



FREE!

THE MAZE RUNNER

JAMES
DASHNER

Sneak Peek — Chapter Sampler

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JAMES
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dashner, James.

The maze runner / James Dashner.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Summary: Sixteen-year-old Thomas wakes up with no memory in the middle of a maze and realizes he must work with the community in which he finds himself if he is to escape.

ISBN 978-0-385-73794-4 (hc)—ISBN 978-0-385-90702-6 (glb)

ISBN 978-0-375-89377-3 (e-book)

[1. Amnesia—Fiction. 2. Cooperativeness—Fiction. 3. Labyrinths—Fiction. 4. Science fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.D2587Maz 2009

[Fic]—dc22

2009001345

The text of this book is set in 11-point Bembo.

Book design by Stephanie Moss

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

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CHAPTER 1

He began his new life standing up, surrounded by cold darkness and stale, dusty air.

Metal ground against metal; a lurching shudder shook the floor beneath him. He fell down at the sudden movement and shuffled backward on his hands and feet, drops of sweat beading on his forehead despite the cool air. His back struck a hard metal wall; he slid along it until he hit the corner of the room. Sinking to the floor, he pulled his legs up tight against his body, hoping his eyes would soon adjust to the darkness.

With another jolt, the room jerked upward like an old lift in a mine shaft.

Harsh sounds of chains and pulleys, like the workings of an ancient steel factory, echoed through the room, bouncing off the walls with a hollow, tinny whine. The lightless elevator swayed back and forth as it ascended, turning the boy's stomach sour with nausea; a smell like burnt oil invaded his senses, making him feel worse. He wanted to cry, but no tears came; he could only sit there, alone, waiting.

My name is Thomas, he thought.

That . . . that was the only thing he could remember about his life.

He didn't understand how this could be possible. His mind

functioned without flaw, trying to calculate his surroundings and predicament. Knowledge flooded his thoughts, facts and images, memories and details of the world and how it works. He pictured snow on trees, running down a leaf-strewn road, eating a hamburger, the moon casting a pale glow on a grassy meadow, swimming in a lake, a busy city square with hundreds of people bustling about their business.

And yet he didn't know where he came from, or how he'd gotten inside the dark lift, or who his parents were. He didn't even know his last name. Images of people flashed across his mind, but there was no recognition, their faces replaced with haunted smears of color. He couldn't think of one person he knew, or recall a single conversation.

The room continued its ascent, swaying; Thomas grew immune to the ceaseless rattling of the chains that pulled him upward. A long time passed. Minutes stretched into hours, although it was impossible to know for sure because every second seemed an eternity. No. He was smarter than that. Trusting his instincts, he knew he'd been moving for roughly *half* an hour.

Strangely enough, he felt his fear whisked away like a swarm of gnats caught in the wind, replaced by an intense curiosity. He wanted to know where he was and what was happening.

With a groan and then a clonk, the rising room halted; the sudden change jolted Thomas from his huddled position and threw him across the hard floor. As he scrambled to his feet, he felt the room sway less and less until it finally stilled. Everything fell silent.

A minute passed. Two. He looked in every direction but saw only darkness; he felt along the walls again, searching for a way out. But there was nothing, only the cool metal. He groaned in frustration;

his echo amplified through the air, like the haunted moan of death. It faded, and silence returned. He screamed, called for help, pounded on the walls with his fists.

Nothing.

Thomas backed into the corner once again, folded his arms and shivered, and the fear returned. He felt a worrying shudder in his chest, as if his heart wanted to escape, to flee his body.

“*Someone . . . help . . . me!*” he screamed; each word ripped his throat raw.

A loud clank rang out above him and he sucked in a startled breath as he looked up. A straight line of light appeared across the ceiling of the room, and Thomas watched as it expanded. A heavy grating sound revealed double sliding doors being forced open. After so long in darkness, the light stabbed his eyes; he looked away, covering his face with both hands.

He heard noises above—voices—and fear squeezed his chest.

“Look at that shank.”

“How old is he?”

“Looks like a klunk in a T-shirt.”

“You’re the klunk, shuck-face.”

“Dude, it smells like *feet* down there!”

“Hope you enjoyed the one-way trip, Greenie.”

“Ain’t no ticket back, bro.”

Thomas was hit with a wave of confusion, blistered with panic. The voices were odd, tinged with echo; some of the words were completely foreign—others felt familiar. He willed his eyes to adjust as he squinted toward the light and those speaking. At first he could see only shifting shadows, but they soon turned into the shapes of bodies—people bending over the hole in the ceiling, looking down

at him, pointing.

And then, as if the lens of a camera had sharpened its focus, the faces cleared. They were boys, all of them—some young, some older. Thomas didn't know what he'd expected, but seeing those faces puzzled him. They were just teenagers. Kids. Some of his fear melted away, but not enough to calm his racing heart.

Someone lowered a rope from above, the end of it tied into a big loop. Thomas hesitated, then stepped into it with his right foot and clutched the rope as he was yanked toward the sky. Hands reached down, lots of hands, grabbing him by his clothes, pulling him up. The world seemed to spin, a swirling mist of faces and color and light. A storm of emotions wrenched his gut, twisted and pulled; he wanted to scream, cry, throw up. The chorus of voices had grown silent, but someone spoke as they yanked him over the sharp edge of the dark box. And Thomas knew he'd never forget the words.

“Nice to meet ya, shank,” the boy said. “Welcome to the Glade.”

CHAPTER 2

The helping hands didn't stop swarming around him until Thomas stood up straight and had the dust brushed from his shirt and pants. Still dazzled by the light, he staggered a bit. He was consumed with curiosity but still felt too ill to look closely at his surroundings. His new companions said nothing as he swiveled his head around, trying to take it all in.

As he rotated in a slow circle, the other kids snickered and stared; some reached out and poked him with a finger. There had to be at least fifty of them, their clothes smudged and sweaty as if they'd been hard at work, all shapes and sizes and races, their hair of varying lengths. Thomas suddenly felt dizzy, his eyes flickering between the boys and the bizarre place in which he'd found himself.

They stood in a vast courtyard several times the size of a football field, surrounded by four enormous walls made of gray stone and covered in spots with thick ivy. The walls had to be hundreds of feet high and formed a perfect square around them, each side split in the exact middle by an opening as tall as the walls themselves that, from what Thomas could see, led to passages and long corridors beyond.

"Look at the Greenbean," a scratchy voice said; Thomas couldn't see who it came from. "Gonna break his shuck neck checkin'

out the new digs.” Several boys laughed.

“Shut your hole, Gally,” a deeper voice responded.

Thomas focused back in on the dozens of strangers around him. He knew he must look out of it—he felt like he’d been drugged. A tall kid with blond hair and a square jaw sniffed at him, his face devoid of expression. A short, pudgy boy fidgeted back and forth on his feet, looking up at Thomas with wide eyes. A thick, heavily muscled Asian kid folded his arms as he studied Thomas, his tight shirtsleeves rolled up to show off his biceps. A dark-skinned boy frowned—the same one who’d welcomed him. Countless others stared.

“Where am I?” Thomas asked, surprised at hearing his voice for the first time in his salvageable memory. It didn’t sound quite right—higher than he would’ve imagined.

“Nowhere good.” This came from the dark-skinned boy. “Just slim yourself nice and calm.”

“Which Keeper he gonna get?” someone shouted from the back of the crowd.

“I told ya, shuck-face,” a shrill voice responded. “He’s a klunk, so he’ll be a Slopper—no doubt about it.” The kid giggled like he’d just said the funniest thing in history.

Thomas once again felt a pressing ache of confusion—hearing so many words and phrases that didn’t make sense. *Shank. Shuck. Keeper. Slopper.* They popped out of the boys’ mouths so naturally it seemed odd for him not to understand. It was as if his memory loss had stolen a chunk of his language—it was disorienting.

Different emotions battled for dominance in his mind and heart. Confusion. Curiosity. Panic. Fear. But laced through it all was the dark feeling of utter hopelessness, like the world had ended for him,

had been wiped from his memory and replaced with something awful. He wanted to run and hide from these people.

The scratchy-voiced boy was talking. “—even do that much, bet my liver on it.” Thomas still couldn’t see his face.

“I said shut your holes!” the dark boy yelled. “Keep yapping and next break’ll be cut in half!”

That must be their leader, Thomas realized. Hating how everyone gawked at him, he concentrated on studying the place the boy had called the Glade.

The floor of the courtyard looked like it was made of huge stone blocks, many of them cracked and filled with long grasses and weeds. An odd, dilapidated wooden building near one of the corners of the square contrasted greatly with the gray stone. A few trees surrounded it, their roots like gnarled hands digging into the rock floor for food. Another corner of the compound held gardens—from where he was standing Thomas recognized corn, tomato plants, fruit trees.

Across the courtyard from there stood wooden pens holding sheep and pigs and cows. A large grove of trees filled the final corner; the closest ones looked crippled and close to dying. The sky overhead was cloudless and blue, but Thomas could see no sign of the sun despite the brightness of the day. The creeping shadows of the walls didn’t reveal the time or direction—it could be early morning or late afternoon. As he breathed in deeply, trying to settle his nerves, a mixture of smells bombarded him. Freshly turned dirt, manure, pine, something rotten and something sweet. Somehow he knew that these were the smells of a farm.

Thomas looked back at his captors, feeling awkward but desperate to ask questions. *Captors*, he thought. Then, *Why did that word pop into my head?* He scanned their faces, taking in each

expression, judging them. One boy's eyes, flared with hatred, stopped him cold. He looked so angry, Thomas wouldn't have been surprised if the kid came at him with a knife. He had black hair, and when they made eye contact, the boy shook his head and turned away, walking toward a greasy iron pole with a wooden bench next to it. A multicolored flag hung limply at the top of the pole, no wind to reveal its pattern.

Shaken, Thomas stared at the boy's back until he turned and took a seat. Thomas quickly looked away.

Suddenly the leader of the group—perhaps he was seventeen—took a step forward. He wore normal clothes: black T-shirt, jeans, tennis shoes, a digital watch. For some reason the clothing here surprised Thomas; it seemed like everyone should be wearing something more menacing—like prison garb. The dark-skinned boy had short-cropped hair, his face clean shaven. But other than the permanent scowl, there was nothing scary about him at all.

“It's a long story, shank,” the boy said. “Piece by piece, you'll learn—I'll be takin' you on the Tour tomorrow. Till then . . . just don't break anything.” He held a hand out. “Name's Alby.” He waited, clearly wanting to shake hands.

Thomas refused. Some instinct took over his actions and without saying anything he turned away from Alby and walked to a nearby tree, where he plopped down to sit with his back against the rough bark. Panic swelled inside him once again, almost too much to bear. But he took a deep breath and forced himself to try to accept the situation. *Just go with it*, he thought. *You won't figure out anything if you give in to fear.*

“Then tell me,” Thomas called out, struggling to keep his voice even. “Tell me the long story.”

Alby glanced at the friends closest to him, rolling his eyes, and Thomas studied the crowd again. His original estimate had been close—there were probably fifty to sixty of them, ranging from boys in their midteens to young adults like Alby, who seemed to be one of the oldest. At that moment, Thomas realized with a sickening lurch that he had no idea how old *he* was. His heart sank at the thought—he was so lost he didn't even know his own age.

“Seriously,” he said, giving up on the show of courage. “Where am I?”

Alby walked over to him and sat down cross-legged; the crowd of boys followed and packed in behind. Heads popped up here and there, kids leaning in every direction to get a better look.

“If you ain't scared,” Alby said, “you ain't human. Act any different and I'd throw you off the Cliff because it'd mean you're a psycho.”

“The Cliff?” Thomas asked, blood draining from his face.

“Shuck it,” Alby said, rubbing his eyes. “Ain't no way to start these conversations, you get me? We don't kill shanks like you here, I promise. Just try and avoid *being* killed, survive, whatever.”

He paused, and Thomas realized his face must've whitened even more when he heard that last part.

“Man,” Alby said, then ran his hands over his short hair as he let out a long sigh. “I ain't good at this—you're the first Greenbean since Nick was killed.”

Thomas's eyes widened, and another boy stepped up and playfully slapped Alby across the head. “Wait for the bloody Tour, Alby,” he said, his voice thick with an odd accent. “Kid's gonna have a buggin' heart attack, nothin' even been heard yet.” He bent down and extended his hand toward Thomas. “Name's Newt, Greenie, and

we'd all be right cheery if ya'd forgive our klunk-for-brains new leader, here."

Thomas reached out and shook the boy's hand—he seemed a lot nicer than Alby. Newt was taller than Alby too, but looked to be a year or so younger. His hair was blond and cut long, cascading over his T-shirt. Veins stuck out of his muscled arms.

"Pipe it, shuck-face," Alby grunted, pulling Newt down to sit next to him. "At least he can understand *half* my words." There were a few scattered laughs, and then everyone gathered behind Alby and Newt, packing in even tighter, waiting to hear what they said.

Alby spread his arms out, palms up. "This place is called the Glade, all right? It's where we live, where we eat, where we sleep—we call ourselves the Gladers. That's all you—"

"Who sent me here?" Thomas demanded, fear finally giving way to anger. "How'd—"

But Alby's hand shot out before he could finish, grabbing Thomas by the shirt as he leaned forward on his knees. "Get up, shank, get up!" Alby stood, pulling Thomas with him.

Thomas finally got his feet under him, scared all over again. He backed against the tree, trying to get away from Alby, who stayed right in his face.

"No interruptions, boy!" Alby shouted. "Whacker, if we told you everything, you'd die on the spot, right after you klunked your pants. Baggers'd drag you off, and you ain't no good to us then, are ya?"

"I don't even know what you're talking about," Thomas said slowly, shocked at how steady his voice sounded.

Newt reached out and grabbed Alby by the shoulders. "Alby, lay off a bit. You're hurtin' more than helpin', ya know?"

Alby let go of Thomas's shirt and stepped back, his chest

heaving with breaths. “Ain’t got time to be nice, Greenbean. Old life’s over, new life’s begun. Learn the rules quick, listen, don’t talk. You get me?”

Thomas looked over at Newt, hoping for help. Everything inside him churned and hurt; the tears that had yet to come burned his eyes.

Newt nodded. “Greenie, you get him, right?” He nodded again.

Thomas fumed, wanted to punch somebody. But he simply said, “Yeah.”

“Good that,” Alby said. “First Day. That’s what today is for you, shank. Night’s comin’, Runners’ll be back soon. The Box came late today, ain’t got time for the Tour. Tomorrow morning, right after the wake-up.” He turned toward Newt. “Get him a bed, get him to sleep.”

“Good that,” Newt said.

Alby’s eyes returned to Thomas, narrowing. “A few weeks, you’ll be happy, shank. You’ll be happy and helpin’. None of us knew jack on First Day, you neither. New life begins tomorrow.”

Alby turned and pushed his way through the crowd, then headed for the slanted wooden building in the corner. Most of the kids wandered away then, each one giving Thomas a lingering look before they walked off.

Thomas folded his arms, closed his eyes, took a deep breath. Emptiness ate away at his insides, quickly replaced by a sadness that hurt his heart. It was all too much—where was he? What was this place? Was it some kind of prison? If so, why had he been sent here, and for how long? The language was odd, and none of the boys seemed to care whether he lived or died. Tears threatened again to fill his eyes, but he refused to let them come.

“What did I do?” he whispered, not really meaning for anyone to hear him. “What did I do—why’d they send me here?”

Newt clapped him on the shoulder. “Greenie, what you’re feelin’, we’ve all felt it. We’ve all had First Day, come out of that dark box. Things are bad, they are, and they’ll get much worse for ya soon, that’s the truth. But down the road a piece, you’ll be fightin’ true and good. I can tell you’re not a bloody sissy.”

“Is this a prison?” Thomas asked; he dug in the darkness of his thoughts, trying to find a crack to his past.

“Done asked four questions, haven’t ya?” Newt replied. “No good answers for ya, not yet, anyway. Best be quiet now, accept the change—morn comes tomorrow.”

Thomas said nothing, his head sunk, his eyes staring at the cracked, rocky ground. A line of small-leafed weeds ran along the edge of one of the stone blocks, tiny yellow flowers peeping through as if searching for the sun, long disappeared behind the enormous walls of the Glade.

“Chuck’ll be a good fit for ya,” Newt said. “Wee little fat shank, but nice sap when all’s said and done. Stay here, I’ll be back.”

Newt had barely finished his sentence when a sudden, piercing scream ripped through the air. High and shrill, the barely human shriek echoed across the stone courtyard; every kid in sight turned to look toward the source. Thomas felt his blood turn to icy slush as he realized that the horrible sound came from the wooden building.

Even Newt had jumped as if startled, his forehead creasing in concern.

“Shuck it,” he said. “Can’t the bloody Med-jacks handle that boy for ten minutes without needin’ my help?” He shook his head and lightly kicked Thomas on the foot. “Find Chuckie, tell him he’s in

charge of your sleepin' arrangements." And then he turned and headed in the direction of the building, running.

Thomas slid down the rough face of the tree until he sat on the ground again; he shrank back against the bark and closed his eyes, wishing he could wake up from this terrible, terrible dream.

CHAPTER 3

Thomas sat there for several moments, too overwhelmed to move. He finally forced himself to look over at the haggard building. A group of boys milled around outside, glancing anxiously at the upper windows as if expecting a hideous beast to leap out in an explosion of glass and wood.

A metallic clicking sound from the branches above grabbed his attention, made him look up; a flash of silver and red light caught his eyes just before disappearing around the trunk to the other side. He scrambled to his feet and walked around the tree, craning his neck for a sign of whatever he'd heard, but he saw only bare branches, gray and brown, forking out like skeleton fingers—and looking just as alive.

“That was one of them beetle blades,” someone said.

Thomas turned to his right to see a kid standing nearby, short and pudgy, staring at him. He was young—probably the youngest of any in the group he'd seen so far, maybe twelve or thirteen years old. His brown hair hung down over his ears and neck, scraping the tops of his shoulders. Blue eyes shone through an otherwise pitiful face, flabby and flushed.

Thomas nodded at him. “A beetle what?”

“Beetle blade,” the boy said, pointing to the top of the tree. “Won't hurt ya unless you're stupid enough to touch one of them.” He paused. “Shank.” He didn't sound comfortable saying the last word, as if he hadn't quite grasped the slang of the Glade.

Another scream, this one long and nerve-grinding, tore through the air and Thomas's heart lurched. The fear was like icy dew on his skin. "What's going on over there?" he asked, pointing at the building.

"Don't know," the chubby boy replied; his voice still carried the high pitch of childhood. "Ben's in there, sicker than a dog. *They* got him."

"They?" Thomas didn't like the malicious way the boy had said the word.

"Yeah."

"Who are *They*?"

"Better hope you never find out," the kid answered, looking far too comfortable for the situation. He held out his hand. "My name's Chuck. I was the Greenbean until you showed up."

This is my guide for the night? Thomas thought. He couldn't shake his extreme discomfort, and now annoyance crept in as well. Nothing made sense; his head hurt.

"Why is everyone calling me Greenbean?" he asked, shaking Chuck's hand quickly, then letting go.

"Cuz you're the newest Newbie." Chuck pointed at Thomas and laughed. Another scream came from the house, a sound like a starving animal being tortured.

"How can you be laughing?" Thomas asked, horrified by the noise. "It sounds like someone's dying in there."

"He'll be okay. No one dies if they make it back in time to get the Serum. It's all or nothing. Dead or not dead. Just hurts a lot."

This gave Thomas pause. "What hurts a lot?"

Chuck's eyes wandered as if he wasn't sure what to say. "Um, gettin' stung by the Griever."

“Grievers?” Thomas was only getting more and more confused. *Stung. Grievers.* The words had a heavy weight of dread to them, and he suddenly wasn’t so sure he wanted to know what Chuck was talking about.

Chuck shrugged, then looked away, eyes rolling.

Thomas sighed in frustration and leaned back against the tree. “Looks like you barely know more than I do,” he said, but he knew it wasn’t true. His memory loss was strange. He mostly remembered the workings of the world—but emptied of specifics, faces, names. Like a book completely intact but missing one word in every dozen, making it a miserable and confusing read. He didn’t even know his age.

“Chuck, how . . . old do you think I am?”

The boy scanned him up and down. “I’d say you’re sixteen. And in case you were wondering, five foot nine . . . brown hair. Oh, and ugly as fried liver on a stick.” He snorted a laugh.

Thomas was so stunned he’d barely heard the last part. Sixteen? He was *sixteen*? He felt much older than that.

“Are you serious?” He paused, searching for words. “How . . .” He didn’t even know what to ask.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be all whacked for a few days, but then you’ll get used to this place. I have. We live here, this is it. Better than living in a pile of klunk.” He squinted, maybe anticipating Thomas’s question. “*Klunk*’s another word for poo. Poo makes a klunk sound when it falls in our pee pots.”

Thomas looked at Chuck, unable to believe he was having this conversation. “That’s nice” was all he could manage. He stood up and walked past Chuck toward the old building; *shack* was a better word for the place. It looked three or four stories high and about to fall

down at any minute—a crazy assortment of logs and boards and thick twine and windows seemingly thrown together at random, the massive, ivy-strewn stone walls rising up behind it. As he moved across the courtyard, the distinct smell of firewood and some kind of meat cooking made his stomach grumble. Knowing now that it was just a sick kid doing the screaming made Thomas feel better. Until he thought about what had caused it . . .

“What’s your name?” Chuck asked from behind, running to catch up.

“What?”

“Your *name*? You still haven’t told us—and I know you remember that much.”

“Thomas.” He barely heard himself say it—his thoughts had spun in a new direction. If Chuck was right, he’d just discovered a link to the rest of the boys. A common pattern to their memory losses. They all remembered their names. Why not their parents’ names? Why not a friend’s name? Why not their *last* names?

“Nice to meet you, Thomas,” Chuck said. “Don’t you worry, I’ll take care of you. I’ve been here a whole month, and I know the place inside and out. You can count on Chuck, okay?”

Thomas had almost reached the front door of the shack and the small group of boys congregating there when he was hit by a sudden and surprise rush of anger. He turned to face Chuck. “You can’t even *tell* me anything. I wouldn’t call that taking care of me.” He turned back toward the door, intent on going inside to find some answers. Where this sudden courage and resolve came from, he had no idea.

Chuck shrugged. “Nothin’ I say’ll do you any good,” he said. “I’m basically still a Newbie, too. But I can be your friend—”

“I don’t need friends,” Thomas interrupted.

He'd reached the door, an ugly slab of sun-faded wood, and he pulled it open to see several stoic-faced boys standing at the foot of a crooked staircase, the steps and railings twisted and angled in all directions. Dark wallpaper covered the walls of the foyer and hallway, half of it peeling off. The only decorations in sight were a dusty vase on a three-legged table and a black-and-white picture of an ancient woman dressed in an old-fashioned white dress. It reminded Thomas of a haunted house from a movie or something. There were even planks of wood missing from the floor.

The place reeked of dust and mildew—a big contrast to the pleasant smells outside. Flickering fluorescent lights shone from the ceiling. He hadn't thought of it yet, but he had to wonder where the electricity came from in a place like the Glade. He stared at the old woman in the picture. Had she lived here once? Taken care of these people?

“Hey, look, it's the Greenbean,” one of the older boys called out. With a start, Thomas realized it was the black-haired guy who'd given him the look of death earlier. He looked like he was fifteen or so, tall and skinny. His nose was the size of a small fist and resembled a deformed potato. “This shank probably klunked his pants when he heard old Benny baby scream like a girl. Need a new diaper, shuck-face?”

“My name's Thomas.” He had to get away from this guy. Without another word, he made for the stairs, only because they were close, only because he had no idea what to do or say. But the bully stepped in front of him, holding a hand up.

“Hold on there, Greenie.” He jerked a thumb in the direction of the upper floor. “Newbies aren't allowed to see someone who's been . . . *taken*. Newt and Alby won't allow it.”

“What’s your problem?” Thomas asked, trying to keep the fear out of his voice, trying not to think what the kid had meant by *taken*. “I don’t even know where I am. All I want is some help.”

“Listen to me, Greenbean.” The boy wrinkled up his face, folded his arms. “I’ve seen you before. Something’s fishy about you showing up here, and I’m gonna find out what.”

A surge of heat pulsed through Thomas’s veins. “I’ve never seen you before in my life. I have no idea who you are, and I couldn’t care less,” he spat. But really, how would he know? And how could this kid remember *him*?

The bully snickered, a short burst of laughter mixed with a phlegm-filled snort. Then his face grew serious, his eyebrows slanting inward. “I’ve . . . *seen* you, shank. Not too many in these parts can say they’ve been stung.” He pointed up the stairs. “I have. I know what old Benny baby’s going through. I’ve been there. And I saw *you* during the Changing.”

He reached out and poked Thomas in the chest. “And I bet your first meal from Frypan that Benny’ll say he’s seen ya, too.”

Thomas refused to break eye contact but decided to say nothing. Panic ate at him once again. Would things ever stop getting worse?

“Griever got ya wettin’ yourself?” the boy said through a sneer. “A little scared now? Don’t wanna get *stung*, do ya?”

There was that word again. *Stung*. Thomas tried not to think about it and pointed up the stairs, from where the moans of the sick kid echoed through the building. “If Newt went up there, then I wanna talk to him.”

The boy said nothing, stared at Thomas for several seconds. Then he shook his head. “You know what? You’re right, Tommy—I shouldn’t be so mean to Newbies. Go on upstairs and I’m sure Alby

and Newt'll fill you in. Seriously, go on. I'm sorry."

He lightly slapped Thomas's shoulder, then stepped back, gesturing up the stairs. But Thomas knew the kid was up to something. Losing parts of your memory didn't make you an idiot.

"What's your name?" Thomas asked, stalling for time while he tried to decide if he should go up after all.

"Gally. And don't let anyone fool you. I'm the real leader here, not the two geezer shanks upstairs. Me. You can call me Captain Gally if you want." He smiled for the first time; his teeth matched his disgusting nose. Two or three were missing, and not a single one approached anything close to the color white. His breath escaped just enough for Thomas to get a whiff, reminding him of some horrible memory that was just out of reach. It made his stomach turn.

"Okay," he said, so sick of the guy he wanted to scream, punch him in the face. "Captain Gally it is." He exaggerated a salute, feeling a rush of adrenaline, as he knew he'd just crossed a line.

A few snickers escaped the crowd, and Gally looked around, his face bright red. He peered back at Thomas, hatred furrowing his brow and crinkling his monstrous nose.

"Just go up the stairs," Gally said. "And stay away from me, you little slinthead." He pointed up again but didn't take his eyes off Thomas.

"Fine." Thomas looked around one more time, embarrassed, confused, angry. He felt the heat of blood in his face. No one made a move to stop him from doing as Gally asked, except for Chuck, who stood at the front door, shaking his head.

"You're not supposed to," the younger boy said. "You're a Newbie—you can't go up there."

"Go," said Gally with a sneer. "Go on up."

Thomas regretted having come inside in the first place—but he *did* want to talk to that Newt guy.

He started up the stairs. Each step groaned and creaked under his weight; he might've stopped for fear of falling through the old wood if he weren't leaving such an awkward situation below. Up he went, wincing at every splintered sound. The stairs reached a landing, turned left, then came upon a railed hallway leading to several rooms. Only one door had a light coming through the crack at the bottom.

“The Changing!” Gally shouted from below. “Look forward to it, shuck-face!”

As if the taunting gave Thomas a sudden burst of courage, he walked over to the lit door, ignoring the creaking floorboards and laughter downstairs—ignoring the onslaught of words he didn't understand, suppressing the dreadful feelings they induced. He reached down, turned the brass handle, and opened the door.

Inside the room, Newt and Alby crouched over someone lying on a bed.

Thomas leaned in closer to see what the fuss was all about, but when he got a clear look at the condition of the patient, his heart went cold. He had to fight the bile that surged up his throat.

The look was fast—only a few seconds—but it was enough to haunt him forever. A twisted, pale figure writhing in agony, chest bare and hideous. Tight, rigid cords of sickly green veins webbed across the boy's body and limbs, like ropes under his skin. Purplish bruises covered the kid, red hives, bloody scratches. His bloodshot eyes bulged, darting back and forth. The image had already burned into Thomas's mind before Alby jumped up, blocking the view but not the moans and screams, pushing Thomas out of the room, then slamming the door shut behind them.

“What’re you doing up here, Greenie!” Alby yelled, his lips taut with anger, eyes on fire.

Thomas felt weak. “I . . . uh . . . want some answers,” he murmured, but he couldn’t put any strength in his words—felt himself give up inside. What was wrong with that kid? Thomas slouched against the railing in the hallway and stared at the floor, not sure what to do next.

“Get your runtcheeks down those stairs, right now,” Alby ordered. “Chuck’ll help you. If I see you again before tomorrow morning, you ain’t reachin’ another one alive. I’ll throw you off the Cliff myself, you get me?”

Thomas was humiliated and scared. He felt like he’d shrunk to the size of a small rat. Without saying a word, he pushed past Alby and headed down the creaky steps, going as fast as he dared. Ignoring the gaping stares of everyone at the bottom—especially Gally—he walked out the door, pulling Chuck by the arm as he did so.

Thomas hated these people. He hated all of them. Except Chuck. “Get me away from these guys,” Thomas said. He realized that Chuck might actually be his only friend in the world.

“You got it,” Chuck replied, his voice chipper, as if thrilled to be needed. “But first we should get you some food from Frypan.”

“I don’t know if I can ever eat again.” Not after what he’d just seen.

Chuck nodded. “Yeah, you will. I’ll meet you at the same tree as before. Ten minutes.”

Thomas was more than happy to get away from the house, and headed back toward the tree. He’d only known what it was like to be alive here for a short while and he already wanted it to end. He wished for all the world he could remember something about his previous life. Anything. His mom, his dad, a friend, his school,

a hobby. A girl.

He blinked hard several times, trying to get the image of what he'd just seen in the shack out of his mind.

The Changing. Gally had called it the Changing.

It wasn't cold, but Thomas shuddered once again.

CHAPTER 4

Thomas leaned against the tree as he waited for Chuck. He scanned the compound of the Glade, this new place of nightmares where he seemed destined to live. The shadows from the walls had lengthened considerably, already creeping up the sides of the ivy-covered stone faces on the other side.

At least this helped Thomas know directions—the wooden building crouched in the northwest corner, wedged in a darkening patch of shadow, the grove of trees in the southwest. The farm area, where a few workers were still picking their way through the fields, spread across the entire northeast quarter of the Glade. The animals were in the southeast corner, mooing and crowing and baying.

In the exact middle of the courtyard, the still-gaping hole of the Box lay open, as if inviting him to jump back in and go home. Near that, maybe twenty feet to the south, stood a squat building made of rough concrete blocks, a menacing iron door its only entrance—there were no windows. A large round handle resembling a steel steering wheel marked the only way to open the door, just like something within a submarine. Despite what he'd just seen, Thomas didn't know which he felt more strongly—curiosity to know what was inside, or dread at finding out.

Thomas had just moved his attention to the four vast openings in the middle of the main walls of the Glade when Chuck arrived, a couple of sandwiches cradled in his arms, along with apples and two metal cups of water. The sense of relief that flooded through Thomas surprised him—he wasn't *completely* alone in this place.

“Frypan wasn’t too happy about me invading his kitchen before supertime,” Chuck said, sitting down next to the tree, motioning to Thomas to do the same. He did, grabbed the sandwich, but hesitated, the writhing, monstrous image of what he’d seen in the shack popping back into his mind. Soon, though, his hunger won out and he took a huge bite. The wonderful tastes of ham and cheese and mayonnaise filled his mouth.

“Ah, man,” Thomas mumbled through a mouthful. “I was starving.”

“Told ya.” Chuck chomped into his own sandwich.

After another couple of bites, Thomas finally asked the question that had been bothering him. “What’s actually *wrong* with that Ben guy? He doesn’t even look human anymore.”

Chuck glanced over at the house. “Don’t really know,” he muttered absently. “I didn’t see him.”

Thomas could tell the boy was being less than honest but decided not to press him. “Well, you don’t want to see him, trust me.” He continued to eat, munching on the apples as he studied the huge breaks in the walls. Though it was hard to make out from where he sat, there was something odd about the stone edges of the exits to the outside corridors. He felt an uncomfortable sense of vertigo looking at the towering walls, as if he hovered above them instead of sitting at their base.

“What’s out there?” he asked, finally breaking the silence. “Is this part of a huge castle or something?”

Chuck hesitated. Looked uncomfortable. “Um, I’ve never been outside the Glade.”

Thomas paused. “You’re hiding something,” he finally replied, finishing off his last bite and taking a long swig of water. The

frustration at getting no answers from anyone was starting to grind his nerves. It only made it worse to think that even if he *did* get answers, he wouldn't know if he'd be getting the truth. "Why are you guys so secretive?"

"That's just the way it is. Things are really weird around here, and most of us don't know everything. *Half* of everything."

It bothered Thomas that Chuck didn't seem to care about what he'd just said. That he seemed indifferent to having his life taken away from him. What was wrong with these people? Thomas got to his feet and started walking toward the eastern opening. "Well, no one said I couldn't look around." He needed to learn something or he was going to lose his mind.

"Whoa, wait!" Chuck cried, running to catch up. "Be careful, those puppies are about to close." He already sounded out of breath.

"Close?" Thomas repeated. "What are you talking about?"

"The Doors, you shank."

"Doors? I don't see any doors." Thomas knew Chuck wasn't just making stuff up—he knew he was missing something obvious. He grew uneasy and realized he'd slowed his pace, not so eager to reach the walls anymore.

"What do you call those big openings?" Chuck pointed up at the enormously tall gaps in the walls. They were only thirty feet away now.

"I'd call them *big openings*," Thomas said, trying to counter his discomfort with sarcasm and disappointed that it wasn't working.

"Well, they're *doors*. And they close up every night."

Thomas stopped, thinking Chuck had to have said something wrong. He looked up, looked side to side, examined the massive slabs of stone as the uneasy feeling blossomed into outright dread.

“What do you mean, they *close*?”

“Just see for yourself in a minute. The Runners’ll be back soon; then those big walls are going to *move* until the gaps are closed.”

“You’re jacked in the head,” Thomas muttered. He couldn’t see how the mammoth walls could possibly be mobile—felt so sure of it he relaxed, thinking Chuck was just playing a trick on him.

They reached the huge split that led outside to more stone pathways. Thomas gaped, his mind emptying of thought as he saw it all firsthand.

“This is called the East Door,” Chuck said, as if proudly revealing a piece of art he’d created.

Thomas barely heard him, shocked by how much bigger it was up close. At least twenty feet across, the break in the wall went all the way to the top, far above. The edges that bordered the vast opening were smooth, except for one odd, repeating pattern on both sides. On the left side of the East Door, deep holes several inches in diameter and spaced a foot apart were bored into the rock, beginning near the ground and continuing all the way up.

On the right side of the Door, foot-long rods jutted out from the wall edge, also several inches in diameter, in the same pattern as the holes facing them on the other side. The purpose was obvious.

“Are you kidding?” Thomas asked, the dread slamming back into his gut. “You weren’t playing with me? The walls really *move*?”

“What else would I have meant?”

Thomas had a hard time wrapping his mind around the possibility. “I don’t know. I figured there was a door that swung shut or a little mini-wall that slid out of the big one. How could these walls move? They’re huge, and they look like they’ve been standing here for a thousand years.” And the idea of those walls closing and

trapping him inside this place they called the Glade was downright terrifying.

Chuck threw his arms up, clearly frustrated. “I don’t know, they just move. Makes one heck of a grinding noise. Same thing happens out in the Maze—those walls shift every night, too.”

Thomas, his attention suddenly snapped up by a new detail, turned to face the younger boy. “What did you just say?”

“Huh?”

“You just called it a maze—you said, ‘same thing happens out in the *maze*.’”

Chuck’s face reddened. “I’m done with you. I’m done.” He walked back toward the tree they’d just left.

Thomas ignored him, more interested than ever in the outside of the Glade. A *maze*? In front of him, through the East Door, he could make out passages leading to the left, to the right, and straight ahead. And the walls of the corridors were similar to those that surrounded the Glade, the ground made of the same massive stone blocks as in the courtyard. The ivy seemed even thicker out there. In the distance, more breaks in the walls led to other paths, and farther down, maybe a hundred yards or so away, the straight passage came to a dead end.

“Looks like a maze,” Thomas whispered, almost laughing to himself. As if things couldn’t have gotten any stranger. They’d wiped his memory and put him inside a gigantic maze. It was all so crazy it really did seem funny.

His heart skipped a beat when a boy unexpectedly appeared around a corner up ahead, entering the main passage from one of the offshoots to the right, running toward him and the Glade. Covered in sweat, his face red, clothes sticking to his body, the boy didn’t slow, hardly glancing at Thomas as he went past. He headed

straight for the squat concrete building located near the Box.

Thomas turned as he passed, his eyes riveted to the exhausted runner, unsure why this new development surprised him so much. Why *wouldn't* people go out and search the maze? Then he realized others were entering through the remaining three Glade openings, all of them running and looking as ragged as the guy who'd just whisked by him. There couldn't be much good about the maze if these guys came back looking so weary and worn.

He watched, curious, as they met at the big iron door of the small building; one of the boys turned the rusty wheel handle, grunting with the effort. Chuck had said something about runners earlier. What had they been doing out there?

The big door finally popped open, and with a deafening squeal of metal against metal, the boys swung it wide. They disappeared inside, pulling it shut behind them with a loud clonk. Thomas stared, his mind churning to come up with any possible explanation for what he'd just witnessed. Nothing developed, but something about that creepy old building gave him goose bumps, a disquieting chill.

Someone tugged on his sleeve, breaking him from his thoughts; Chuck had come back.

Before Thomas had a chance to think, questions were rushing out of his mouth. "Who are those guys and what were they doing? What's in that building?" He wheeled around and pointed out the East Door. "And why do you live inside a freaking maze?" He felt a rattling pressure of uncertainty, making his head splinter with pain.

"I'm not saying another word," Chuck replied, a new authority filling his voice. "I think you should get to bed early—you'll need your sleep. Ah"—he stopped, held up a finger, pricking up his right ear—"it's about to happen."

“What?” Thomas asked, thinking it kind of strange that Chuck was suddenly acting like an adult instead of the little kid desperate for a friend he’d been only moments earlier.

A loud boom exploded through the air, making Thomas jump. It was followed by a horrible crunching, grinding sound. He stumbled backward, fell to the ground. It felt as if the whole earth shook; he looked around, panicked. The walls were closing. The walls were *really* closing—trapping him inside the Glade. An onrushing sense of claustrophobia stifled him, compressed his lungs, as if water filled their cavities.

“Calm down, Greenie,” Chuck yelled over the noise. “It’s just the walls!”

Thomas barely heard him, too fascinated, too shaken by the closing of the Doors. He scrambled to his feet and took a few trembling steps back for a better view, finding it hard to believe what his eyes were seeing.

The enormous stone wall to the right of them seemed to defy every known law of physics as it slid along the ground, throwing sparks and dust as it moved, rock against rock. The crunching sound rattled his bones. Thomas realized that only *that* wall was moving, heading for its neighbor to the left, ready to seal shut with its protruding rods slipping into the drilled holes across from it. He looked around at the other openings. It felt like his head was spinning faster than his body, and his stomach flipped over with the dizziness. On all four sides of the Glade, only the right walls were moving, toward the left, closing the gap of the Doors.

Impossible, he thought. *How can they do that?* He fought the urge to run out there, slip past the moving slabs of rock before they shut, flee the Glade. Common sense won out—the maze held even more

unknowns than his situation inside.

He tried to picture in his mind how the structure of it all worked. Massive stone walls, hundreds of feet high, moving like sliding glass doors—an image from his past life that flashed through his thoughts. He tried to grasp the memory, hold on to it, complete the picture with faces, names, a place, but it faded into obscurity. A pang of sadness pricked through his other swirling emotions.

He watched as the right wall reached the end of its journey, its connecting rods finding their mark and entering without a glitch. An echoing boom rumbled across the Glade as all four Doors sealed shut for the night. Thomas felt one final moment of trepidation, a quick slice of fear through his body, and then it vanished.

A surprising sense of calm eased his nerves; he let out a long sigh of relief. “Wow,” he said, feeling dumb at such a monumental understatement.

“Ain’t nothin’, as Alby would say,” Chuck murmured. “You kind of get used to it after a while.”

Thomas looked around one more time, the *feel* of the place completely different now that all the walls were solid with no way out. He tried to imagine the purpose of such a thing, and he didn’t know which guess was worse—that they were being sealed *in* or that they were being protected from something *out there*. The thought ended his brief moment of calm, stirring in his mind a million possibilities of what might live in the maze outside, all of them terrifying. Fear gripped him once again.

“Come *on*,” Chuck said, pulling at Thomas’s sleeve a second time. “Trust me, when nighttime strikes, you want to be in *bed*.”

Thomas knew he had no other choice. He did his best to suppress everything he was feeling and followed.

CHAPTER 5

They ended up near the back of the Homestead—that was what Chuck called the leaning structure of wood and windows—in a dark shadow between the building and the stone wall behind it.

“Where are we going?” Thomas asked, still feeling the weight of seeing those walls close, thinking about the maze, the confusion, the fear. He told himself to stop or he’d drive himself crazy. Trying to grasp a sense of normalcy, he made a weak attempt at a joke. “If you’re looking for a goodnight kiss, forget it.”

Chuck didn’t miss a beat. “Just shut up and stay close.”

Thomas let out a big breath and shrugged before following the younger boy along the back of the building. They tiptoed until they came upon a small, dusty window, a soft beam of light shining through onto the stone and ivy. Thomas heard someone moving around in-side.

“The bathroom,” Chuck whispered.

“So?” A thread of unease stitched along Thomas’s skin.

“I love doing this to people. Gives me great pleasure before bedtime.”

“Doing what?” Something told Thomas Chuck was up to no good. “Maybe I should—”

“Just shut your mouth and watch.” Chuck quietly stepped up onto a big wooden box that sat right under the window. He crouched

so that his head was positioned just below where the person on the inside would be able to see him. Then he reached up with his hand and lightly tapped on the glass.

“This is stupid,” Thomas whispered. There couldn’t possibly be a worse time to play a joke—Newt or Alby could be in there. “I don’t wanna get in trouble—I just got here!”

Chuck suppressed a laugh by putting his hand over his mouth. Ignoring Thomas, he reached up and tapped the window again.

A shadow crossed the light; then the window slid open. Thomas jumped to hide, pressing himself against the back of the building as hard as he could. He just couldn’t believe he’d been suckered into playing a practical joke on somebody. The angle of vision from the window protected him for the moment, but he knew he and Chuck would be seen if whoever was in there pushed his head outside to get a better look.

“Who’s that!” yelled the boy from the bathroom, his voice scratchy and laced with anger. Thomas had to hold in a gasp when he realized it was Gally—he *knew* that voice already.

Without warning, Chuck suddenly popped his head up toward the window and screamed at the top of his lungs. A loud crash from inside revealed that the trick had worked—and the litany of swearwords following it let them know Gally was none too happy about it. Thomas was struck with an odd mix of horror and embarrassment.

“I’m gonna kill you, shuck-face!” Gally yelled, but Chuck was already off the box and running toward the open Glade. Thomas froze as he heard Gally open the door inside and run out of the bathroom.

Thomas finally snapped out of his daze and took off after his new—and only—friend. He’d just rounded the corner when Gally

came screaming out of the Homestead, looking like a ferocious beast on the loose.

He immediately pointed at Thomas. “Come here!” he yelled.

Thomas’s heart sank in surrender. Everything seemed to indicate that he’d be getting a fist in the face. “It wasn’t me, I swear,” he said, though as he stood there, he sized the boy up and realized he shouldn’t be so terrified after all. Gally wasn’t that big—Thomas could actually take him if he had to.

“Wasn’t you?” Gally snarled. He ambled up to Thomas slowly and stopped right in front of him. “Then how do you know there was something you didn’t do?”

Thomas didn’t say anything. He was definitely uncomfortable but not nearly as scared as a few moments earlier.

“I’m not a dong, Greenie,” Gally spat. “I saw Chuck’s fat face in the window.” He pointed again, this time right at Thomas’s chest. “But you better decide right quick who you want as your friends and enemies, hear me? One more trick like that—I don’t care if it’s your sissy idea or not—there’ll be blood spilled. You got that, Newbie?” But before Thomas could answer Gally’d already turned to walk away.

Thomas just wanted this episode over. “Sorry,” he muttered, wincing at how stupid it sounded.

“I know you,” Gally added without looking back. “I saw you in the Changing, and I’m gonna figure out who you are.”

Thomas watched as the bully disappeared back into the Homestead. He couldn’t remember much, but something told him he’d never disliked someone so strongly. He was surprised by how much he truly hated the guy. He really, really hated him. He turned to see Chuck standing there, staring at the ground, clearly

embarrassed. “Thanks a lot, *buddy*.”

“Sorry—if I’d known it was Gally, I never would’ve done it, I swear.”

Surprising himself, Thomas laughed. An hour ago, he’d thought he’d never hear such a sound come out of his mouth again.

Chuck looked closely at Thomas and slowly broke into an uneasy grin. “What?”

Thomas shook his head. “Don’t be sorry. The . . . shank deserved it, and I don’t even know what a shank is. That was awesome.” He felt much better.

A couple of hours later, Thomas was lying in a soft sleeping bag next to Chuck on a bed of grass near the gardens. It was a wide lawn that he hadn’t noticed before, and quite a few of the group chose it as their bedtime spot. Thomas thought that was strange, but apparently there wasn’t enough room inside the Homestead. At least it was warm. Which made him wonder for the millionth time *where* they were. His mind had a hard time grasping names of places, or remembering countries or rulers, how the world was organized. And none of the kids in the Glade had a clue, either—at least, they weren’t sharing if they did.

He lay in silence for the longest time, looking at the stars and listening to the soft murmurs of various conversations drifting across the Glade. Sleep felt miles away, and he couldn’t shake the despair and hopelessness that coursed through his body and mind—the temporary joy of Chuck’s trick on Gally had long since faded away. It’d been one endless—and strange—day.

It was just so . . . weird. He remembered lots of little things about life—eating, clothes, studying, playing, general images of the makeup

of the world. But any detail that would fill in the picture to create a true and complete memory had been erased somehow. It was like looking at an image through a foot of muddy water. More than anything else, perhaps, he felt . . . *sad*.

Chuck interrupted his thoughts. “Well, Greenie, you survived First Day.”

“Barely.” *Not now, Chuck*, he wanted to say. *I’m not in the mood*.

Chuck pulled himself up to lean on an elbow, looking at Thomas. “You’ll learn a lot in the next couple of days, start getting used to things. Good that?”

“Um, yeah, good that, I guess. Where’d all these weird words and phrases come from, anyway?” It seemed like they’d taken some other language and melded it with his own.

Chuck flopped back down with a heavy flump. “I don’t know—I’ve only been here a month, remember?”

Thomas wondered about Chuck, whether he knew more than he let on. He was a quirky kid, funny, and he seemed innocent, but who was to say? Really he was just as mysterious as everything else in the Glade.

A few minutes passed, and Thomas felt the long day finally catch up to him, the leaded edge of sleep crossing over his mind. But—like a fist had shoved it in his brain and let go—a thought popped into his head. One that he didn’t expect, and he wasn’t sure from where it came.

Suddenly, the Glade, the walls, the Maze—it all seemed . . . familiar. Comfortable. A warmth of calmness spread through his chest, and for the first time since he’d found himself there, he didn’t feel like the Glade was the worst place in the universe. He stilled, felt his eyes

widen, his breathing stop for a long moment. *What just happened?* he thought. *What changed?* Ironically, the feeling that things would be okay made him slightly uneasy.

Not quite understanding how, he knew what he needed to do. He didn't get it. The feeling—the epiphany—was a strange one, foreign and familiar at the same time. But it felt . . . right.

“I want to be one of those guys that goes out there,” he said aloud, not knowing if Chuck was still awake. “Inside the Maze.”

“Huh?” was the response from Chuck. Thomas could hear a tinge of annoyance in his voice.

“Runners,” Thomas said, wishing he knew where this was coming from. “Whatever they're doing out there, I want in.”

“You don't even know what you're talking about,” Chuck grumbled, and rolled over. “Go to sleep.”

Thomas felt a new surge of confidence, even though he truly *didn't* know what he was talking about. “I want to be a Runner.”

Chuck turned back and got up on his elbow. “You can forget that little thought right now.”

Thomas wondered at Chuck's reaction, but pressed on. “Don't try to—”

“Thomas. Newbie. My new friend. Forget it.”

“I'll tell Alby tomorrow.” *A Runner*, Thomas thought. *I don't even know what that means. Have I gone completely insane?*

Chuck lay down with a laugh. “You're a piece of klunk. Go to sleep.”

But Thomas couldn't quit. “Something out there—it feels familiar.”

“Go . . . to . . . sleep.”

Then it hit Thomas—he felt like several pieces of a puzzle had

been put together. He didn't know what the ultimate picture would be, but his next words almost felt like they were coming from someone else. "Chuck, I . . . I think I've *been* here before."

He heard his friend sit up, heard the intake of breath. But Thomas rolled over and refused to say another word, worried he'd mess up this new sense of being encouraged, eradicate the reassuring calm that filled his heart.

Sleep came much more easily than he'd expected.

CHAPTER 6

Someone shook Thomas awake. His eyes snapped open to see a too-close face staring down at him, everything around them still shadowed by the darkness of early morning. He opened his mouth to speak but a cold hand clamped down on it, gripping it shut. Panic flared until he saw who it was.

“Shh, Greenie. Don’t wanna be wakin’ Chuckie, now, do we?”

It was Newt—the guy who seemed to be second in command; the air reeked of his morning breath.

Though Thomas was surprised, any alarm melted away immediately. He couldn’t help being curious, wondering what this boy wanted with him. Thomas nodded, doing his best to say yes with his eyes, until Newt finally took his hand away, then leaned back on his heels.

“Come on, Greenie,” the tall boy whispered as he stood. He reached down and helped Thomas to his feet—he was so strong it felt like he could rip Thomas’s arm off. “Supposed to show ya somethin’ before the wake-up.”

Any lingering haze of sleep had already vanished from Thomas’s mind. “Okay,” he said simply, ready to follow. He knew he should hold *some* suspicion, having no reason to trust anyone yet, but the curiosity won out. He quickly leaned over and slipped on his shoes. “Where are we going?”

“Just follow me. And stay close.”

They snuck their way through the tightly strewn pack of sleeping bodies, Thomas almost tripping several times. He stepped on someone's hand, earning a sharp cry of pain in return, then a punch on the calf.

"Sorry," he whispered, ignoring a dirty look from Newt.

Once they left the lawn area and stepped onto the hard gray stone of the courtyard floor, Newt broke into a run, heading for the western wall. Thomas hesitated at first, wondering why he needed to run, but snapped out of it quickly and followed at the same pace.

The light was dim, but any obstructions loomed as darker shadows and he was able to make his way quickly along. He stopped when Newt did, right next to the massive wall towering above them like a skyscraper—another random image that floated in the murky pool of his memory wipe. Thomas noticed small red lights flashing here and there along the wall's face, moving about, stopping, turning off and on.

"What are those?" he whispered as loudly as he dared, wondering if his voice sounded as shaky as he felt. The twinkling red glow of the lights held an undercurrent of warning.

Newt stood just a couple of feet in front of the thick curtain of ivy on the wall. "When you bloody need to know, you'll know, Greenie."

"Well, it's kind of stupid to send me to a place where nothing makes sense and not answer my questions." Thomas paused, surprised at himself. "*Shank*," he added, throwing all the sarcasm he could into the syllable.

Newt broke out in a laugh, but quickly cut it off. "I like you, Greenie. Now shut it and let me show ya somethin'."

Newt stepped forward and dug his hands into the thick ivy,

spreading several vines away from the wall to reveal a dust-frosted window, a square about two feet wide. It was dark at the moment, as if it had been painted black.

“What’re we looking for?” Thomas whispered.

“Hold your undies, boy. One’ll be comin’ along soon enough.”

A minute passed, then two. Several more. Thomas fidgeted on his feet, wondering how Newt could stand there, perfectly patient and still, staring into nothing but darkness.

Then it changed.

Glimmers of an eerie light shone through the window; it cast a wavering spectrum of colors on Newt’s body and face, as if he stood next to a lighted swimming pool. Thomas grew perfectly still, squinting, trying to make out what was on the other side. A thick lump grew in his throat. *What is that?* he thought.

“Out there’s the Maze,” Newt whispered, eyes wide as if in a trance. “Everything we do—our whole life, Greenie—revolves around the Maze. Every lovin’ second of every lovin’ day we spend in honor of the Maze, tryin’ to solve somethin’ that’s not shown us it has a bloody solution, ya know? And we want to show ya why it’s not to be messed with. Show ya why them buggin’ walls close shut every night. Show ya why you should never, never find your butt out there.”

Newt stepped back, still holding on to the ivy vines. He gestured for Thomas to take his place and look through the window.

Thomas did, leaning forward until his nose touched the cool surface of the glass. It took a second for his eyes to focus on the moving object on the other side, to look past the grime and dust and see what Newt wanted him to see. And when he did, he felt his breath catch in his throat, like an icy wind had blown down there and frozen the air solid.

A large, bulbous creature the size of a cow but with no distinct shape twisted and seethed along the ground in the corridor outside. It climbed the opposite wall, then leaped at the thick-glassed window with a loud thump. Thomas shrieked before he could stop himself, jerked away from the window—but the thing bounced backward, leaving the glass undamaged.

Thomas sucked in two huge breaths and leaned in once again. It was too dark to make out clearly, but odd lights flashed from an unknown source, revealing blurs of silver spikes and glistening flesh. Wicked instrument-tipped appendages protruded from its body like arms: a saw blade, a set of shears, long rods whose purpose could only be guessed.

The creature was a horrific mix of animal and machine, and seemed to realize it was being observed, seemed to know what lay inside the walls of the Glade, seemed to want to get inside and feast on human flesh. Thomas felt an icy terror blossom in his chest, expand like a tumor, making it hard to breathe. Even with the memory wipe, he felt sure he'd never seen something so truly awful.

He stepped back, the courage he'd felt the previous evening melting away.

“What is that thing?” he asked. Something shivered in his gut, and he wondered if he'd ever be able to eat again.

“Grievors, we call 'em,” Newt answered. “Nasty bugger, eh? Just be glad the Grievors only come *out* at night. Be thankful for these walls.”

Thomas swallowed, wondering how he could ever go out there. His desire to become a Runner had taken a major blow. But he had to do it. Somehow he *knew* he had to do it. It was such an odd thing to feel, especially after what he'd just seen.

Newt looked at the window absently. “Now you know what bloody lurks in the Maze, my friend. Now you know this isn’t joke time. You’ve been sent to the Glade, Greenie, and we’ll be expectin’ ya to survive and help us do what we’ve been sent here to do.”

“And what’s that?” Thomas asked, even though he was terrified to hear the answer.

Newt turned to look him dead in the eye. The first traces of dawn had crept up on them, and Thomas could see every detail of Newt’s face, his skin tight, his brow creased.

“Find our way out, Greenie,” Newt said. “Solve the buggin’ Maze and find our way home.”

A couple of hours later, the doors having reopened, rumbling and grumbling and shaking the ground until they were finished, Thomas sat at a worn, tilted picnic table outside the Homestead. All he could think about was the Grievors, what their purpose could be, what they did out there during the night. What it would be like to be attacked by something so terrible.

He tried to get the image out of his head, move on to something else. The Runners. They’d just left without saying a word to anybody, bolting into the Maze at full speed and disappearing around corners. He pictured them in his mind as he picked at his eggs and bacon with a fork, speaking to no one, not even Chuck, who ate silently next to him. The poor guy had exhausted himself trying to start a conversation with Thomas, who’d refused to respond. All he wanted was to be left alone.

He just didn’t get it; his brain was on overload trying to compute the sheer impossibility of the situation. How could a maze, with walls so massive and tall, be so big that dozens of kids hadn’t been able to

solve it after who knew how long trying? How could such a structure exist? And more importantly, *why*? What could possibly be the purpose of such a thing? Why were they all there? How *long* had they been there?

Try as he might to avoid it, his mind still kept wandering back to the image of the vicious Griever. Its phantom brother seemed to leap at him every time he blinked or rubbed his eyes.

Thomas knew he was a smart kid—he somehow felt it in his bones. But nothing about this place made any sense. Except for one thing. He was supposed to be a Runner. Why did he feel that so strongly? And even now, after seeing what lived in the maze?

A tap on his shoulder jarred him from his thoughts; he looked up to see Alby standing behind him, arms folded.

“Ain’t you lookin’ fresh?” Alby said. “Get a nice view out the window this morning?”

Thomas stood, hoping the time for answers had come—or maybe hoping for a distraction from his gloomy thoughts. “Enough to make me want to learn about this place,” he said, hoping to avoid provoking the temper he’d seen flare in this guy the day before.

Alby nodded. “Me and you, shank. The Tour begins now.” He started to move but then stopped, holding up a finger. “Ain’t no questions till the end, you get me? Ain’t got time to jaw with you all day.”

“But . . .” Thomas stopped when Alby’s eyebrows shot up. Why did the guy have to be such a jerk? “But tell me everything—I wanna know everything.” He’d decided the night before not to tell anyone else how strangely familiar the place seemed, the odd feeling that he’d been there before—that he could *remember* things about it.

Sharing that seemed like a very bad idea.

“I’ll tell ya what I wanna tell ya, Greenie. Let’s go.”

“Can I come?” Chuck asked from the table.

Alby reached down and tweaked the boy’s ear.

“Ow!” Chuck shrieked.

“Ain’t you got a job, slinthead?” Alby asked. “Lots of sloppin’ to do?”

Chuck rolled his eyes, then looked at Thomas. “Have fun.”

“I’ll try.” He suddenly felt sorry for Chuck, wished people would treat the kid better. But there was nothing he could do about it—it was time to go.

He walked away with Alby, hoping the Tour had officially begun.

CHAPTER 7

They started at the Box, which was closed at the moment—double doors of metal lying flat on the ground, covered in white paint, faded and cracked. The day had brightened considerably, the shadows stretching in the opposite direction from what Thomas had seen yesterday. He still hadn't spotted the sun, but it looked like it was about to pop over the eastern wall at any minute.

Alby pointed down at the doors. "This here's the Box. Once a month, we get a Newbie like you, never fails. Once a *week*, we get supplies, clothes, some food. Ain't needin' a lot—pretty much run ourselves in the Glade."

Thomas nodded, his whole body itching with the desire to ask questions. *I need some tape to put over my mouth*, he thought.

"We don't know jack about the Box, you get me?" Alby continued. "Where it came from, how it gets here, who's in charge. The shanks that sent us here ain't told us nothin'. We got all the electricity we need, grow and raise most of our food, get clothes and such. Tried to send a slinthead Greenie back in the Box one time—thing wouldn't move till we took him out."

Thomas wondered what lay under the doors when the Box wasn't there, but held his tongue. He felt such a mixture of emotions—curiosity, frustration, wonder—all laced with the lingering horror of seeing the Griever that morning.

Alby kept talking, never bothering to look Thomas in the eye. “Glade’s cut into four sections.” He held up his fingers as he counted off the next four words. “Gardens, Blood House, Homestead, Deadheads. You got that?”

Thomas hesitated, then shook his head, confused.

Alby’s eyelids fluttered briefly as he continued; he looked like he could think of a thousand things he’d rather be doing right then. He pointed to the northeast corner, where the fields and fruit trees were located. “Gardens—where we grow the crops. Water’s pumped in through pipes in the ground—always has been, or we’d have starved to death a long time ago. Never rains here. Never.” He pointed to the southeast corner, at the animal pens and barn. “Blood House—where we raise and slaughter animals.” He pointed at the pitiful living quarters. “Homestead—stupid place is twice as big than when the first of us got here because we keep addin’ to it when they send us wood and klunk. Ain’t pretty, but it works. Most of us sleep outside anyway.”

Thomas felt dizzy. So many questions splintered his mind he couldn’t keep them straight.

Alby pointed to the southwest corner, the forest area fronted with several sickly trees and benches. “Call that the Deadheads. Graveyard’s back in that corner, in the thicker woods. Ain’t much else. You can go there to sit and rest, hang out, whatever.” He cleared his throat, as if wanting to change subjects. “You’ll spend the next two weeks working one day apiece for our different job Keepers—until we know what you’re best at. Slopper, Bricknick, Bagger, Track-hoe—somethin’ll stick, always does. Come on.”

Alby walked toward the South Door, located between what he’d called the Deadheads and the Blood House. Thomas followed,

wrinkling his nose up at the sudden smell of dirt and manure coming from the animal pens. *Graveyard?* he thought. *Why do they need a graveyard in a place full of teenagers?* That disturbed him even more than not knowing some of the words Alby kept saying—words like *Slopper* and *Bagger*—that didn't sound so good. He came as close to interrupting Alby as he'd done so far, but willed his mouth shut.

Frustrated, he turned his attention to the pens in the Blood House area.

Several cows nibbled and chewed at a trough full of greenish hay. Pigs lounged in a muddy pit, an occasionally flickering tail the only sign they were alive. Another pen held sheep, and there were chicken coops and turkey cages as well. Workers bustled about the area, looking as if they'd spent their whole lives on a farm.

Why do I remember these animals? Thomas wondered. Nothing about them seemed new or interesting—he knew what they were called, what they normally ate, what they looked like. Why was stuff like that still lodged in his memory, but not *where* he'd seen animals before, or with whom? His memory loss was baffling in its complexity.

Alby pointed to the large barn in the back corner, its red paint long faded to a dull rust color. "Back there's where the Slicers work. Nasty stuff, that. Nasty. If you like blood, you can be a Slicer."

Thomas shook his head. Slicer didn't sound good at all. As they kept walking, he focused his attention on the other side of the Glade, the section Alby had called the Deadheads. The trees grew thicker and denser the farther back in the corner they went, more alive and full of leaves. Dark shadows filled the depths of the wooded area, despite the time of day. Thomas looked up, squinting to see that the sun was finally visible, though it looked odd—more orange than it

should be. It hit him that this was yet another example of the odd selective memory in his mind.

He returned his gaze to the Deadheads, a glowing disk still floating in his vision. Blinking to clear it away, he suddenly caught the red lights again, flickering and skittering about deep in the darkness of the woods. *What are those things?* he wondered, irritated that Alby hadn't answered him earlier. The secrecy was very annoying.

Alby stopped walking, and Thomas was surprised to see they'd reached the South Door; the two walls bracketing the exit towered above them. The thick slabs of gray stone were cracked and covered in ivy, as ancient as anything Thomas could imagine. He craned his neck to see the top of the walls far above; his mind spun with the odd sensation that he was looking *down*, not up. He staggered back a step, awed once again by the structure of his new home, then finally returned his attention to Alby, who had his back to the exit.

"Out there's the Maze." Alby jabbed a thumb over his shoulder, then paused. Thomas stared in that direction, through the gap in the walls that served as an exit from the Glade. The corridors out there looked much the same as the ones he'd seen from the window by the East Door early that morning. This thought gave him a chill, made him wonder if a Griever might come charging toward them at any minute. He took a step backward before realizing what he was doing. *Calm down*, he chided himself, embarrassed.

Alby continued. "Two years, I've been here. Ain't none been here longer. The few before me are already dead." Thomas felt his eyes widen, his heart quicken. "Two years we've tried to solve this thing, no luck. Shuckin' walls move out there at night just as much as these here doors. Mappin' it out ain't easy, ain't easy nohow." He nodded toward the concrete-blocked building into which the Runners had

disappeared the night before.

Another stab of pain sliced through Thomas's head—there were too many things to compute at once. They'd been here two years? The walls moved out in the Maze? How many had died? He stepped forward, wanting to see the Maze for himself, as if the answers were printed on the walls out there.

Alby held out a hand and pushed Thomas in the chest, sent him stumbling backward. "Ain't no goin' out there, shank."

Thomas had to suppress his pride. "Why not?"

"You think I sent Newt to ya before the wake-up just for kicks? Freak, that's the Number One Rule, the only one you'll never be forgiven for breaking. Ain't nobody—*nobody*—allowed in the Maze except the Runners. Break that rule, and if you ain't killed by the Grievors, we'll kill you ourselves, you get me?"

Thomas nodded, grumbling inside, sure that Alby was exaggerating. Hoping that he was. Either way, if he'd had any doubt about what he'd told Chuck the night before, it had now completely vanished. He wanted to be a Runner. He *would* be a Runner. Deep inside he knew he had to go out there, into the Maze. Despite everything he'd learned and witnessed firsthand, it called to him as much as hunger or thirst.

A movement up on the left wall of the South Door caught his attention. Startled, he reacted quickly, looking just in time to see a flash of silver. A patch of ivy shook as the thing disappeared into it.

Thomas pointed up at the wall. "What was that?" he asked before he could be shut down again.

Alby didn't bother looking. "No questions till the end, shank. How many times I gotta tell ya?" He paused, then let out a sigh. "Beetle blades—it's how the Creators watch us. You better not—"

He was cut off by a booming, ringing alarm that sounded from all directions. Thomas clamped his hands to his ears, looking around as the siren blared, his heart about to thump its way out of his chest. But when he focused back on Alby, he stopped.

Alby wasn't acting scared—he appeared . . . confused. Surprised. The alarm clanged through the air.

“What’s going on?” Thomas asked. Relief flooded his chest that his tour guide didn't seem to think the world was about to end—but even so, Thomas was getting tired of being hit by waves of panic.

“That’s weird” was all Alby said as he scanned the Glade, squinting. Thomas noticed people in the Blood House pens glancing around, apparently just as confused. One shouted to Alby, a short, skinny kid drenched in mud.

“What’s up with that?” the boy asked, looking to Thomas for some reason.

“I don't know,” Alby murmured back in a distant voice.

But Thomas couldn't stand it anymore. “Alby! What’s going on?”

“The Box, shuck-face, the Box!” was all Alby said before he set off for the middle of the Glade at a brisk pace that almost looked to Thomas like panic.

“What about it?” Thomas demanded, hurrying to catch up. *Talk to me!* he wanted to scream at him.

But Alby didn't answer or slow down, and as they got closer to the box Thomas could see that dozens of kids were running around the courtyard. He spotted Newt and called to him, trying to suppress his rising fear, telling himself things would be okay, that there had to be a reasonable explanation.

“Newt, what’s going on!” he yelled.

Newt glanced over at him, then nodded and walked over,

strangely calm in the middle of the chaos. He swatted Thomas on the back. “Means a bloody Newbie’s comin’ up in the Box.” He paused as if expecting Thomas to be impressed. “Right *now*.”

“So?” As Thomas looked more closely at Newt, he realized that what he’d mistaken for calm was actually disbelief—maybe even excitement.

“So?” Newt replied, his jaw dropping slightly. “Greenie, we’ve never had two Newbies show up in the same *month*, much less two days in a row.”

And with that, he ran off toward the Homestead.

REMEMBER.
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