

This is a rather lengthy chapter. Read and enjoy at your leisure but read it all today. You will have no written work today but be ready to answer questions tomorrow.

CHAPTER 2

A Message to the Mayor

Lina often took different routes between school and home. Sometimes, just for variety, she'd go all the way around Sparkswallow Square, or way up by the shoe repair shops on Liverie Street. But today she took the shortest route because she was eager to get home and tell her news.

She ran fast and easily through the streets of Ember. Every corner, every alley, every building was familiar to her. She always knew where she was, though most streets looked more or less the same. All of them were lined with old two-story stone buildings, the wood of their window frames and doors long unpainted. On the street level were shops; above the shops were the apartments where people lived. Every building, at the place where the wall met the roof, was equipped with a row of floodlights—big cone-shaped lamps that cast a strong yellow glare.

Stone walls, lighted windows, lumpy, muffled shapes of people—Lina flew by them. Her slender legs felt immensely strong, like the wood of a bow that flexes and springs. She darted around obstacles—broken furniture left for the trash heaps or for scavengers, stoves and refrigerators that were past repair, peddlers sitting on the pavement with their wares spread out around them. She leapt over cracks and potholes.

When she came to Hafter Street, she slowed a little. This street was deep in shadow. Four of its streetlamps were out and had not been fixed. For a second, Lina thought of the rumour she'd heard about light bulbs: that some kinds were completely gone. She was used to shortages of things—everyone was—but not of light bulbs! If the bulbs for the streetlamps ran out, the only lights would be inside the buildings. What would happen then? How could people find their way through the streets in the dark?

Somewhere inside her, a black worm of dread stirred. She thought about Doon's outburst in class. Could things really be as bad as he said? She didn't want to believe it. She pushed the thought away.

As she turned onto Budloe Street, she sped up again. She passed a line of customers waiting to get into the vegetable market, their shopping bags draped over their arms. At the corner of Oliver Street, she dodged a group of washers trudging along with bags of laundry, and some movers carrying away a broken table. She passed a street-sweeper shoving dust around with his broom. I am so lucky, she thought, to have the job I want. And because of Doon Harrow, of all people.

When they were younger, Lina and Doon had been friends. Together they had explored the back alleys and dimly lit edges of the city. But in their fourth year of school, they had begun to grow apart. It started one day during the hour of free

time, when the children in their class were playing on the front steps of the school. "I can go down three steps at a time," someone would boast. "I can hop down on one foot!" someone else would say. The others would chime in. "I can do a handstand against the pillar!" "I can leapfrog over the trash can!" As soon as one child did something, all the rest would do it, too, to prove they could.

Lina could do it all, even when the dares got wilder. She yelled out the wildest one of all: "I can climb the light pole!" For a second everyone just stared at her. But Lina dashed across the street, took off her shoes and socks, and wrapped herself around the cold metal of the pole. Pushing with her bare feet, she inched upward. She didn't get very far before she lost her grip and fell back down. The children laughed, and so did she. "I didn't say I'd climb to the top," she explained. "I just said I'd climb it."

The others swarmed forward to try. Lizzie wouldn't take off her socks—her feet were too cold, she said—so she kept sliding back. Fordy Penn wasn't strong enough to get more than a foot off the ground. Next came Doon. He took his shoes and socks off and placed them neatly at the foot of the pole. Then he announced, in his serious way, "I'm going to the top." He clasped the pole and started upward, pushing with his feet, his knees sticking out to the sides. He pulled himself upward, pushed again—he was higher now than Lina had been—but suddenly his hands slid and he came plummeting down. He landed on his bottom with his legs poking up in the air.

Lina laughed. She shouldn't have; he might have been hurt. But he looked so funny that she couldn't help it.

He wasn't hurt. He could have jumped up, grinned, and walked away. But Doon didn't take things lightly. When he heard Lina and the others laughing, his face darkened. His temper rose in him like hot water. "Don't you dare laugh at me," he said to Lina. "I did better than you did! That was a stupid idea anyway, a stupid, stupid idea to climb that pole. . . ." And as he was shouting, red in the face, their teacher, Mrs. Polster, came out onto the steps and saw him. She took him by the shirt collar to the school director's office, where he got a scolding he didn't think he deserved.

After that day, Lina and Doon barely looked at each other when they passed in the hallway. At first it was because they were fuming about what had happened. Doon didn't like being laughed at; Lina didn't like being shouted at. After a while the memory of the light-pole incident faded, but by then they had got out of the habit of friendship. By the time they were twelve, they knew each other only as classmates. Lina was friends with Vindie Chance, Orly Gordon, and most of all, red-haired Lizzie Bisco, who could run almost as fast as Lina and could talk three times faster.

Now, as Lina sped toward home, she felt immensely grateful to Doon and hoped he'd come to no harm in the Pipeworks. Maybe they'd be friends again. She'd like to ask him about the Pipeworks. She was curious about it.

When she got to Greystone Street, she passed Clary Laine, who was probably on her way to the greenhouses. Clary waved to her and called out,

“What job?” and Lina called back, “Messenger!” and ran on.

Lina lived in Quillium Square, over the yarn shop run by her grandmother. When she got to the shop, she burst in the door and cried, “Granny! I’m a messenger!”

Granny’s shop had once been a tidy place, where each ball of yarn and spool of thread had its spot in the cubbyholes that lined the walls. All the yarn and thread came from old clothes that had gotten too shabby to be worn. Granny unravelled sweaters and picked apart dresses and jackets and pants; she wound the yarn into balls and the thread onto spools, and people bought them to use in making new clothes.

These days, the shop was a mess. Long loops and strands of yarn dangled out of the cubbyholes, and the browns and greys and purples were mixed in with the ochres and olive greens and dark blues. Granny’s customers often had to spend half an hour unsnarling the rust-red yarn from the mudbrown, or trying to fish out the end of a thread from a tangled wad. Granny wasn’t much help. Most days she just dozed behind the counter in her rocking chair.

That’s where she was when Lina burst in with her news. Lina saw that Granny had forgotten to knot up her hair that morning—it was standing out from her head in a wild white frizz.

Granny stood up, looking puzzled. “You aren’t a messenger, dear, you’re a schoolgirl,” she said.

“But Granny, today was Assignment Day. I got my job. And I’m a messenger!”

Granny’s eyes lit up, and she slapped her hand down on the counter.

“I remember!” she cried. “Messenger, that’s a grand job! You’ll be good at it.”

Lina’s little sister toddled out from behind the counter on unsteady legs. She had a round face and round brown eyes. At the top of her head was a sprig of brown hair tied up with a scrap of red yarn. She grabbed on to Lina’s knees. “Wy-na, Wy-na!” she said.

Lina bent over and took the child’s hands. “Poppy! Your big sister got a good job! Are you happy, Poppy? Are you proud of me?”

Poppy said something that sounded like, “Hoppyhoppyhoppy!” Lina laughed, hoisted her up, and danced with her around the shop.

Lina loved her little sister so much that it was like an ache under her ribs. The baby and Granny were all the family she had now. Two years ago, when the coughing sickness was raging through the city again, her father had died. Some months later, her mother,

giving birth to Poppy, had died, too. Lina missed her parents with an ache that was as strong as what she felt for Poppy, only it was a hollow feeling instead of a full one.

“When do you start?” asked Granny.

“Tomorrow,” said Lina. “I report to the messengers’ station at eight o’clock.”

“You’ll be a famous messenger,” said Granny. “Fast and famous.”

Taking Poppy with her, Lina went out of the shop and climbed the stairs to their apartment. It was a small apartment, only four rooms, but there was enough stuff in it to fill twenty. There were things that had belonged to Lina’s parents, her grandparents, and even *their* grandparents—old, broken, cracked, threadbare things that had been patched and repaired dozens or hundreds of times. People in Ember rarely threw anything away. They made the best possible use of what they had.

In Lina’s apartment, layers of worn rugs and carpets covered the floor, making it soft but uneven underfoot. Against one wall squatted a sagging couch with round wooden balls for legs, and on the couch were blankets and pillows, so many that you had to toss some on the floor before you could sit down. Against the opposite wall stood two wobbly tables that held a clutter of plates and bottles, cups and bowls, unmatching forks and spoons, little piles of scrap paper, bits of string wound up in untidy wads, and a few stubby pencils. There were four lamps, two tall ones that stood on the floor and two short ones that stood on tables. And in uneven lines up near the ceiling were hooks that held coats and shawls and nightgowns and sweaters, shelves that held pots and pans, jars with unreadable labels, and boxes of buttons and pins and tacks.

Where there were no shelves, the walls had been decorated with things of beauty—a label from a can of peaches, a few dried yellow squash flowers, a strip of faded but still pretty purple cloth. There were drawings, too. Lina had done the drawings out of her imagination. They showed a city that looked somewhat like Ember, except that its buildings were lighter and taller and had more windows.

One of the drawings had fallen to the floor. Lina retrieved it and pinned it back up. She stood for a minute and looked at the pictures. Over and over, she’d drawn the same city. Sometimes she drew it as seen from afar, sometimes she chose one of its buildings and drew it in detail. She put in stairways and streetlamps and carts. Sometimes she tried to draw the people who lived in the city, though she wasn’t good at drawing people—their heads always came out too small, and their hands looked like spiders. One picture showed a scene in which the people of the city greeted her when she arrived—the first person they had ever seen to come from elsewhere. They argued with each other about who should be the first to invite her home.

Lina could see this city so clearly in her mind she almost believed it was real. She knew it couldn’t be, though. *The Book of the City of Ember*, which all children studied in school, taught otherwise. “The city of Ember was made for us long ago by the Builders,”

the book said. "It is the only light in the dark world. Beyond Ember, the darkness goes on forever in all directions."

Lina had been to the outer border of Ember. She had stood at the edge of the trash heaps and gazed into the darkness beyond the city—the Unknown Regions. No one had ever gone far into the Unknown Regions—or at least no one had gone far and returned. And no one had ever arrived in Ember from the Unknown Regions, either. As far as anyone knew, the darkness *did* go on forever. Still, Lina wanted the other city to exist. In her imagination, it was so beautiful, and it seemed so real. Sometimes she longed to go there and take everyone in Ember with her.

But she wasn't thinking about the other city now. Today she was happy to be right where she was. She set Poppy on the couch. "Wait there," she said. She went into the kitchen, where there was an electric stove and a refrigerator that no longer worked and was used to store glasses and dishes so Poppy couldn't get at them. Above the refrigerator were shelves holding more pots and jars, more spoons and knives, a wind-up clock that Granny always forgot to wind, and a long row of cans. Lina tried to keep the cans in alphabetical order so she could find what she wanted quickly, but Granny always messed them up. Now, she saw, there were beans at the end of the row and tomatoes at the beginning. She picked out a can labelled Baby Drink and a jar of boiled carrots, opened them, poured the liquid into a cup and the carrots into a little dish, and took these back to the baby on the couch.

Poppy dribbled Baby Drink down her chin. She ate some of her carrots and poked others between the couch cushions. For the moment, Lina felt almost perfectly happy. There was no need to think about the fate of the city right now. Tomorrow, she'd be a messenger! She wiped the orange goop off Poppy's chin. "Don't worry," she said. "Everything will be all right."

The messengers' headquarters was on Cloving Street, not far from the back of the Gathering Hall. When Lina arrived the next morning, she was greeted by Messenger Captain Allis Fleery, a bony woman with pale eyes and hair the color of dust. "Our new girl," said Captain Fleery to the other messengers, a cluster of nine people who smiled and nodded at Lina. "I have your jacket right here," said the captain. She handed Lina a red jacket like the one all messengers wore. It was only a little too large.

From the clock tower of the Gathering Hall came a deep reverberating bong. "Eight o'clock!" cried Captain Fleery. She waved a long arm. "Take your stations!" As the clock sounded seven more times, the messengers scattered in all directions. The captain turned to Lina. "Your station," she said, "is Garn Square."

Lina nodded and started off, but the captain caught her by the collar. "I haven't told you the rules," she said. She held up a knobby finger. "One: When a customer gives you a message, repeat it back to make sure you have it right. Two: Always wear your red jacket so people can identify you. Three: Go as fast as possible. Your customers pay twenty cents for every message, no matter how far you have to take it."

Lina nodded. "I always go fast," she said.

"Four," the captain went on. "Deliver a message only to the person it's meant for, no one else."

Lina nodded again. She bounced a little on her toes, eager to get going.

Captain Fleery smiled. "Go," she said, and Lina was off.

She felt strong and speedy and surefooted. She glanced at her reflection as she ran past the window of a furniture repair shop. She liked the look of her long dark hair flying out behind her, her long legs in their black socks, and her flapping red jacket. Her face, which had never seemed especially remarkable, looked almost beautiful, because she looked so happy.

As soon as she came into Garn Square, a voice cried, "Messenger!" Her first customer! It was old Natty Prine, calling to her from the bench where he always sat. "This goes to Ravenet Parsons, 18 Selverton Square," he said. "Bend down."

She bent down so that her ear was close to his whiskery mouth.

The old man said in a slow, hoarse voice, "My stove is broke, don't come for dinner. Repeat."

Lina repeated the message.

"Good," said Natty Prine. He gave Lina twenty cents, and she ran across the city to Selverton Square. There she found Ravenet Parsons also sitting on a bench.

She recited the message to him.

"Old turniphead," he growled. "Lazy old flea-face. He just doesn't feel like cooking. No reply."

Lina ran back to Garn Square, passing a group of Believers on the way. They were standing in a circle, holding hands, singing one of their cheerful songs. It seemed to Lina there were more Believers than ever these days. What they believed in she didn't know, but it must make them happy—they were always smiling.

Her next customer turned out to be Mrs. Polster, the teacher of the fourth-year class. In Mrs. Polster's class, they memorized passages from *The Book of the City of Ember* every week. Mrs. Polster had charts on the walls for everything, with everyone's name listed. If you did something right, she made a green dot by your name. If you did something wrong, she made a red dot. "What you need to learn, children," she always said, in her resonant, precise voice, "is the difference between right and wrong in every area of life.

And once you learn the difference—” Here she would stop and point to the class, and the class would finish the sentence: “You must always choose the right.” In every situation, Mrs. Polster knew what the right choice was.

Now here was Mrs. Polster again, looming over Lina and pronouncing her message. “To Annisette Lafrond, 39 Humm Street, as follows,” she said. “My confidence in you has been seriously diminished since I heard about the disreputable activities in which you engaged on Thursday last. Please repeat.”

It took Lina three tries to get this right. “Uh-oh, a red dot for me,” she said. Mrs. Polster did not seem to find this amusing.

Lina had nineteen customers that first morning. Some of them had ordinary messages: “I can’t come on Tuesday.” “Buy a pound of potatoes on your way home.” “Please come and fix my front door.” Others had messages that made no sense to her at all, like Mrs. Polster’s. But it didn’t matter. The wonderful part about being a messenger was not the messages but the places she got to go. She could go into the houses of people she didn’t know and hidden alleyways and little rooms in the backs of stores. In just a few hours, she discovered all kinds of strange and interesting things.

For instance: Mrs. Sample, the mender, had to sleep on her couch because her entire bedroom, almost up to the ceiling, was crammed with clothes to be mended. Dr. Felinia Tower had the skeleton of a person hanging against her living room wall, its bones all held in place with black strings. “I study it,” she said when she saw Lina staring. “I have to know how people are put together.” At a house on Calloo Street, Lina delivered a message to a worried-looking man whose living room was completely dark. “I’m saving on light bulbs,” the man said. And when Lina took a message to the Can Café, she learned that on certain days the back room was used as a meeting place for people who liked to converse about Great Subjects. “Do you think an Invisible Being is watching over us all the time?” she heard someone ask. “Perhaps,” answered someone else. There was a long silence. “And then again, perhaps not.”

All of it was interesting. She loved finding things out, and she loved running. And even by the end of the day, she wasn’t tired. Running made her feel strong and big-hearted, it made her love the places she ran through and the people whose messages she delivered. She wished she could bring all of them the good news they so desperately wanted to hear.

Late in the afternoon, a young man came up to her, walking with a sort of sideways lurch. He was an odd-looking person—he had a very long neck with a bump in the middle and teeth so big they looked as if they were trying to escape from his mouth. His black, bushy hair stuck out from his head in untidy tufts.

“I have a message for the mayor, at the Gathering Hall,” he said. He paused to let the importance of this be understood. “The mayor,” he said. “Did you get that?”

“I got it,” said Lina.

“All right. Listen carefully. Tell him: Delivery at eight. From Looper. Repeat it back.”

“Delivery at eight. From Looper,” Lina repeated. It was an easy message.

“All right. No answer required.” He handed her twenty cents, and she sprinted away.

The Gathering Hall occupied one entire side of Harken Square, which was the city’s central plaza. The square was paved with stone. It had a few benches bolted to the ground here and there, as well as a couple of kiosks for notices. Wide steps led up to the Gathering Hall, and fat columns framed its big door. The mayor’s office was in the Gathering Hall. So were the offices of the clerks who kept track of which buildings had broken windows, what streetlamps needed repair, and the number of people in the city. There was the office of the timekeeper, who was in charge of the town clock. And there were offices for the guards who enforced the laws of Ember, now and then putting pickpockets or people who got in fights into the Prison Room, a small one-story structure with a sloping roof that jutted out from one side of the building.

Lina ran up the steps and through the door into a broad hallway. On the left was a desk, and at the desk sat a guard: “Barton Snode, Assistant Guard,” said a badge on his chest. He was a big man, with wide shoulders, brawny arms, and a thick neck. But his head looked as if it didn’t belong to his body—it was small and round and topped with a fuzz of extremely short hair. His lower jaw jutted out and moved a little from side to side, as if he were chewing on something.

When he saw Lina, his jaw stopped moving for a moment and his lips curled upward in a very small smile. “Good day,” he said. “What business brings you here today?”

“I have a message for the mayor.”

“Very good, very good.” Barton Snode heaved himself to his feet. “Step this way.”

He led Lina down the corridor and opened a door marked “Reception Room.”

“Wait here, please,” he said. “The mayor is in his basement office on private business, but he will be up shortly.”

Lina went inside.

“I’ll notify the mayor,” said Barton Snode. “Please have a seat. The mayor will be right with you. Or pretty soon.” He left, closing the door behind him. A second later, the door opened again, and the guard’s small fuzzy head re-appeared. “What *is* the message?” he asked.

“I have to give it to the mayor in person,” said Lina.

“Of course, of course,” said the guard. The door closed again. He doesn’t seem very sure about things, Lina thought. Maybe he’s new at his job.

The Reception Room was shabby, but Lina could tell that it had once been impressive. The walls were dark red, with brownish patches where the paint was peeling away. In the right-hand wall was a closed door. An ugly brown carpet lay on the floor, and on it stood a large armchair covered in itchy-looking red material, and several smaller chairs. A small table held a teapot and some cups, and a larger table in the middle of the room displayed a copy of *The Book of the City of Ember*, lying open as if someone were going to read from it. Portraits of all the mayors of the city since the beginning of time hung on the walls, staring solemnly from behind pieces of old window glass.

Lina sat in the big armchair and waited. No one came. She got up and wandered around the room. She bent over *The Book of the City of Ember* and read a few sentences: “The citizens of Ember may not have luxuries, but the foresight of the Builders, who filled the storerooms at the beginning of time, has ensured that they will always have enough, and enough is all that a person of wisdom needs.”

She flipped a few pages. “The Gathering Hall clock,” she read, “measures the hours of night and day. It must never be allowed to run down. Without it, how would we know when to go to work and when to go to school? How would the light director know when to turn the lights on and when to turn them off again? It is the job of the timekeeper to wind the clock every week and to place the date sign in Harken Square every day. The timekeeper must perform these duties faithfully.”

Lina knew that not all timekeepers were as faithful as they should be. She’d heard of one, some years ago, who often forgot to change the date sign, so that it might say, “Wednesday, Week 38, Year 227” for several days in a row. There had even been timekeepers who forgot to wind the clock, so that it might stand at noon or at midnight for hours at a time, causing a very long day or a very long night. The result was that no one really knew anymore exactly what day of the week it was, or exactly how many years it had been since the building of the city—they called this the year 241, but it might have been 245 or 239 or 250. As long as the clock’s deep boom rang out every hour, and the lights went on and off more or less regularly, it didn’t seem to matter.

Lina left the book and examined the pictures of the mayors. The seventh mayor, Podd Morethwart, was her greatgreat— she didn’t know how many greats —grandfather. He looked quite dreary, Lina thought. His cheeks were long and hollow, his mouth turned down at the corners, and there was a lost look in his eyes. The picture she liked best was of the fourth mayor, Jane Larket, who had a serene smile and fuzzy black hair.

Still no one came. She heard no sounds from the hallway. Maybe they’d forgotten her.

Lina went over to the closed door in the right-hand wall. She pulled it open and saw stairs going up. Maybe, while she waited, she’d just see where they went. She started upward. At the top of the first flight was a closed door. Carefully, she opened it. She saw

another hallway and more closed doors. She shut the door and kept going. Her footsteps sounded loud on the wood, and she was afraid someone would hear her and come and scold her. No doubt she was not supposed to be here. But no one came, and she climbed on, passing another closed door.

The Gathering Hall was the only building in Ember with three stories. She had always wanted to stand on its roof and look out at the city. Maybe from there it would be possible to see beyond the city, into the Unknown Regions. If the bright city of her drawings really did exist, it would be out there somewhere.

At the top of the stairs, she came to a door marked "Roof," and she pushed it open. Chilly air brushed against her skin. She was outside. Ahead of her was a flat gravel surface, and about ten paces away she could see the high wall of the clock tower.

She went to the edge of the roof. From there she could see the whole of Ember. Directly below was Harken Square, where people were moving this way and that, all of them appearing, from this topdown view, more round than tall. Beyond Harken Square, the lighted windows of the buildings made checkered lines, yellow and black, row after row, in all directions. She tried to see farther, across the Unknown Regions, but she couldn't. At the edges of the city, the lights were so far away that they made a kind of haze. She could see nothing beyond them but blackness.

She heard a shout from the square below. "Look!" came a small but piercing voice. "Someone on the roof!" She saw a few people stop and look up. "Who is it? What's she doing up there?" someone cried. More people gathered, until a crowd was standing on the steps of the Gathering Hall. They see me! Lina thought, and it made her laugh. She waved at the crowd and did a few steps from the Bugfoot Scurry Dance, which she'd learned on Cloving Square Dance Day, and they laughed and shouted some more.

Then the door behind her burst open, and a huge guard with a bushy black beard was suddenly running toward her. "Halt!" he shouted, though she wasn't going anywhere. He grabbed her by the arm. "What are you doing here?"

"I was just curious," said Lina, in her most innocent voice. "I wanted to see the city from the roof." She read the guard's name badge. It said, "Redge Stabmark, Chief Guard."

"Curiosity leads to trouble," said Redge Stabmark. He peered down at the crowd. "You have caused a commotion." He pulled her toward the door and hustled her down all three flights of stairs. When they came out into the waiting room, Barton Snode was standing there looking flustered, his jaw twitching from side to side. Next to him was the mayor.

"A child causing trouble, Mayor Cole," said the chief guard.

The mayor glared at her. "I recall your face. From Assignment Day. Shame! Disgracing yourself in your new job."

“I didn’t mean to cause trouble,” said Lina. “I was looking for you so I could deliver a message.”

“Shall we put her in the Prison Room for a day or two?” asked the chief guard.

The mayor frowned. He pondered a moment. “What is the message?” he said. He bent down so that Lina could speak into his ear. She noticed that he smelled a little like overcooked turnips.

“Delivery at eight,” Lina whispered. “From Looper.”

The mayor smiled a tight little smile. He turned to the guard. “Just a child’s antics,” he said. “We will let it go this time. From now on,” he said to Lina, “behave yourself.”

“Yes, Mr. Mayor,” said Lina.

“And you,” said the mayor, turning to the assistant guard and shaking a thick finger at him, “watch visitors much . . . more . . . carefully.”

Barton Snode blinked and nodded.

Lina ran for the door. Outside, the small crowd was still standing by the steps. A few of them cheered as Lina came out. Others frowned at her and muttered words like “mischief” and “silliness” and “show-off.” Lina felt embarrassed suddenly. She hadn’t meant to show off. She hurried past, out into Otterwill Street, and started to run.

She didn’t see Doon, who was among those watching her. He had been on his way home from his first day in the Pipeworks when he’d come across the cluster of people gazing up at the roof of the Gathering Hall and laughing. He was tired and chilly. The bottoms of his pants legs were wet, and mud clung to his shoes and smeared his hands. When he raised his eyes and saw the small figure next to the clock tower, he realized right away that it was Lina. He saw her raise her arm and wave and hop about, and for a second he wondered what it would be like to be up there, looking out over the whole city, laughing and waving. When Lina came down, he wanted to speak to her. But he knew he was filthy-looking and that she would ask him questions he didn’t want to answer. So he turned away. Walking fast, he headed for home.