do you know it’s not just supplies or whatever?”

“The alarm doesn’t go off when that happens,” Chuck answered, simply. “The supplies come up at the same time every week. Hey, look.” Chuck stopped and pointed to someone in the crowd. It was Gally, staring dead at them.

“Shuck it,” Chuck said. “He does *not* like you, man.”

“Yeah,” Thomas muttered. “Figured that out already.” And the feeling was mutual.

Chuck nudged Thomas with his elbow and the boys resumed their walk to the edge of the crowd, then waited in silence; any questions Thomas had were forgotten. He'd lost the urge to talk after seeing Gally.

Chuck apparently hadn't. "Why don't you go ask him what his problem is?" he asked, trying to sound tough.

Thomas wanted to think he was brave enough, but that currently sounded like the worst idea in history. "Well, for one, he has a lot more allies than I do. Not a good person to pick a fight with."

"Yeah, but you're smarter. And I bet you're quicker. You could take him and all his buddies."

One of the boys standing in front of them looked back over his shoulder, annoyance crossing his face.

Must be a friend of Gally's, Thomas thought. "Would you shut it?" he hissed at Chuck.

A door closed behind them; Thomas turned to see Alby and Newt heading over from the Homestead. They both looked exhausted.

Seeing them brought Ben back to his mind—along with the horrific image of him writhing in bed. "Chuck, man, you gotta tell me what this whole Changing business is. What have they been *doing* in there with that poor Ben kid?"

Chuck shrugged. "Don't know the details. The Grievors do bad things to you, make your whole body go through something awful. When it's over, you're . . . different."

Thomas sensed a chance to finally have a solid answer. "Different? What do you mean? And what does it have to do with the Grievors? Is that what Gally meant by 'being stung'?"

"Shh." Chuck held a finger to his mouth.

Thomas almost screamed in frustration, but he kept quiet. He resolved to make Chuck tell him later, whether the guy wanted to or not.

Alby and Newt had reached the crowd and pushed themselves to the front, standing right over the doors that led to the Box. Everyone quieted, and for the first time, Thomas noted the grinds and rattles of the rising lift, reminding him of his own nightmarish trip the day before. Sadness washed over him, almost as if he were reliving those few terrible minutes of awakening in darkness to the memory loss. He felt sorry for whoever this new kid was, going through the same things.

A muffled boom announced that the bizarre elevator had arrived.

Thomas watched in anticipation as Newt and Alby took positions on opposite sides of the shaft doors—a crack split the metal square right down the middle. Simple hook-handles were attached on both sides, and together they yanked them apart. With a metallic scrape the doors were opened, and a puff of dust from the surrounding stone rose into the air.

Complete silence settled over the Gladers. As Newt leaned over to get a better look into the Box, the faint bleating of a goat in the distance echoed across the courtyard. Thomas leaned forward as far as he possibly could, hoping to get a glance at the newcomer.

With a sudden jerk, Newt pushed himself back into an upright position, his face scrunched up in confusion. “Holy . . .,” he breathed, looking around at nothing in particular.

By this time, Alby had gotten a good look as well, with a similar reaction. “No way,” he murmured, almost in a trance.

A chorus of questions filled the air as everyone began pushing forward to get a look into the small opening. *What do they see down there?* Thomas wondered. *What do they see!* He felt a sliver of muted fear, similar to what he’d experienced that morning when he stepped toward the window to see the Griever.

“Hold on!” Alby yelled, silencing everyone. “Just hold on!”

“Well, what’s wrong?” someone yelled back.

Alby stood up. “Two Newbies in two days,” he said, almost in a whisper. “Now this. Two years, nothing different, now this.” Then, for some reason, he looked straight at Thomas. “What’s goin’ on here, Greenie?”

Thomas stared back, confused, his face turning bright red, his gut clenching. “How am I supposed to know?”

“Why don’t you just tell us what the shuck is down there, Alby?” Gally called out. There were more murmurs and another surge forward.

“You shanks shut up!” Alby yelled. “Tell ’em, Newt.”

Newt looked down in the Box one more time, then faced the crowd, gravely.

“It’s a girl,” he said.

Everyone started talking at once; Thomas only caught pieces here and there.

“A *girl*?”

“I got dibs!”

“What’s she look like?”

“How old is she?”

Thomas was drowning in a sea of confusion. A *girl*? He hadn’t even thought about why the Glade only had boys, no girls. Hadn’t even had the chance to notice, really. *Who is she?* he wondered. *Why—*

Newt shushed them again. “That’s not bloody half of it,” he said, then pointed down into the Box. “I think she’s dead.”

A couple of boys grabbed some ropes made from ivy vines and lowered Alby and Newt into the Box so they could retrieve the girl’s body. A mood of reserved shock had come over most of the Gladers, who were milling about with solemn faces, kicking loose rocks and not saying much at all. No one dared admit they couldn’t wait to see the girl, but Thomas assumed they were all just as curious as he was.

Gally was one of the boys holding on to the ropes, ready to hoist

her, Alby, and Newt out of the Box. Thomas watched him closely. His eyes were laced with something dark—almost a sick fascination. A gleam that made Thomas suddenly more scared of him than he'd been minutes earlier.

From deep in the shaft came Alby's voice shouting that they were ready, and Gally and a couple of others started pulling up on the rope. A few grunts later and the girl's lifeless body was dragged out, across the edge of the door and onto one of the stone blocks making up the ground of the Glade. Everyone immediately ran forward, forming a packed crowd around her, a palpable excitement hovering in the air. But Thomas stayed back. The eerie silence gave him the creeps, as if they'd just opened up a recently laid tomb.

Despite his own curiosity, Thomas didn't bother trying to force his way through to get a look—the bodies were too tightly squeezed together. But he *had* caught a glimpse of her before being blocked off. She was thin, but not too small. Maybe five and a half feet tall, from what he could tell. She looked like she could be fifteen or sixteen years old, and her hair was tar black. But the thing that had really stood out to him was her skin: pale, white as pearls.

Newt and Alby scrambled out of the Box after her, then forced their way through to the girl's lifeless body, the crowd re-forming behind to cut them off from Thomas's view. Only a few seconds later, the group parted again, and Newt was pointing straight at Thomas.

"Greenie, get over here," he said, not bothering to be polite about it.

Thomas's heart jumped into his throat; his hands started to sweat. What did they want him for? Things just kept getting worse and worse. He forced himself to walk forward, trying to seem innocent without acting like someone who was guilty who was trying to act innocent. *Oh, calm it*, he told himself. *You haven't done anything wrong.* But he had a strange feeling that maybe he had without realizing it.

The boys lining the path to Newt and the girl glared at him as he walked past, as if he were responsible for the entire mess of the Maze and the Glade and the Grievors. Thomas refused to make eye contact with any of them, afraid of looking guilty.

He approached Newt and Alby, who both knelt beside the girl. Thomas, not wanting to meet their stares, concentrated on the girl; despite her paleness, she was really pretty. More than pretty. Beautiful. Silky hair, flawless skin, perfect lips, long legs. It made him sick to think that way about a dead girl, but he couldn't look away. *Won't be that way for long*, he thought with a queasy twist in his stomach. *She'll start rotting soon*. He was surprised at having such a morbid thought.

"You know this girl, shank?" Alby asked, sounding ticked off.

Thomas was shocked by the question. "*Know* her? Of course I don't know her. I don't know anyone. Except for you guys."

"That's not . . ." Alby began, then stopped with a frustrated sigh. "I meant does she look *familiar* at all? Any kind of feelin' you've seen her before?"

"No. Nothing." Thomas shifted, looked down at his feet, then back at the girl.

Alby's forehead creased. "You're sure?" He looked like he didn't believe a word Thomas said, seemed almost angry.

What could he possibly think I have to do with this? Thomas thought. He met Alby's glare evenly and answered the only way he knew how. "Yes. Why?"

"Shuck it," Alby muttered, looking back down at the girl. "Can't be a coincidence. Two days, two Greenies, one alive, one dead."

Then Alby's words started to make sense and panic flared in Thomas. "You don't think I . . ." He couldn't even finish the sentence.

"Slim it, Greenie," Newt said. "We're not sayin' you bloody killed the girl."

Thomas's mind was spinning. He was sure he'd never seen her before—but then the slightest hint of doubt crept into his mind. "I swear she doesn't look familiar at all," he said anyway. He'd had enough accusations.

"Are you—"

Before Newt could finish, the girl shot up into a sitting position. As she sucked in a huge breath, her eyes snapped open and she blinked, looking around at the crowd surrounding her. Alby cried out and fell backward. Newt gasped and jumped up, stumbling away from her. Thomas didn't move, his gaze locked on the girl, frozen in fear.

Burning blue eyes darted back and forth as she took deep breaths. Her pink lips trembled as she mumbled something over and over, indecipherable. Then she spoke one sentence—her voice hollow and haunted, but clear.

"Everything is going to change."

Thomas stared in wonder as her eyes rolled up into her head and she fell back to the ground. Her right fist shot into the air as she landed, staying rigid after she grew still, pointing toward the sky. Clutched in her hand was a wadded piece of paper.

Thomas tried to swallow but his mouth was too dry. Newt ran forward and pulled her fingers apart, grabbing the paper. With shaking hands he unfolded it, then dropped to his knees, spreading out the note on the ground. Thomas moved up behind him to get a look.

Scrawled across the paper in thick black letters were five words:

She's the last one.

Ever.

CHAPTER 9

An odd moment of complete silence hung over the Glade. It was as if a supernatural wind had swept through the place and sucked out all sound. Newt had read the message aloud for those who couldn't see the paper, but instead of erupting in confusion, the Gladers all stood dumbfounded.

Thomas would've expected shouts and questions, arguments. But no one said a word; all eyes were glued to the girl, now lying there as if asleep, her chest rising and falling with shallow breaths. Contrary to their original conclusion, she was very much alive.

Newt stood, and Thomas hoped for an explanation, a voice of reason, a calming presence. But all he did was crumple the note in his fist, veins popping from his skin as he squeezed it, and Thomas's heart sank. He wasn't sure why, but the situation made him very uneasy.

Alby cupped his hands around his mouth. "Med-jacks!"

Thomas wondered what that word meant—he knew he'd heard it before—but then he was abruptly knocked aside. Two older boys were pushing their way through the crowd—one was tall with a buzz cut, his nose the size of a fat lemon. The other was short and actually had gray hair already conquering the black on the sides of his head. Thomas could only hope they'd make some sense of everything.

"So what do we do with her?" the taller one asked, his voice much higher pitched than Thomas expected.

“How should I know?” Alby said. “You two shanks are the Med-jacks—figure it out.”

Med-jacks, Thomas repeated in his head, a light going off. *They must be the closest thing they have to doctors.* The short one was already on the ground, kneeling beside the girl, feeling for her pulse and leaning over to listen to her heartbeat.

“Who said Clint had first shot at her?” someone yelled from the crowd. There were several barks of laughter. “I’m next!”

How can they joke around? Thomas thought. *The girl’s half dead.* He felt sick inside.

Alby’s eyes narrowed; his mouth pulled into a tight grin that didn’t look like it had anything to do with humor. “If anybody touches this girl,” Alby said, “you’re gonna spend the night sleepin’ with the Grievors in the Maze. Banished, no questions.” He paused, turning in a slow circle as if he wanted every person to see his face. “Ain’t nobody better touch her! Nobody!”

It was the first time Thomas had actually liked hearing something come out of Alby’s mouth.

The short guy who’d been referred to as a Med-jack—*Clint*, if the spectator had been correct—stood up from his examination. “She seems fine. Breathing okay, normal heartbeat. Though it’s a bit slow. Your guess is as good as mine, but I’d say she’s in a coma. Jeff, let’s take her to the Homestead.”

His partner, Jeff, stepped over to grab her by the arms while Clint took hold of her feet. Thomas wished he could do more than watch—with every passing second, he doubted more and more that what he’d said earlier was true. She *did* seem familiar; he felt a connection to her, though it was impossible to grasp in his mind. The idea made him nervous, and he looked around, as if someone might’ve heard his thoughts.

“On the count of three,” Jeff, the taller Med-jack, was saying, his tall frame looking ridiculous bent in half, like a praying mantis. “One . . . two . . . three!”

They lifted her with a quick jerk, almost throwing her up in the air—she was obviously a lot lighter than they’d thought—and Thomas almost shouted at them to be more careful.

“Guess we’ll have to see what she does,” Jeff said to no one in particular. “We can feed her soupy stuff if she doesn’t wake up soon.”

“Just watch her closely,” Newt said. “Must be something special about her or they wouldn’t have sent her here.”

Thomas’s gut clenched. He knew that he and the girl were connected somehow. They’d come a day apart, she seemed familiar, he had a consuming urge to become a Runner despite learning so many terrible things. . . . What did it all mean?

Alby leaned over to look in her face once more before they carried her off. “Put her next to Ben’s room, and keep a watch on her day and night. Nothin’ better happen without me knowing about it. I don’t care if she talks in her sleep or takes a klunk—you come tell me.”

“Yeah,” Jeff muttered; then he and Clint shuffled off to the Homestead, the girl’s body bouncing as they went, and the other Gladers finally started to talk about it, scattering as theories bubbled through the air.

Thomas watched all this in mute contemplation. This strange connection he felt wasn’t his alone. The not-so-veiled accusations thrown at him only a few minutes before proved that the others suspected something, too, but what? He was already completely confused—being blamed for things only made him feel worse. As if reading his thoughts, Alby walked over and grabbed him by the shoulder.

“You ain’t never seen her before?” he asked.

Thomas hesitated before he answered. “Not . . . no, not that I

remember.” He hoped his shaky voice didn’t betray his doubts. What if he *did* know her somehow? What would that mean?

“You’re sure?” Newt prodded, standing right behind Alby.

“I . . . no, I don’t think so. Why are you grilling me like this?” All Thomas wanted right then was for night to fall, so he could be alone, go to sleep.

Alby shook his head, then turned back to Newt, releasing his grip on Thomas’s shoulder. “Something’s whacked. Call a Gathering.”

He said it quietly enough that Thomas didn’t think anyone else heard, but it sounded ominous. Then the leader and Newt walked off, and Thomas was relieved to see Chuck coming his way.

“Chuck, what’s a Gathering?”

He looked proud to know the answer. “It’s when the Keepers meet—they only call one when something weird or terrible happens.”

“Well, I guess today fits both of those categories pretty well.” Thomas’s stomach rumbled, interrupting his thoughts. “I didn’t finish my breakfast—can we get something somewhere? I’m starving.”

Chuck looked up at him, his eyebrows raised. “Seeing that chick wig out made you hungry? You must be more psycho than I thought.”

Thomas sighed. “Just get me some food.”

The kitchen was small but had everything one needed to make a hearty meal. A big oven, a microwave, a dishwasher, a couple of tables. It seemed old and run-down but clean. Seeing the appliances and the familiar layout made Thomas feel as if memories—real, solid memories—were right on the edge of his mind. But again, the essential parts were missing—names, faces, places, events. It was maddening.

“Take a seat,” Chuck said. “I’ll get you something—but I swear this is the last time. Just be glad Frypan isn’t around—he hates it when we raid his fridge.”

Thomas was relieved they were alone. As Chuck fumbled about with dishes and things from the fridge, Thomas pulled out a wooden chair from a small plastic table and sat down. “This is crazy. How can this be for real? Somebody sent us here. Somebody evil.”

Chuck paused. “Quit complaining. Just accept it and don’t think about it.”

“Yeah, right.” Thomas looked out a window. This seemed a good time to bring up one of the million questions bouncing through his brain. “So where does the electricity come from?”

“Who cares? I’ll take it.”

What a surprise, Thomas thought. *No answer.*

Chuck brought two plates with sandwiches and carrots over to the table. The bread was thick and white, the carrots a sparkling, bright orange. Thomas’s stomach begged him to hurry; he picked up his sandwich and started devouring it.

“Oh, man,” he mumbled with a full mouth. “At least the food is good.”

Thomas was able to eat the rest of his meal without another word from Chuck. And he was lucky that the kid didn’t feel like talking, because despite the complete weirdness of everything that had happened within Thomas’s known reach of memory, he felt calm again. His stomach full, his energy replenished, his mind thankful for a few moments of silence, he decided that from then on he’d quit whining and deal with things.

After his last bite, Thomas sat back in his chair. “So, Chuck,” he said as he wiped his mouth with a napkin. “What do I have to do to become a Runner?”

“Not that again.” Chuck looked up from his plate, where he’d been picking at the crumbs. He let out a low, gurgly burp that made Thomas cringe.

“Alby said I’d start my trials soon with the different Keepers. So, when do I get a shot with the Runners?” Thomas waited patiently to get some sort of actual information from Chuck.

Chuck rolled his eyes dramatically, leaving no doubt as to how stupid an idea he thought that would be. “They should be back in a few hours. Why don’t you ask *them*?”

Thomas ignored the sarcasm, digging deeper. “What do they do when they get back every night? What’s up with the concrete building?”

“Maps. They meet right when they get back, before they forget anything.”

Maps? Thomas was confused. “But if they’re trying to make a map, don’t they have paper to write on while they’re out there?” Maps. This intrigued him more than anything else he’d heard in a while. It was the first thing suggesting a potential solution to their predicament.

“Of course they do, but there’s still stuff they need to talk about and discuss and analyze and all that klunk. Plus”—the boy rolled his eyes—“they spend most of their time running, not writing. That’s why they’re called *Runners*.”

Thomas thought about the Runners and the maps. Could the Maze really be so massively huge that even after two years they still hadn’t found a way out? It seemed impossible. But then, he remembered what Alby said about the moving walls. What if all of them were sentenced to live here until they died?

Sentenced. The word made him feel a rush of panic, and the spark of hope the meal had brought him fizzled with a silent hiss.

“Chuck, what if we’re all criminals? I mean—what if we’re murderers or something?”

“Huh?” Chuck looked up at him as if he were a crazy person. “Where did that happy thought come from?”

“Think about it. Our memories are wiped. We live inside a place that seems to have no way out, surrounded by bloodthirsty monster-guards. Doesn’t that sound like a prison to you?” As he said it out loud, it sounded more and more possible. Nausea trickled into his chest.

“I’m probably twelve years old, dude.” Chuck pointed to his chest. “At the most, thirteen. You really think I did something that would send me to prison for the rest of my life?”

“I don’t care what you did or didn’t do. Either way, you *have* been sent to a prison. Does this seem like a vacation to you?” *Oh, man*, Thomas thought. *Please let me be wrong.*

Chuck thought for a moment. “I don’t know. It’s better than—”

“Yeah, I know, living in pile of klunk.” Thomas stood up and pushed his chair back under the table. He liked Chuck, but trying to have an intelligent conversation with him was impossible. Not to mention frustrating and irritating. “Go make yourself another sandwich—I’m going exploring. See ya tonight.”

He stepped out of the kitchen and into the courtyard before Chuck could offer to join him. The Glade had gone back to business as usual—people working the jobs, the doors of the Box closed, sun shining down. Any signs of a crazed girl bearing notes of doom had disappeared.

Having had his tour cut short, he decided to take a walk around the Glade on his own and get a better look and feel for the place. He headed out for the northeast corner, toward the big rows of tall green cornstalks that looked ready to harvest. There was other stuff, too: tomatoes, lettuce, peas, a lot more that Thomas didn’t recognize.

He took a deep breath, loving the fresh whiff of dirt and growing plants. He was almost positive the smell would bring back some sort of pleasant memory, but nothing came. As he got closer, he saw that

several boys were weeding and picking in the small fields. One waved at him with a smile. An actual smile.

Maybe this place won't be so bad after all, Thomas thought. *Not everyone here could be a jerk.* He took another deep breath of the pleasant air and pulled himself out of his thoughts—there was a lot more he wanted to see.

Next was the southeast corner, where shabbily built wooden fences held in several cows, goats, sheep, and pigs. No horses, though. *That sucks*, Thomas thought. *Riders* would definitely be faster than *Runners*. As he approached, he figured he must've dealt with animals in his life before the Glade. Their smell, their sound—they seemed very familiar to him.

The smell wasn't quite as nice as the crops, but still, he imagined it could've been a lot worse. As he explored the area, he realized more and more how well the Gladers kept up the place, how clean it was. He was impressed by how organized they must be, how hard they all must work. He could only imagine how truly horrific a place like this could be if everyone went lazy and stupid.

Finally, he made it to the southwest quarter, near the forest.

He was approaching the sparse, skeletal trees in front of the denser woods when he was startled by a blur of movement at his feet, followed by a hurried set of clacking sounds. He looked down just in time to see the sun flash off something metallic—a toy rat—scurrying past him and toward the small forest. The thing was already ten feet away by the time he realized it wasn't a rat at all—it was more like a lizard, with at least six legs scuttling the long silver torso along.

A beetle blade. *It's how they watch us*, Alby had said.

He caught a gleam of red light sweeping the ground in front of the creature as if it came from its eyes. Logic told him it had to be his mind

playing tricks on him, but he swore he saw the word *WICKED* scrawled down its rounded back in large green letters. Something so strange had to be investigated.

Thomas sprinted after the scurrying spy, and in a matter of seconds he entered the thick copse of trees and the world became dark.