

Gathering Blue



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LOIS LOWRY

Lois Lowry was born in Hawaii, the second of three children. Her father was an army dentist whose work led him to move his family around the country. In 1939, for instance, the family moved to Brooklyn, New York, and in 1942, when her father was deployed to the Pacific for World War II, the family moved to Pennsylvania. As a girl, Lowry spent two years in Japan, where she attended junior high school. She attended high school in New York, and at the age of 19, she married a military officer, Donald Lowry. During their early years together, the Lowries lived in California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Florida. It was only in the 1960s, when Donald settled into a career as a lawyer, that they settled in Maine. Here, Lowry raised four children while also completing a degree in English. At the age of 40, Lowry published her first book, *A Summer to Die*, a children's story inspired by Lowry's experience dealing with her older sister's death from cancer. The novel was a commercial success. It was also in this year that Lowry divorced her husband. Lowry continued to care for her children and write a large number of children's books throughout the 1980s and 90s. These included *Number the Stars* (1989) and *The Giver* (1993), both of which won her the Newbery Medal, the highest honor for children's literature. She followed *The Giver*, a dystopian fable, with three loosely connected sequels: *Gathering Blue* (2000), *Messenger* (2004), and *Son* (2012). It's been noted that Lowry's books for children address unusually adult subject matter. *Gathering Blue*, for instance, includes infanticide, murder, kidnapping, and cannibalism. Lowry continues to give large numbers of lectures and interviews.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It's both very easy and very hard to relate *Gathering Blue* to historical events. On one hand, it's a work of science fiction: there are very few specific allusions to history, since the world Lowry portrays isn't our own. On the other hand, the telling of history is crucial to the society in Lowry's book: the annual Gathering ceremony centers around the performance of a long Song of Ruin, a kind of oral history of the world, moving from the origins of a civilization to its decline, and then on to the birth of a new civilization. When Kira studies the Singer's robe, she sees buildings engulfed in fire. Lowry, whose father served in the military in World War II, may have been thinking of the great cities that were destroyed during the battles of the 1940s: Dresden, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Berlin, etc. In a similar vein, it's possible that Lowry was thinking of Fascist Germany when she wrote *Gathering Blue*: like Germany under Hitler, the

village exterminates those who are sick, deformed, or weak. (Lowry also wrote a children's novel about the Holocaust, *Number the Stars*).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Gathering Blue is a dystopia, meaning that it portrays an evil, unjust society. With this in mind, many elements of Lowry's fictional society, the village, appear in other famous dystopias. In *1984*, by George Orwell, for instance, the authoritarian Party controls society by closely monitoring all information, including artistic work, thereby ensuring that the only "vision of the future" is one that the Party approves of—nearly the same is true of the Council of Guardians in *Gathering Blue*. Another dystopia worth mentioning is Lowry's own *The Giver*, which describes a society that's corrupt in very different ways. One common trait of both societies, however, is their readiness to kill children they perceive to be unhealthy or weak. Finally, *Gathering Blue* is a coming-of-age novel, and borrows many tropes of this genre, the *Bildungsroman*: the orphaned protagonist, the false father figure, the second, "true" father, the conflict between creativity and society, etc. While there are hundreds of important novels that fit the pattern of the *Bildungsroman*, arguably the first is Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Gathering Blue*
- **Where Written:** Portland, Maine
- **When Published:** October, 2000
- **Literary Period:** The "Young Adult Renaissance" of the 90s and 2000s.
- **Genre:** Science-fiction / Fantasy
- **Setting:** A village in the future, after some apocalyptic event
- **Climax:** The return of Christopher, Kira's father
- **Antagonist:** Jamison, the Council of Guardians
- **Point of View:** Third person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Nice going, Hollywood: Lois Lowry's most famous book is *The Giver*. In 2014, the inevitable happened: Hollywood announced that it was adapting the book for the big screen. Lowry was largely uninvolved in the film's production, but she was rumored to have told the film's director, "Don't turn this into another teenage romance." Ultimately, the film was widely criticized for featuring a tedious subplot about a teenage romance. They should have listened.

Top honors: Though Lowry hasn't published a book since 2012, she's continued to receive many prestigious awards and honors. In 2014, she was awarded an honorary degree from Brown University in recognition of her impressive achievements as a writer.



PLOT SUMMARY

The novel begins with the death of Katrina, the mother of a girl named Kira. Kira lives in a village where the sick and weak are dragged off to die in the Field of the Living; after they die, someone is required to watch the spirit leave the dead body for the next four days. Katrina dies in her cott, or cottage, where she lived with Kira. Kira drags her dead mother to the Field and spends four days watching her spirit leave. Kira has a lame leg; when she was born, the villagers wanted to leave her in the Field to die, but Katrina insisted that she keep Kira, because she recognizes that her daughter is bright and good with her hands. Kira's father, Christopher, was supposed to serve on the Council of Guardians, the group that controls the village, but wild beasts killed him in a hunting accident before Kira was born.

When she returns from the Field, Kira meets her friend Matt, a young, rambunctious child who lives in the Fen, a nearby area where the people are poorer and dirtier. Matt tells Kira that Vandara, a fearsome woman, wants to take the site of Kira's cott and use it to build a pen for young children, known as "tykes." When Kira returns to her cott, the women of the village, led by Vandara, confront her, carrying rocks and stones. Kira saves her own life by reminding them that the penalty for taking a life without the Council's approval is death. Vandara drops her rock, but tells Kira that she will bring her to court tomorrow. Kira wonders how she can convince the Council to let her stay in the village. She can't do much work, due to her lame leg, but she is an excellent weaver.

The next day, a messenger summons Kira to the Council Edifice, where the Council of Elders holds a trial for Kira and Vandara. Kira has been to the Edifice before for the Gathering, an annual ceremony that every villager must attend. During the Gathering, the Singer sings a long **Ruin Song**, about the rise and fall of all the civilizations in history. At the trial, Vandara accuses Kira of being lazy and incapable of doing any work, and argues that she should be left to die in the Field of the Living. The chief guardian of the Council appoints Jamison, one of the younger guardians, to defend Kira. Jamison argues that Kira should be allowed to stay, both because she is the granddaughter of a former chief guardian and because she is an accomplished weaver. As Kira listens to Jamison, she clutches a **cloth** that she carries with her wherever she goes. Kira carries the cloth both because it reminds her that she is an excellent weaver and because it sometimes seems to speak to her—now, for instance, the cloth tells her that she need not worry.

The Council decides that Kira will be taken to live in the Council Edifice and work as a weaver, a decision that infuriates Vandara. With Matt's help, Kira gathers her remaining possessions from her cott and moves into the Council Edifice. Matt brings her a pendant that belonged to her mother; Kira decides to wear it. In the Edifice, she meets a boy, Thomas the Carver, who carves the Singer's **staff**. Kira will repair the Singer's **robe**. Thomas explains that Kira can do whatever she likes, provided that she completes her work. At first, Kira dislikes her new home, since its running water and indoor plumbing are new to her, but gradually she comes to feel comfortable in the Edifice.

In order to master the art of weaving completely, Kira will go to the cott of an old woman named Annabella, who also taught Katrina how to weave. With Matt, Kira goes to Annabella's house, where she begins to learn the names of the plants that can be used to dye threads. Annabella tells Kira that plants that produce the color **blue** can be found "yonder." Although the Council forbids women to learn how to read, Thomas helps Kira by writing down the names of the plants and their corresponding colors, and reading this information to Kira whenever she needs it. He also mentions that he's heard a child crying in the night, though neither he nor Kira know what to make of this.

Kira studies the robe, and sees that it depicts an endless pattern of peace and destruction. Cities flourish, but then collapse in flames. She prefers the peaceful sections, woven in green and gold, to the violent sections, mostly woven in red and orange. She also wants to add blue to the robe, and wonders where she can find it.

Thomas and Kira work on their projects, eating lunch together and gradually becoming friends. Thomas is also an orphan. His parents died mysteriously when he was a child, and he was taken to live in the Edifice. Like Kira, Thomas keeps a small object he made as a tyke: a beautiful wooden **carving**. Much like Kira's cloth, Thomas's carving tells him if he should expect danger or peace. Unlike Kira, however, Thomas views his carving as a symbol of knowledge and creativity that he's long since lost—Kira, by contrast, feels that her creativity and knowledge of weaving is still growing.

On one of her visits to Annabella's cott, Annabella tells Kira that there actually aren't any wild beasts. Shortly thereafter, Kira and Thomas hear a child crying again; they decide to investigate where the noise is coming from, enlisting Matt and his dog, Branch, for help. On a lower floor of the Edifice, the four of them hear Jamison talking to a small child in an angry tone. Matt says that he recognizes the child, Jo, from the Fen—Jo is a highly gifted singer who mysteriously vanished. Shortly after this, Kira tells Jamison that Annabella told her there were no beasts; Jamison insists that Annabella is losing her wisdom. The next day, Kira learns that Annabella has died. She begins to grow suspicious of Jamison.

Kira returns to the floor where she heard Jamison scold Jo. From behind a door, she talks to Jo and learns that Jo is being held in the Edifice against her will. When Kira explains this to Thomas, he's initially dismissive, but gradually, they both come to realize that the Council has taken them from their homes and forced them to use their artistic abilities for the Gathering. Thomas and Kira visit Jo, and Thomas uses a special key he carved to open Jo's door. Kira comforts Jo, and shows her how to tap on the ceiling if she's in any danger, thereby alerting Kira and Thomas. Kira also discovers that Matt has gone on a quest; when she and Thomas visit the Fen, they learn from Matt's brother that he's gone in search of blue for Kira.

As the Gathering approaches, Jamison praises Kira for the repairs she's made to the Singer's robe. He shows her a blank area on the robe, and tells her that she will weave "the future" into this area, according to the Council's supervision.

On the day of the Gathering, all the villagers enter the hall of the Council Edifice. Kira, Thomas, and Jo sit in special chairs. The Singer, wearing the robe Kira has repaired and holding the staff Thomas has been carving, begins to sing the lengthy Ruin Song. As he sings, Kira notices Matt crawling among the villagers. She also hears a metallic "clank," and sees something about the Singer that shocks her.

After the end of the Gathering, Kira reunites with Matt, who tells her that he's brought her two gifts: one little, one big. The little gift is a small blue cloth, and the big gift turns out to be a blind, scarred man, wearing a blue shirt. The man reveals a pendant that matches the one Kira's mother wore, and explains that he is Christopher, Kira's father. During one hunt, Christopher explains, a rival clubbed Christopher in the head (making him permanently blind), stabbed him, and left him to die in the Field of the Living. A mysterious group of people carried Christopher away from the Field, took him to a new community, and nursed him back to health. In this new community, Christopher explains, almost everyone is disabled or wounded in some way; as a result, everyone is kind and gentle. Christopher decided not to return to his village because he assumed that his life would still be in danger. However, when Matt found him, he quickly deduced that Matt's friend, a weaver, must be Christopher's own daughter. Kira assures Christopher that his life is safe, since she has a friend, Jamison, on the Council of Guardians. Christopher reveals that it was Jamison who tried to kill him.

Christopher makes plans to take Kira back to the new community he's joined, and then goes with Matt to rest in a safe place. That night, Kira remembers what she saw at the Gathering: a heavy **chain** around the Singer's leg. Kira realizes that she is a prisoner of the Council: the Council has kidnapped three artists—Kira, Jo, and Thomas—and killed the artists' parents, so that they can put the artists to work. By controlling what Kira, Jo, and Thomas create, the guardians effectively control the future: they control how villagers see the rest of the

world, and thus how the villagers behave.

At dawn, Christopher arrives at the Council Edifice, prepared to leave with Kira. Kira tells him that she can't go with him—she must stay and weave the robe according to her own creative vision, instead of the Council's. Christopher is surprised, but accepts her decision, and says that Matt will lead him back instead. Before he leaves, he gives Kira woad, the plant that produces the color blue, and a handful of blue threads he pulled from his shirt. Kira returns to the Edifice, prepared to weave blue into the robe and certain that the future is in her hands.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Kira – The young protagonist of *Gathering Blue*, Kira is a girl with a lame leg, who is probably around twelve years old and who excels at weaving. Throughout the novel, she's forced to fight to defend two strong instincts that, it often seems, no one else shares: creativity and compassion. When she lives in the village, Kira longs for the time and resources to exercise her creativity through weaving, but few people acknowledge that her fabrics and designs have any value. Kira is also horrified at the way the villagers hurt each other, both physically and mentally. When her mother, Katrina, dies and the Council of Elders brings Kira into the Edifice, she thinks that she's found a solution to both of her problems: the Council both encourages her artistry—putting her to work repairing the Singer's **robe**—and treats her and her friends well. In the end, however, Kira comes to see that the Council is secretly cruel and controlling, and that it uses its power to *control* creativity to sway its people's beliefs toward its own ends. Eventually, Kira reunites with her father, Christopher, who Kira had believed was dead. Rather than leave the village with Christopher, though, Kira proves her bravery and maturity by choosing to remain in the Council's control while secretly using her creativity to undermine the Council's power.

Matt – A young, rambunctious boy, probably around seven, who lives in the Fen near the village. Matt is a close friend of Kira's. Though he affects swagger and strength, two qualities that make him try to emulate the village's hunters, Matt is a sensitive, compassionate boy, as shown by the way he cares for Branch, his dog, after Branch is crushed under a cart—indeed, aside from Kira, Matt is the most compassionate and sensitive character in the novel. At many points, Matt struggles between the influence of Kira, who encourages him to be polite and kind, and the influence of the villagers, who encourage him to be wild and violent. Ultimately, he seems to side with Kira: he comes to understand the idea of a gift, which Kira has been struggling to teach him, and agrees to escort Christopher back to his community, suggesting that Matt himself will be surrounded by

kind, caring people.

Christopher – Katrina’s husband and Kira’s father. Kira believes Christopher to be dead until the last chapters of the book. In the village, Christopher was an excellent hunter and a charismatic leader, and he was supposed to join the Council of Guardians before Jamison stabbed him in the back and left him to die. Instead of succumbing to his wounds, Christopher found himself among a community of kind, compassionate people, all of whom had injuries or deformities of some kind—Christopher himself lost his eyesight after he was stabbed. Christopher cares deeply for his wife and daughter. Nevertheless, he understands when Kira explains that she must stay behind in the village instead of going with him to his new community.

Thomas the Carver – Kira’s friend, and another orphaned artist who works for the Council of Guardians, Thomas is a talented wood carver who spends his days repairing the Singer’s **staff**. Like Kira, Thomas is a compassionate person, though on many occasions, especially around Matt and Jo, his compassion seems far weaker than Kira’s, perhaps because he’s lived in the Council Edifice for longer. Also like Kira, Thomas derives much inspiration from a symbol of his artistic freedom—in his case, a **carving** he made as a child. Unlike Kira, however, Thomas feels like his long time in service to the Council has cost him the natural talent he had as a child. While he’s more reluctant to disobey the Council than Kira, Thomas agrees to help her take care of Matt, Jo, and Christopher.

Jamison – The Council Guardian responsible for defending Kira in her suit with Vandara, Jamison appears to be a kind, respectful father figure giving Kira both safety and attention. As the novel progresses, though, it becomes clear to Kira that Jamison is a tyrannical, overbearing, violent man who only cares about Kira’s ability to weave the Singer’s **robe** and, by extension, help the Council to shift the outlook of the villagers in the way it desires. Eventually, it’s revealed that Jamison was the man who stabbed Christopher in the back.

The Singer – An artist whose sole responsibility is to sing the day-long **Ruin Song** before the entire village at the annual Gathering. The Singer is highly respected in the village, though he lives a hard life, studying the Ruin Song throughout the year. As Kira discovers, the Singer is literally a prisoner of the Council of Guardians: he wears a heavy **chain** on his leg, and leaves a trail of blood wherever he walks. He wears a robe (repaired by Kira) and carries a staff (carved by Thomas), both of which represent the Ruin Song in pictorial form.

Vandara – A strong, cruel, petty, and possibly murderous woman who tries to have Kira dragged into the Field of the Living after Katrina dies. Vandara is an intimidating woman, and many of the other women in the village take their cues from her. She has a large scar on her face, which she claims she sustained in a fight with a wild beast, though it’s later revealed that she got it after slipping on sharp rocks.

Annabella – An old woman who lives in the forest and teaches both Katrina and Kira the arts of weaving. Annabella is immensely old, and thus respected for her wisdom. Like Kira, she is kind to others, even those like Matt who are often perceived as obnoxious. She is the first to tell Kira that there are no beasts surrounding their village. She dies mysteriously soon after telling Kira this.

Jo – A young girl who is an excellent signer and who was abducted by the Council of Guardians and forced to live in the Edifice, studying music. Jo will become the future singer when the current Singer dies. When Kira discovers Jo’s presence in the Council Edifice and begins to take care of her, Jo comes to regard Kira as a mother figure.

Chief guardian – An old, powerful man who, as the head of the Council, organizes the village’s annual Gathering and presides over trials, including Kira’s. The chief guardian seems to believe that women have no rights—at the end of Kira’s trial he tells Vandara as much—but he also recognizes and wishes to control the power of art, and thus appoints Kira to weave the Gathering **robe**. While we are never certain of the chief guardian’s name, Kira thinks that it might be Bartholomew—something with four syllables, indicating his age and supposed wisdom.

Katrina’s brother – Kira’s “uncle” (though the village doesn’t use this term) is a callous, unfeeling man who drags his wife, Solora, to the Field of the Living after she dies in childbirth. He’s shown to have no sympathy for Kira, though his lack of sympathy is a product of the village’s general lack of compassion, not of any specific animosity.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Katrina – Kira’s loving mother, who dies of sickness shortly before the novel begins. Katrina is an accomplished weaver, though Kira’s abilities quickly eclipse hers. She’s also a warm and compassionate woman who saves her daughter from infanticide, even though it’s customary in the village to kill all deformed babies.

Helena – A villager whose daughter dies around the same time that Katrina succumbs to sickness.

Dan – The son of Katrina’s brother, and thus, Kira’s cousin (though the village doesn’t think in such terms).

Solora – The wife of Kira’s mother’s brother—in other words, Kira’s aunt. Solora dies in childbirth around the time when the novel begins.

Mar – The daughter of Katrina’s brother, and thus, Kira’s cousin (though the village doesn’t think in such terms).

Branch – Matt’s dog, usually very inquisitive and energetic.

Marlena – A woman who works at the weaving shed.

Camilla – A woman who works at the weaving shed and is later

dragged to the Field of the Living to die after she breaks her arms in an accident and can no longer work.

Matthew – A carpenter and friend of Katrina’s.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



ART AND CREATIVE INSTINCT

Gathering Blue is set in a town that, long after a worldwide catastrophe called the Ruin, is primarily characterized by the struggle to survive. It is a world without art, a world in which the villagers see art as lacking any practical purpose, and therefore as being useless. The novel focuses, though, on three young artists: Kira, who excels at weaving, Thomas, who excels at carving wood, and Jo, who excels at singing. Through the experiences of these artists in a village without art, the novel comments on art and the creative instinct, as well as the way that art can be abused by the powerful and the requirements and responsibilities of art.

In the novel, the “creative gift” is presented as almost mystical, something that no one—including the artists themselves—fully understands. Kira’s develops her talent for weaving in part by practicing with her mother, Katrina, but for the most part her abilities require no education at all: she’s born with them. Similarly, Thomas becomes a great wood carver without anyone to help him, and Jo learns to sing without any training whatsoever. Further, at times the artists’ creativity gives them an almost magical power to see the future. We see this most clearly in Kira, who senses whether there is danger, or whether something important is going to happen, whenever she touches the **cloth** she wove as a child. In this way the novel seems to suggest that artists are in tune with the world and are able to represent and understand that world in profound and powerful ways.

While the origin of artistic talent is presented as mysterious, the government of the village—the Council of Guardians—shows itself to be very adept at *using* art. The Council takes the three artists of the village from their uncomfortable circumstances and gives them comfortable lives in the Council Edifice. But the Council also gives them very specific, very controlled jobs for their art: to embroider the **robe**, carve the **staff**, and sing the **Ruin Song** that are the centerpieces of the village’s annual Gathering. And further, the song and artifacts perform a very specific purpose at the Gathering: they describe the history of the world in such a way as to show an endless cycle of growth and decay that will teach

the villagers that, since “Ruin” is inevitable and no real progress can be made, it’s every man for himself. Put another way: the Council uses the artists it controls to produce art that influences the people it rules to act in a way that benefits the government. There is a name for art used in this sort of political way — propaganda.

As the novel progresses, Kira and the other artists come to be unsatisfied with the “art” that they are being asked to produce. Part of this dissatisfaction comes from the fact that there is no actual creativity to their art: they are told what to do. Even when Kira is given the opportunity to design the undecorated part of the robe, it’s clear that the Council is going to tell her what to weave. But such “controlled” art is also unsatisfying because it makes the art worse. Both Kira and Thomas come to feel that they have lost touch with their innate creativity when they are working for the Council. Thomas comments that the **carving** he made as a child was far more creative than anything he’s done for the Council.

Ultimately, Kira decides to take control of her art, and to weave the undecorated part of the robe according to her own creative instincts, not the orders of the Council. Kira realizes that art is powerful, but recognizes that it is most powerful when controlled by the artist herself, and when she decides to stay in the village rather than leave with her father she embraces the fact that through art an artist can share their own vision with the world and create change.



SELF-INTEREST VERSUS COMPASSION

The people of the town in which Kira lives are marked by their anger, greed, and profound self-interest. Healthy villagers dispassionately drag the sick, dying, and deformed to die in the Field of the Living—it doesn’t matter if the sick are the villagers’ own family or friends. The villagers do this because resources are so scarce in the town that they are afraid that it costs too much time and food to nurse the sick back to health. The implication is that the villagers’ behavior is a product of their environment: they can’t afford to have feelings for the sick, because caring for them would cause other people to go hungry.

This idea that behavior is a product of one’s environment is supported also by characters that do act compassionately. Kira freely admits that she’s kind and nurturing because she was born with a lame leg—if she’d been born healthy, she’d be no kinder than the other villagers. Even the village of “the wounded” that Matt discovers later in the book as he searches for a plant that can aid Kira in producing a **blue** dye is compassionate because it has to be: compassion and generosity are qualities that help the disabled people who live there survive.

And yet as the novel continues, particularly after Kira’s father, Christopher, returns to the town and reveals the secrets of the

Council of Guardians and Jamison's selfish actions in particular, it becomes clear that the behavior of the townspeople is actually by design. The Council of Guardians has designed its story of history, with its cyclical rise and falls and lack of any real change of progress, precisely to create in the townspeople the sense that it makes no sense to act in any way other than selfishly. Such selfishness ensures the continued power of the Council, as it eliminates the possibility of the townspeople ever working together to try to create something better than they have.

Similarly, a few characters in the novel show signs of innate compassion without any practical, environmental motives. Matt frees his dog, Branch, from underneath a cart, and nurses it back to health, and Kira's mother, Katrina, saves Kira from infanticide when Kira is a baby. Taken together, these examples suggest some people—and maybe all people—have the innate desire to love and care for others. The idea that people can be taught to access their innate feelings of compassion is a key part of Kira's decision to stay behind at the end of the novel. Kira wants to undermine the Council of Guardians by teaching her village "blue," which has been a symbol of love and compassion throughout the novel. Thus, Kira will use her skills as a weaver to weave blue threads into the **robe** and, it's suggested, teach the villagers to act out of love and compassion.

Gathering Blue ends on a note of cautious optimism. It will be difficult for Kira to educate the stubborn, selfish village in compassionate behavior, but her experiences in the novel have convinced her that it's possible to do so, and therefore worth trying.



POWER AND FREEDOM

It's clear from early on in *Gathering Blue* that the Council of Guardians wields a huge amount of power over the village. It presides over all trials,

hosts the annual Gathering, and can expel anyone in the village at any time. What's unclear, at least until the end of the novel, is the source of the Council's great power. At any time, it would seem, the villagers could rise up and overthrow the Council—in fact, this seems like exactly the kind of wild, violent gesture the villagers specialize in.

Throughout the book, the Council of Guardians uses psychology and manipulation to stay in power. By holding an annual Gathering, which every villager must attend, the Council subtly persuades the villagers to abide by their rule. The **Ruin Song** that's performed every year at the Gathering tells the story of the great civilizations of the past, with their tall buildings and powerful armies. By residing in the huge, imposing Council Edifice, and hosting the Gathering in the Edifice, the Council steals some of the respect the villagers feel for the civilizations of the past. In a different way, the Council

encourages the villagers to accept their place in life. The Ruin Song describes how all civilizations inevitably die out, to be replaced by other civilizations. The pessimism of this song is so great that it teaches the villagers, from the time that they're children, to view their lives pessimistically, believe that no real change is possible, and therefore accept that's it every man for himself. With no alliances or friendships, the villagers are too weak to rise up against the Council.

Another way the Council wages psychological war on the villagers is by spreading the myth of wild beasts. The villagers are told to be afraid of the wild beasts that surround the village. Partly because they're afraid of beasts, they don't help one another—in dangerous times, it's every man for himself. The Council clearly profits from the villager's fear and confusion. Indeed, when the Council learns that people don't believe in beasts, it has them killed.

It's clear the Council stays in power by "persuading" the villagers to accept their rule—in essence, by frightening or intimidating them into submission. The Council controls people's freedom by controlling what they think, not what they do. A good example of this is Kira. Though she's summoned to live in the Council Edifice, she can—and often does—leave at any time. Yet she always returns—in part because she likes the life the Council provides her, but also because the Council has intimidated her into thinking that she must respect their wishes and continue working on the **robe**.

Nevertheless, it's possible to achieve freedom simply by recognizing the source of power. At the end of the novel, Kira understands how the Council uses the Ruin Song and her robe to control the village. Yet she doesn't leave the village with her father; instead, she stays behind to alter the robe's message. Seemingly, Kira is as much of a slave as she was before—she's still working for the Council, after all. Yet Kira has gained freedom for herself—she's not intimidated by the Council anymore, and she'll work as a "secret agent," dismantling the Council's power from the inside. Because power consists of mental control as much as physical control, Lowry concludes, there is freedom simply in taking control of one's mind.



PAIN AND MATURITY

It's been noted that the characters in Lowry's children's books endure an unusual amount of pain and suffering. *Gathering Blue* is no exception: that

Kira loses her mother isn't so remarkable (there are plenty of protagonists of children's books who are orphans, after all), but she has to drag her mother to a field and watch her corpse for four gruesome days. It's fair to say that Lowry seeks to explore the impact of pain: what people do with it, how they respond to it, and how they learn from it.

Kira is hardly unique in her village—all the villagers have to deal with pain and suffering. Many of the adults lose their husbands

or wives to sickness, and others are injured while hunting. When a villager endures a huge amount of pain—an injury or disease, for example—the other villagers drag him to the Field of the Living to succumb to his pain and die. When the pain is of a milder sort—for instance, when a child annoys its mother—the pain is immediately returned upon the person who causes it—the mother beats her child. In the former case, pain is ignored, swept under the rug; there is no point in trying to minimize another’s pain, the villagers believe. In the latter case, the pain is reproduced in the short term (the child is beaten) and perpetuated in the long term (presumably the child grows up to beat its own children).

At the core of the way the villagers deal with pain is a deep pessimism about the world: pain cannot be fought; it can only be ignored or passed on to someone else. This pessimism mirrors exactly the pessimism of the **Ruin Song**, which teaches the village that Ruin cannot be fought; it can only be accepted as an inevitability.

The similarity between the pessimism of the villagers and the pessimism of the Ruin Song suggests that part of the role of art is to teach humans how to deal with pain. Thus, it’s no coincidence that Kira, an artist, learns how to live with pain by transforming it into something new. Kira’s mother teaches her that pain can make her stronger. We see many examples of this in the novel. When she first arrives in the hall of the Council Edifice, Kira is frightened and nervous. Yet the very nervousness and fear she feels teaches her to be calmer and more confident in the future. Thus, when she returns to the hall for the Gathering, she’s not afraid at all, and even notes how much more mature she’s grown. Similarly, Kira insists on making the difficult journey to Annabella’s house, even though it’s exhausting for her to walk with a lame leg. Her perseverance makes her stronger, and makes it easier for her to travel freely. In both cases, pain is a crucial part of growing up. By going through a painful experience, Kira teaches herself to deal with that experience, so that when she encounters it in the future, it causes her less pain.

Transforming pain into experience is an almost artistic process: it requires Kira to see beauty and value in ugly things, thereby shaping them into something beautiful and valuable. Although Kira’s ability to transform pain into experience is closely tied to her abilities as an artist, Lowry makes a much more general point: maturation is only possible with pain. Thus, children become adults by experiencing pain and learning how to deal with it.



MEN, WOMEN, AND GENDER ROLES

At many points, Kira notes that her society is strictly divided along gender lines. Women can only perform certain jobs and go certain places. Many of them work by gathering food for the village, and others spend their time weaving. Men, on the other hand, hunt for food for

the village. On the day of a hunt, they brag and argue and fight with each other. This isn’t a case of “separate but equal”; clearly the men have more power and freedom than the women of the village. We can see this when Vandara and Kira go to court before the Council of Guardians. There seem to be no women on the Council (whereas there are at least three men on it, including the chief guardian), and Vandara learns from the chief guardian that she has no rights, presumably because she’s a woman. It’s also mentioned many times that women aren’t allowed to learn how to read.

For the most part, Lowry doesn’t suggest that there are any innate behavioral differences between the sexes. (On the few occasions when she does suggest this, she’s being humorous—for instance, in the scene where Kira gets irritated at Thomas for being too interested in the construction work, and thinks that all men are the same). Men and women aren’t born wanting to hunt or weave, respectively—the village *teaches* them to want to do these things. Matt’s behavior in the second half of *Gathering Blue* suggests how the village tells men and women how to behave. Matt is a wild, rambunctious boy who, like most of his peers, wants to be a hunter. At one point, he finds himself a spear and joins the men as they prepare to hunt, observing and imitating all the typical behavior of men: fighting, bragging, etc. It’s only because Kira and Thomas stop him that he doesn’t participate in the hunt. Later, Matt shows that he’s moved past the desire to hunt and fight. He brings Kira a gift—a **blue** cloth—and volunteers to take Kira’s father, Christopher, back to his home.

For the most part, masculinity as it’s practiced in the village is a case of “monkey see, monkey do”—boys learn how to be men by imitating men. Nothing says that boys must grow up to be hunters and fighters—with the right guidance and education, their character can be more compassionate and mature. Perhaps the best way to fight gender roles while remaining in the village is to become an artist. As a weaver for the Council of Guardians, Kira has much more contact with men—Jamison, Thomas—than she has previously. Moreover, her contribution to the Gathering, the **robe**, isn’t seen as inferior to Thomas’s contribution, the **staff**. The only criterion for art is its quality—the gender of the artist doesn’t matter.

In the village of *Gathering Blue*, men are arrogant, violent, and controlling, while women are weaker and less educated. With education and art, this unfair, arbitrary arrangement can be changed. It’s worth remembering that Lowry herself didn’t begin her career as a writer until the age of 40, after she’d raised four children and completed a college degree and a Master’s degree—she can testify firsthand to the importance of art and education for women.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BLUE

As Kira becomes more familiar with the art of weaving, she comes to understand that different colors correspond to different emotions, and, conversely, that some feelings have a particular “color.” (This way of looking at color is called *synesthesia*). Yellow and orange are angry, hot colors (mostly because of their association with fire), while green and yellow are more peaceful (on the **robe**, they indicate eras of calm and happiness). Blue is almost entirely missing from the robe. Because the robe is an explicit symbol of the society of the village, this would suggest that blue symbolizes an emotion that is particularly lacking among the guardians and the villagers. This is exactly what Lowry intends: blue symbolizes love and compassion. Lowry implies this in various ways. Kira’s mother, Katrina, who’s one of the few compassionate people in the village, dies of sickness. While she’s alive, she sings a song about how blue never lasts. When Matt returns from Christopher’s new home, he says that the new community has blue everywhere, and makes it clear that this community’s most noticeable quality is the compassion of its citizens for one another. Thus, when Kira decides to stay in her village and decorate the robe with blue thread, she aims to pass on love and compassion from a community that has both emotions in abundance to one that barely knows them.



KIRA'S CLOTH / THOMAS'S CARVING

The artists in *Gathering Blue* have special objects—a cloth, a carving—that seem to communicate with their owners and let them see, or at least sense, the future. For Kira, and especially for Thomas, these objects remind their owners of a time when they were at their most creative—before the Council of Guardians took them in and controlled their art by ordering them to work on art for the Gathering. Lowry, a highly experienced writer at this point in her career, may see the cloth and carving as symbols of artistic inspiration and creativity. Artistic inspiration, or the *daemon*, as some writers have called it, is a strange thing: many great writers have reported that their *daemons* seem to know the right words or images before the artists themselves do. It’s as if there is a part of the artist’s brain that can predict the future. In many cases, the rules of society limit artistic creativity: we see this very clearly with Thomas, and later Kira—indeed, Thomas was more creative as a small child than he is as an “employee” of the guardians. The cloth and carving, then, externalize what all great artists (including Lowry) say they have: a voice in their

head that tells them how to create and is always fighting to be heard.



THE ROBE, STAFF, AND RUIN SONG

The Singer’s robe, staff, and Ruin Song are three different versions of the same thing: a story of the endless, inevitable rise and fall of history. Civilizations begin, grow, decay, and eventually die out, often in a fiery blaze, to be followed by a new, fresh civilization. The Song shows this with words, the robe shows it in weaving, and the staff shows it in wood. As Kira learns, the Council of Guardians believes that it is in its own best interest to control this version of history: to make sure that everyone knows it, and to make sure that when Thomas and Kira tell the future of civilization by carving the staff and embroidering the robe, their vision of the future depicts the Council in a flattering light. By the end of the book, it’s clear why the Council is so invested in teaching their version of history to the village: doing so encourages the villagers to believe that death and decay are inevitable, and therefore that everyone should accept their place in life and obey the Council. Kira decides to undermine the Council’s plan by weaving a version of the robe that includes **blue**, and will teach compassion and love to the villagers. Thus, the robe, staff, and Ruin Song show the power of art: a power that can be dangerous in the hands of a corrupt government, but liberating in the hands of individual artists working toward their own vision.



THE SINGER'S CHAIN

Kira notices that the Singer of the **Ruin Song** wears a heavy chain that restricts his movements and causes him to leave a trail of blood wherever he walks. When Kira sees this, she realizes that she is no better off than the Singer. In spite of her pampered lifestyle, she’s imprisoned in the Council Edifice, forced to create art—in her case, a **robe**—that doesn’t reflect what she feels or believes. It’s important to note that even after she realizes this, Kira agrees to remain in the Edifice, working on her own, secret version of the robe. Unlikely as it sounds, perhaps it’s possible to fight the Council—and any tyrannical system—while still appearing to be a slave to that system.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin edition of *Gathering Blue* published in 2012.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞☞ She felt a small shudder of fear. Fear was always a part of life for the people. Because of fear, they made shelter and found food and grew things. For the same reason, weapons were stored, waiting. There was fear of cold, of sickness and hunger. There was fear of beasts. And fear propelled her now as she stood, leaning on her stick. She looked down a last time at the lifeless body that had once contained her mother, and considered where to go.

Related Characters: Kira

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

As the quotation makes very clear, Kira lives in a society where the dominant emotion is fear. In the village where Kira has spent her entire life, the weak are dispassionately dragged to a field to die, and the dead aren't given a burial of any kind. In general, "survival of the fittest" seems to be the only rule. There's no mention of cooperation or collaboration between people--everyone seems to be looking out for him or herself, and no one else.

Although Kira seems to dislike the constant fear of her society, she has no choice but to be afraid herself. Kira is crippled (the passage mentions her "stick"), which means that she's in danger of being regarded as weak and useless. Even more keenly than other people in her village, then, Kira feels afraid of being left to die.

This horrifying rite--of watching her mother's body decay--is also an important step towards Kira growing up. As in many of Lowry's works, Kira as protagonist must suffer a lot of pain, but also be transformed by pain to become a mature young heroine.

☞☞ "Of course not. Your strong hands and wise head make up for the crippled leg. You are a sturdy and reliable helper in the weaving shed; all the women who work there say so. And one bent leg is of no importance when measured against your cleverness. The stories you tell to the tykes, the pictures you create with words -- and with thread! The threading you do! It is unlike any threading the people have ever seen. Far beyond anything I could do!"

Related Characters: Katrina (speaker), Kira

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 6-7

Explanation and Analysis

In this flashback, Kira remembers something her mother, Katrina, told her before her untimely death. Katrina, rather than criticize Kira for her physical weakness and crippled leg, praised her daughter for her intelligence and creativity. Most of all, Katrina encouraged Kira to weave thread--an activity for which Kira showed notable aptitude.

Katrina's behavior toward her daughter shows that in spite of the atmosphere of fear and competition in Kira's world, there *are* good, kind people who are willing to help others instead of fight with them. Katrina's gentle, encouraging treatment of her daughter might seem perfectly natural to readers, but Lowry makes it clear that in Kira's village, it's not the norm at all: even mothers usually don't treat their own children as kindly as Katrina does. The flashback is also important in that it shows us where Kira gets her aptitude for weaving--a talent that, in the harsh, competitive village, might appear "useless."

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞☞ Nodding in agreement, the women turned their backs on Kira and moved away, scolding and kicking at the small tykes by their sides. The sun was low in the sky now. They would attend to their evening tasks, preparing for the return of the village men, who would need food and fire and the wrapping of wounds. One woman was soon to give birth; perhaps that would happen tonight, and the others would attend her, muffling her cries and assessing the value of the infant. Others would be coupling tonight, creating new people, new hunters for the future of the village as the old ones died of wounds and illness and age.

Related Characters: Kira

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Lowry describes how the village works--in other words, how a community of harsh, ruthless people could possibly survive for more than one generation.

Many of the activities described in this quotation are brutal and callous. The women help each other give birth, but there's no sign that they show any love or affection for newborns--on the contrary, their job is to dispassionately

"assess" babies. And although the people of the community have sex, there seems to be little to no romance between them--the purpose of sex is to breed children, nothing else.

Yet as Lowry makes clear, the people of the village aren't *entirely* self-interested. Although the majority of the characters we've met so far seem selfish and small-minded, the people of the village recognize that it's important to work together for the good of their community as a whole. They dress the wounds of the hunters, so that everyone can have food to eat. Notably, it appears to be women who are most concerned with taking care of other people--even if they seem harsh, they're still gentler than their male counterparts.

☛ Kira had always had a clever way with her hands. When she was still a tyke, her mother had taught her to use a needle, to pull it through woven fabric and create a pattern with colored threads. But suddenly, recently, the skill had become more than simple cleverness. In one astounding burst of creativity, her ability had gone far beyond her mother's teaching. Now, without instruction or practice, without hesitancy, her fingers felt the way to twist and weave and stitch the special threads together to create designs rich and explosive with color. She did not understand how the knowledge had come to her. But it was there, in her fingertips, and now they trembled slightly with eagerness to start. If only she was allowed to stay.

Related Characters: Katrina, Kira

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 22-23

Explanation and Analysis

Here Lowry vividly describes the nature of Kira's creativity. Kira is a fantastic weaver: she instinctively knows how to manipulate thread to make beautiful, elaborate patterns. The key word here is "instinctive"--although Kira has had her fair share of training, thanks to Katrina, even she doesn't really know how she does it--her talent for weaving is like a magical power, beyond the limits of human comprehension.

It's interesting to note that Kira almost seems *more* concerned with continuing to weave than with continuing to live in the village at all; put another way, she only cares about her life insofar as she's allowed to continue pursuing her passion of weaving.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☛ "Take pride in your pain," her mother had always told her. "You are stronger than those who have none."

Related Characters: Katrina, Kira

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kira remembers an important lesson her mother taught her: take pride in pain.

Again and again, Lowry will show us how Kira uses her pain as a learning tool. Kira encounters sadness, pain, and fear during the course of the novel, but she never allows her emotions to paralyze her. Instead, she uses her pain to become more calm and confident in the future. In this scene, for example, Kira doesn't allow her fear of appearing before the village Council intimidate her--instead, she embraces her fear, and prepares to appear before the Council.

Kira's philosophy of pain is also important because it shows why the philosophy of the village, "survival of the fittest," is ultimately wrong. While the majority of the villagers think that people who have endured a great deal of pain have nothing more to contribute to society, Kira knows better: people who've survived their pain have the invaluable gifts of wisdom and knowledge.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☛ Now, secret in her hand, the cloth seemed to speak a silent, pulsing message to Kira. It told her there was danger still. But it told her also that she was to be saved.

Related Characters: Kira

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Kira clutches one of her prized possessions--a tiny piece of cloth. When Kira is feeling anxious or uncertain, she touches her cloth, and usually feels better. In this situation, Kira is preparing to listen to the Guardians' verdict about whether or not she'll be allowed to remain in the community.

Kira's cloth is an important symbol of the way her mind works. Unlike most of the people in the community, Kira is thoughtful and has an "inner life"--she has ambitions, sympathies, anxieties, etc. (It's hard to imagine Vandara, for example, thinking deep thoughts.) Kira's thoughtfulness and introspection seem closely tied to her talents as an artist. Many artists say that they have an "intuition" for creation--without knowing why, they're able to make artistic choices that lead them to create beautiful music, art, literature, etc. Kira's cloth, then, makes the artistic process something more literal and even fantastical. Kira doesn't know *why* her cloth is right, but she trusts it--in other words, Kira's cloth works in the same way as her creative intuition.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☛ Matt heard him and looked up toward Kira in dismay. "No. Me and Branch, we be going now," he said. Then with an expression of concern, he asked, "You don't be captive here, do you?" "No, she's not a captive," Jamison reassured Matt. "Why would you think that?"

Related Characters: Jamison, Matt (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Matt--Kira's young, boastful friend--visits Kira in her new home among the Guardians. Although Kira's home is beautiful and luxurious, Matt is suspicious that Kira is a prisoner, a suggestion that Jamison immediately rebuts.

Although Matt's comment seems childish and objectively wrong, there's actually something very perceptive about it. Matt seems to sense that Kira is now under the close control of the Guardians--although she has a nice home, and is even allowed to leave it when she wants, she's being forced to work for the Guardians, repairing the Singer's robe for the Ruin Ceremony. Matt's question foreshadows Kira's realization at the end of the novel: she really is a prisoner to the Guardians--year after year, she'll be forced to work for them to ensure that the all-important Ruin Ceremony goes off without a hitch. Kira lives in the nicest prison cell ever built--but she's still a prisoner.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛ "This is the entire story of our world. We must keep it intact. More than intact."

She saw that his hand had moved and was stroking the wide unadorned section of fabric, the section of the cloth that fell across the Singer's shoulders.

"The future will be told here," he said. "Our world depends upon the telling."

Related Characters: Jamison (speaker), Kira

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jamison shows Kira the robe that she'll be working on all year. The Robe is designed to depict the history of the world: an endless process in which civilizations rise out of nothing, become powerful, and then die out once again. Jamison tells Kira that she'll have the job of depicting the future of the world, embroidering a vision of the future on the Singer's Robe.

Although Kira doesn't yet realize how sinister Jamison's plan is, she recognizes that the Singer's Robe is a teaching tool for the entire community, and she also realizes that as a talented artist, she has a lot of power over the community. Every single person in the village attends the Ruin Ceremony--there, they study the Singer's Robe, staff, and song in order to learn about the world. Because the Ruin Ceremony is the villagers' only source of information about the broader external world, the content of the ceremony (what the Robe depicts, for example) is crucial--the villagers can be compelled to do or believe almost anything based on what they see at the ceremony.

Chapter 9 Quotes

☞ The Singer's robe contained only a few tiny spots of ancient blue, faded almost to white. After her supper, after the oil lamps had been lit, Kira examined it carefully. She lay her threads — the ones from her own small collection and the many others that Annabella had given to her — on the large table, knowing she would have to match the hues carefully in daylight before she began the repairs. It was then that she noticed — with relief because she would not know how to repair it; and with disappointment because the color of sky would have been such a beautiful addition to the pattern — that there was no real blue any more, only a hint that there once had been.

Related Characters: The Singer, Kira

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 97

Explanation and Analysis

In this symbolic scene, Kira studies the Singer's robe and realizes that it's almost entirely missing the color blue. Traditionally, the color blue has been associated with mercy, love, and intimacy. Thus, for the Singer's robe to be missing blue is a sign of a broader problem in the society that's based around the Ruin Ceremony: it's missing compassion. Based on everything we've seen in the village, Kira's world is cruel, brutish, and competitive; it's rare that one person will help another person out.

The passage also suggests that there *was* blue in the Singer's robe—in a symbolic sense, one could say that there used to be compassion in the world. From the reader's perspective, most of the behavior that goes on in Kira's world is barbaric, and her society seems dystopian. By craving the color blue (and the emotions that go with it), Kira seems to be yearning for contact with an earlier time, and also for contact with us, the readers.

☞ When he read the word hollyhock aloud with his finger on the word, she saw that it was long, with many lines like tall stems. She turned her eyes away quickly so that she would not learn it, would not be guilty of something clearly forbidden to her. But it made her smile, to see it, to see how the pen formed the shapes and the shapes told a story of a name.

Related Characters: Kira (speaker), Thomas the Carver

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Kira watches as Thomas the Carver reads from a book. Kira, as a woman, hasn't been allowed to learn how to read—her community forbids women from educating themselves in any meaningful way. Although Kira can't understand the words she's looking at, she gets pleasure from the pictorial quality of the letters—the fact that certain words and letters *look* like the things they're describing.

The fact that Kira hasn't been allowed to learn how to read—something we weren't aware of until this moment—reinforces the repressive, sexist nature of her community. Women, because they're physically weaker, are considered less important than men—they can't hunt, so they're certainly not worth educating. And yet Kira's ability to partially grasp the meaning of language, even if she doesn't understand the specific words, shows that her intelligence and creativity are stronger than the restrictions the community has placed on her existence.

☞ "It's a lovely thing," he said, seeing the small cloth. Kira stroked it before she closed the lid. "It speaks to me somehow," she told him. "It seems almost to have life." She smiled, embarrassed, because she knew it was an odd thing and that he would not understand and could perhaps find her foolish. But Thomas nodded. "Yes," he said to her surprise. "I have a piece of wood that does the same. One I carved long ago, when I was just a tyke. "And sometimes I feel it in my fingers still, the knowledge that I had then." He turned to leave. That you had then? No more? The knowledge doesn't stay? Kira was dismayed at the thought but she said nothing to her friend.

Related Characters: Kira, Thomas the Carver (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Kira and Thomas compare their prized possessions—Kira has a cloth; Thomas has a piece of wood.

Both possessions seem to serve (or have served) a similar purpose: they inspire the owner's creativity, in a way that's impossible to put into words. Thomas and Kira know that their possessions help them think creatively and intuitively, yet they could never *teach* their creative process to someone else—it's a mystery even to them.

It's important to notice that Thomas is speaking about his piece of wood in the past tense: he once had a strong creative streak, but his time working for the Guardians has restricted this creativity. The passage foreshadows Kira's realization that the Guardians control artists by limiting their creativity: if Kira spends enough time with Guardians, then her cloth will stop speaking to her, too. The passage also suggests that young people in particular have a natural creative tendency, which often vanishes when they get older (although there are many exceptions, of course).

Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ Kira had not been much in the world of men. They led very separate lives from those of women. She had never envied them. Now, as she found herself jostled by their thick, sweat-smelling bodies, as she heard their muttered angry comments and their shouts, she found herself both frightened and annoyed. But she realized that this was hunt behavior, a time for flaunting and boasting, a time for testing each other. No wonder Matt, with his childish swagger, wanted to be part of it.

Related Characters: Kira

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 111-112

Explanation and Analysis

Kira lives in a society with rigorously enforced gender roles. Women are forced to care for children, gather fruits and berries, and weave; men, on the other hand, are sent out to hunt for food in the forest. As Kira witnesses a hunt for the first time in her life, she begins to see the problem with her community as a whole. Kira's village is led entirely by men: the all-male Guardians run the village's government, and men have the prestigious job of obtaining food. In the men themselves, this society encourages stereotypical "masculine" traits like aggressiveness, competition, and violence. Furthermore, the masculinity of Kira's community is so pervasive that it gets passed down from generation to generation: here, for instance, Kira that Matt is being trained to think of adulthood as a pattern of violent, argumentative behavior.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☝☝ Annabella laughed. "There be no beasts," she said.

Related Characters: Annabella (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Annabella tells Kira a surprising truth about her community. Like everyone else she knows, Kira has been brought up to believe that the village is surrounded by dangerous beasts. The existence of these beasts requires that everyone live in fear, compete with one another for limited food and shelter, and depend on the protection of the Guardians to survive.

Lowry suggests that the constant sense of fear in Kira's village is just an illusion—Kira and her neighbors have nothing to be afraid of. So although Kira doesn't yet realize it, the nonexistence of the beasts tells us a lot about how the Guardians maintain power over their people. By creating an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, the Guardians ensure that the villagers remain weak, disorganized, and above all, dependent on the Guardians' authority.

☝☝ The fabric gave a kind of answer but it was no more than a flutter, like a breeze across her that she would not remember when she woke at dawn. The scrap told her something of her father — something important, something that mattered — but the knowledge entered her sleep, trembling through like a dream, and in the morning she did not know that it was there at all.

Related Characters: Christopher, Kira

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the novel, Kira's creativity and intuition fail her. She's been told that the "beasts" that supposedly surround her village are just myths, and she's beginning to distrust Jamison and the other Guardians who rule her village. And yet Kira isn't sure what the future holds. Basically, she's beginning to doubt the reality of her community, but she doesn't know what to put in its place.

Because Kira's cloth is a symbol of artistic creativity and intuition, the quotation suggests that Kira, in spite of her obvious talent, isn't a full artist yet. Previously, Kira's creative instinct has helped her decide how to interact with the Guardians; now, however, she's clueless. By the time the novel is over, Kira will have discovered a way to use art to tell the truth, exposing the Guardians' lies to the villagers. For the time being, though, she'll have to wait for artistic inspiration to hit her.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☞☞ Ruin. Rebuilding. Ruin again. Regrowth. Kira followed the scenes with her hand as larger and greater cities appeared and larger, greater destruction took place. The cycle was so regular that its pattern took on a clear form: an up-and-down movement, wavelike. From the tiny corner where it began, where the first ruin came, it enlarged upon itself. The fires grew as the villages grew. All of them were still tiny, created from the smallest stitches and combinations of stitches, but she could see their pattern of growth and how each time the ruin was worse and the rebuilding more difficult. But the sections of serenity were exquisite. Miniature flowers of countless hues flourished in meadows streaked with golden-threaded sunlight. Human figures embraced. The pattern of the peaceful times felt immensely tranquil compared to the tortured chaos of the others. Tracing with her finger the white and pink-tinged clouds against pale skies of gray or green, Kira wished again for blue. The color of calm.

Related Characters: Kira

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 131

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Kira studies the Singer's Robe and grasps the vast story of history that it's designed to tell. The Robe is covered with cyclical patterns, in which a civilization arises, grows, and then is consumed with fire. If there is an overall arc to history, it's that life is getting harder and harder--rebuilding gets more difficult with every ruin.

Although Kira doesn't fully grasp the implications of the Robe's version of history, she already disagrees with it. Where the designers of the Robe in years past have painted history as a story of death and destruction, Kira--a naturally

compassionate person--sees history differently. She focuses on the happy moments in the lifespan of a civilization--the points when communities took care of one another instead of competing or fighting. One could say that the Robe was designed to inspire Kira's village's attitude toward life: the village thinks that life is a constant process of fighting and avoiding danger, so it makes sense that the Robe, which teaches the people of the village, would see history in identical terms. Kira, by contrast, sees life as an opportunity for cooperation and even love--thus, she disagrees with the story the Robe is telling.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☞☞ "So we are each artists, and we were each orphaned, and they brought us each here."

Related Characters: Kira (speaker), Jo, Thomas the Carver

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Kira begins to see that the Guardians aren't as trustworthy as they've seemed. Kira is an orphan, brought to live with the Guardians shortly after her mother's death. The same is true of Jo and Thomas: their parents were mysteriously killed, after which they came to make art for the Ruin Ceremony. Kira realizes the truth: the Guardians are probably responsible for their parents' deaths. Recognizing that art is extremely important to the community, the Guardians have killed villagers in order to control their children.

Kira's realization suggests that art--far from being useless, as she'd previously been taught--is of the utmost importance to the village, and to the Guardians' power. Indeed, art is so important that the Guardians are willing to murder innocent people just to be able to control it. Kira won't fully grasp the importance of art to the Guardians until the book's final chapter.

Chapter 16 Quotes

☞☞ As Kira prepared for bed, she thought about the frightened, lonely tyke below. What songs were they forcing her to learn? Why was she here at all? Ordinarily an orphaned tyke would be turned over to another family. It was the same question that she and Thomas had discussed the day before. And the answer seemed to be the conclusion they had reached: they were artists, the three of them. Makers of song, of wood, of threaded patterns. Because they were artists, they had some value that she could not comprehend. Because of that value, the three of them were here, well fed, well housed, and nurtured.

Related Characters: Kira (speaker), Jo, Thomas the Carver

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 170-171

Explanation and Analysis

Kira has discovered that there's a small child living in the Guardians' building: Jo. Like Kira and Thomas, Jo is a talented artist--her singing will be featured at the annual Ruin Ceremony, alongside Kira's weaving and Thomas's woodcutting. Strangely, thinking about Jo's situation--locked away in a strange building--makes Kira more aware of her own. She and Jo are no different: they've both been ripped away from their old homes and "imprisoned" in the Council Edifice. Although Kira is allowed to leave the building at any time, she's only offered such freedom because the Guardians are confident that she'll come back every time: she's too frightened of beasts, and too addicted to nice clothes and warm baths to run off. Jo, a younger and less complacent child, might run away without warning; as a result, she has to be locked up. Kira realizes that she, Jo, and Thomas are being imprisoned because of their artistic abilities--her task is now to find out what use the Guardians have for them.

☞☞ Kira did too. She wanted her hands to be free of the robe so that they could make patterns of their own again. Suddenly she wished that she could leave this place, despite its comforts, and return to the life she had known. She buried her face in the bedclothes and for the first time cried in despair.

Related Characters: Kira (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 171-172

Explanation and Analysis

As Kira spends more time repairing the Singer's robe (and as she investigates the Guardians' deceptions more thoroughly), she becomes increasingly reluctant to cooperate with the Guardians' authority. She enjoys the opportunity to weave, but she resents the fact that she's being ordered *what* to weave--being forced to work efficiently but not creatively.

In effect, Kira cries during this scene because she realizes that she values artistic freedom more highly than material luxury. The Guardians offer her a fancy lifestyle to ensure that she'll cooperate with their artistic aims. But Kira knows from talking to Thomas that a lifetime spent working on the robe will destroy her innate creativity--like Thomas, she'll lose her "spark" of inspiration, her most precious possession. Overcome with fear of losing her creativity to the Guardians' commands, Kira begins to plan an escape.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☞☞ "Why must there be such a horrible place?" Kira whispered to Thomas. "Why do people have to live like this?" "It's how it is," he replied, frowning. "It's always been."

A sudden vision slid into Kira's mind. The robe. The robe told how it had always been; and what Thomas had said was not true. There had been times -- oh, such long ago times -- when people's lives had been golden and green. Why could there not be such times again? She began to say it to him.

"Thomas," she suggested, "you and I? We're the ones who will fill in the blank places. Maybe we can make it different."

Related Characters: Kira (speaker), The Singer, Thomas the Carver

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 177-178

Explanation and Analysis

Here Kira talks with Thomas about the Fen--a place that seems similar, but even worse than Kira's home village. Kira is well-aware of the horrors of life in her village: infants are murdered, children are beaten, the sick are left to die, etc. She asks Thomas why these things continue to happen, and Thomas offers the conventional wisdom: "that's just the way it is."

In effect, Thomas is saying that the force of routine (and, in a broader sense, tradition and history) keeps the villagers

(and the people of the Fen) passive and complacent. They have no model for how life *could be*, other than the way it is now; thus, they continue hurting one another, unsure of any other kind of culture. Kira, on the other hand, thinks that she can use her artistry to make the village and Fen a better place: by exposing the people to happiness, peace, and cooperation, she can prove that life need not be harsh and cruel--in short, that constant pain is *not necessarily* "the way it is."

Chapter 20 Quotes

☞ "Them be all broken, them people. But there be plenty of food. And it's quiet-like, and nice."

"What do you mean, broken?"

He gestured toward her twisted leg. "Like you. Some don't walk good. Some be broken in other ways. Not all. But lots. Do you think it makes them quiet and nice, to be broken?"

Puzzled by his description, Kira didn't answer. Pain makes you strong, her mother had told her. She had not said quiet, or nice. "Anyways," Matt went on, "them got blue, for certain sure."

Related Characters: Matt (speaker), Kira

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 210-211

Explanation and Analysis

Kira reunites with Matt, who's been traveling to a far-away community. Matt describes the community he's just visited: it's peaceful, kind, and "nice." Furthermore, everyone in the community is wounded or disabled in some way: people have broken legs, are blind, etc.

In a way, Matt's report reiterates everything we already knew about pain and kindness, based on Kira's behavior. Kira has spent her life without full control of her legs. Largely as a result, she's grown into a kind, gentle person who doesn't bully others for their weaknesses. So although Kira finds the link between pain and compassion a little surprising, we don't--it's no coincidence that Kira is both the most compassionate character in the novel and the only disabled one. Lowry reinforces the connection between compassion, pain, and Kira in this passage by then alluding to the color blue--both Kira's favorite color and an important symbol of compassion. Blue is missing from the village, the Guardians, and the Singer's robe, just as compassion is--but according to Matt, blue is plentiful

among this community of the disabled.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☞ "Kira," he said, but he did not need to tell her now, because she knew, "my name is Christopher. I'm your father."

In shock, she stared at him. She watched his ruined eyes, and saw that they were able, still, to weep.

Related Characters: Christopher, Kira

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Kira reunites with her father, Christopher, whom she can barely remember. Christopher (who was driven out of the village by his rival, Jamison) has spent the last decade living in the community of invalids--a place where compassion is celebrated instead of condemned.

The scene is interesting because there's no way for Kira to know, to a certainty, that the blind man standing before her is her father. And yet Lowry makes it clear that Kira and Christopher are related: she shows that they're kindred spirits, linked by their disability and their compassion. The fact that Christopher's eyes, though ruined, are able to weep suggests that he's a gentle, compassionate person in spite of (or because of) his physical weakness--just as Kira is a more gentle, compassionate person because of her lame leg.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☞ "We have gardens. Houses. Families. But it is much quieter than this village. There is no arguing. People share what they have, and help each other. Babies rarely cry. Children are cherished."

Kira looked at the stone pendant that rested against his blue shirt. She touched her own matching one.

"Do you have a family there?" she asked hesitantly.

"The whole village is like a family to me, Kira," he replied.

Related Characters: Christopher, Kira (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 228-229

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Kira reunites with her father, Christopher. Christopher has spent many years living in a faraway community that--it's pretty clear--is altogether unlike Kira's. While Kira's community is barbaric and cruel, Christopher's is compassionate, and everyone looks out for everyone else. Christopher describes how babies are cherished instead of neglected and tortured (as they are in Kira's village). One could say that Christopher's new community believes in the principle of compassion--everyone should love and help each other--while Kira's community believes in the principle of "survival of the fittest."

The presence of the color blue in this scene is another important sign of Christopher's compassion. Just as the color blue (symbolically, the emotion of compassion) is almost entirely missing in Kira's community, it's overflowing in Christopher's new home.

Chapter 23 Quotes

☛ The three of them — the new little Singer who would one day take the chained Singer's place; Thomas the Carver, who with his meticulous tools wrote the history of the world; and she herself, the one who colored that history — they were the artists who could create the future.

Related Characters: Jo, Thomas the Carver, Kira

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

In this important quotation, Kira first begins to realize how powerful she, Thomas, and Jo are. Because they have artistic talent, they've been tasked with performing and depicting the history of the world. Indeed, the Ruin Ceremony--the cloak, the staff, the song, etc.--is itself a history of human civilization, which Kira and her friends are

tasked with polishing year after year.

Kira begins to realize how powerful she is: she has the ability to tell a story of the future, rather than merely rehashing the past. As long as Kira obeys the guardians and simply repairs the Singer's robe year after year, she's sending a message to the people of the village that nothing is ever going to change. But if she were to change the robe to depict a better potential future, then Kira could send a different message to her audience of villagers.

☛ The guardians with their stern faces had no creative power. But they had strength and cunning, and they had found a way to steal and harness other people's powers for their own needs. They were forcing the children to describe the future they wanted, not the one that could be.

Related Characters: Jo, Thomas the Carver, Kira

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

In this quotation, Kira comes to realize how the guardians use art and performance to control their society. Kira, along with her friends Thomas and Jo, are inadvertently using their gifts to tell a story about society: a story in which there is no progress; just continuous death and destruction. By telling this story at the Ruin Ceremony, year after year, Kira and her fellow artists contribute to the culture of the village--in other words, they're helping reinforce the idea that the universe is dark and dangerous, and it's every man for himself. The guardians want to maintain this worldview, because it allows them to control society, knowing that the villagers are too competitive, disorganized, and afraid to revolt. Throughout the novel, Kira has been told that her gifts are both useful and useless. Here, at the novel's end, she finally realizes why art is so important: it creates attitudes and mindsets. By upholding the wrong status quo with her art, Kira accidentally keeps evil people in power.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

A girl named Kira, her age unspecified, calls for her mother, but no one replies. Kira's mother, who was named Katrina, has died recently, and now her spirit is leaving her. Katrina was a warm, kind woman, but now she is only a body, about to be eaten by animals. Kira cries—she has never experienced death before, and loved her mother very much.

Kira thinks about the death rituals she has seen other families go through. Families bring the dead and the wounded to die in a place called the Field of the Living. Kira thinks that a woman named Helena is standing in the Field of the Living, watching as her infant daughter's spirit leaves her body. In Kira's society, infant deaths do not require the customary four days in which family members watch spirits leave the body.

Kira has no family and no home; her home has been burned, along with everything in it. This is the custom after someone dies of "sickness." Kira thinks that there is fear everywhere in her community, which is known only as "the village." Villagers are afraid of the cold, of disease, of hunger, etc. Now, Kira's fear motivates her to build a new shelter. She thinks that her shelter will be difficult to make, because she has a lame leg. Nevertheless, she will find a way to survive.

Kira thinks about her mother's brother. Yesterday, while Kira was sitting in the Field of the Living, watching her mother's spirit leave her body, Katrina's brother was also present, watching the spirit of his dead wife, Solora, who died in childbirth. Although Kira and her mother's brother acknowledged each other, they didn't speak. Later, her mother's brother left the Field to return to his two children, who are so young that their names have only one syllable: Dan and Mar. Kira wonders what her future will be, and thinks for a moment that she might be allowed to care for Dan and Mar. Then, she realizes that this is impossible: healthy infant children, or "tykes," as they're known, are highly valuable, and are sold to families that need children.

This is a gruesome way to begin a children's book! There are plenty of children's books where the main character loses a parent, but the description of Katrina's body decomposing is terrifyingly vivid. Throughout the novel, Kira will deal with the pain of her mother's death, and it's strikingly rendered in this opening section. It's also worth noting that Kira's age is unclear—we'll quickly come to see why this is the case.



Clearly, we're in an unfamiliar place, characterized by unfamiliar customs—and indeed, for many pages, we won't fully understand what's happening, since we're not yet familiar with the society in which this novel is set. For now, though, it's strange to note that the Field of the "Living" is actually a final resting place for the dead.



We begin to catch glimpses of Kira's society. Clearly, it's a society with a lot of fear. At the same time, it's apparently a society with almost no compassion—it seems as if no one will be taking care of Kira after her mother's death, even though she's a child. With this in mind, it's impressive to see Kira thinking as optimistically as she does here—she converts her fear into action.



We learn more about this society: there aren't complex family relationships (for instance, the word "uncle" apparently isn't a part of the collective vocabulary). This suggests that family itself isn't very important to this society: it's been whittled down to its simplest form of mother, father, and child. Clearly, the society isn't very technologically advanced, since dying in childbirth is common. Ages are calculated very crudely, based on the syllables in one's name: the more syllables, the older one is. (These ages seem to correspond roughly to young children, teenagers, adults, and the elderly.)



As she prepares to leave the Field of the Living, Kira thinks of a story her mother used to tell her. Kira was born “fatherless,” with a twisted leg. When Kira was so young that she didn’t even have her one-syllable infant name, “Kir,” people came to Katrina planning to take her daughter to the Field of the Living to die. This is the custom in her society, Kira thinks, and the merciful thing to do. Growing up, Kira would tell Katrina, “they didn’t know it was me,” and Katrina would reply, “It wasn’t you, yet.”

Katrina would tell Kira that her father was taken by beasts; thus, Katrina feared that she wouldn’t be able to have another child. As a baby, Kira had bright eyes, and gripped Katrina’s hands, showing her strength. For these reasons, Katrina refused to let Kira be taken to the Field of the Living. Katrina’s father had a four-syllable name, and was the chief guardian: the leader of the village. Kira’s father, Christopher, was also meant to become a guardian before animals killed him. Thus, Katrina was able to convince the people who came to take Kira away that they must let her keep her daughter. Since that time, Kira has made up for her lame leg with her strong hands and intelligence. She helps the women who work in the weaving shed, and entertains children with her vivid stories. Kira is also a brilliant weaver, whose abilities had already surpassed those of her mother when she died.

Yet, despite what Katrina would tell Kira, Kira sees now that she isn’t useful to her village. She helps in the weaving shed, but in general her labor is minimal because of her leg—she can’t gather food, as most of the women do. Also because of her leg, she will never make a good mate. She can tell entertaining stories and weave, but neither of these skills qualify as work, at least not even to the women in the weaving shed.

As Kira thinks about her mother and her life, she walks back to her village, noticing tykes along the way. Kira recognizes every tyke she sees, and watches as they play-fight and run from each other. When she was a tyke, Kira watched enviously as her peers played similar games.

The practice of killing babies for being unhealthy seems barbaric, yet in this society, it’s perfectly normal. Even Katrina, who presumably loves Kira, doesn’t have a problem with infanticide itself—she doesn’t even blame the villagers for wanting to kill Kira. Clearly, the villagers have little compassion for one another—perhaps this is because of the atmosphere of fear Kira has mentioned. It’s in this section that we learn how people in Kira’s community are named: the more syllables in your name, the older you are.



Family in the village isn’t worth very much. In other words, having a powerful grandfather or father is helpful, but not too helpful. Thus, after Kira’s parents die, she has no protection, money, or property left to her. Despite this grim situation, Kira shows that she can work through her pain and suffering and make the best of her situation. Even though she’s lame, she makes up for it with her intelligence and strong fingers. We also get the first signs of her artistic abilities, which will quickly become the focal point of the novel. Kira’s creativity doesn’t seem to stem from training or education of any kind—she just knows how to weave.



Kira thinks she’s useless, but only because of the way her society—a very sexist society—defines use. Women are expected to work as laborers, produce children, and little else. She isn’t confident in her own artistic abilities because she herself doesn’t know what these abilities accomplish, what value they have.



Kira is a warm and compassionate person, especially by the village’s standards. Where others consider tykes annoying, she knows them all by name. We also begin to see why Kira is compassionate: as a child, she never played, due to her leg. Thus, being around tykes makes her think of the fun she never had.



Kira sees a boy of eight or nine years, named Matt. Matt is Kira's friend. He lives in the Fen, and is probably the son of a dragger or a digger. Kira calls Matt, and he runs to her, followed by his dog. Matt asks Kira about Katrina's spirit leaving her body. Matt speaks in the strange Fen dialect that causes most people in the village to look down on people from the Fen. Kira is not one of these people. She likes Matt a lot.

Matt is holding an armful of twigs. He tells Kira that her cott, or house, has been burnt. Whenever someone dies of sickness, Kira thinks, that person's possessions are burnt. Sometimes, when the sickness spreads, there is a mass burning, after which the villagers bond over building new shelters. In Katrina's case, though, only she died of sickness, meaning that the village barely noticed her death. Kira asks Matt to help her start building a new shelter, but Matt insists that he has to go collect twigs for the fire, or he'll be whipped.

Before leaving to collect more fire twigs, Matt tells Kira that the women of the village want to send Kira to the Field "for the beasts." They want to claim the vacant space where Katrina's cott used to be, and turn it into a pen to keep birds and tykes. Kira is horrified, but asks Matt who the strongest voice against her was. Matt answers that it was Vandara, and Kira is unsurprised.

CHAPTER 2

Kira thinks about what to do, now that she knows the women of the village want her gone. She decides to return to her mother's cott and begin to rebuild it, in the hope that seeing her at work will convince the women to let her stay.

Kira walks through her village to her cott. She notices Katrina's brother with his young son, Dan. Together, they're pulling weeds, which have grown while he was away watching his dead wife and infant in the Field. Mar, his young daughter, plays in the dirt. Kira's mother's brother angrily slaps Dan for not holding a pole straight. As Kira walks by, none of them acknowledge her.

As Kira approaches her mother's cott, she realizes that she's very hungry. Nothing remains of the cott except black ashes and a small garden. She's surprised to see a woman picking carrots from the garden, and yells at the woman to stop. The woman laughs and walks away—Kira, with her deformed leg, is too slow to pursue her.

While most villagers judge others based on superficial things like their accents and dialects, Kira judges Matt based on his character. It's interesting that Kira doesn't know who Matt's parents are—once again, it's clear that family isn't a very important concept in the village.



Ironically, Kira is a little disappointed that her mother's death doesn't merit a mass-burning—at least a mass-burning would bring the community together. As it is, Kira is completely on her own, separated from the other villagers. It's disturbing that the village only cares about people's deaths insofar as these deaths could spread disease to others.



Matt shows himself to be a useful informant for the first but not the last time in the novel. Lowry ends the first chapter on a note of suspense—what will happen to Kira, and who is Vandara?



Even when it seems unlikely that Kira will be allowed to live in the village, she remains optimistic. Instead of retreating into despair, Kira makes the best of a very bad situation.



We get more reminders that Kira's society is cold and cruel—even Kira's close relatives (by our measure) don't care about what happens to her. We also see how tykes are treated by the majority of the villagers—Kira, with her kindness to those who are unlike her, is an anomaly.



Not only is there no compassion in Kira's community; there's no respect for rules. Everyone knows that Kira, with her lameness, can't protect her possessions. Here, a woman takes advantage of this fact.



Kira eats what remains of her garden—some dirty tubers. After her father died, Kira and Katrina were forced to survive almost entirely without meat. Instead, they ate fish from the nearby river and vegetables from their garden. Kira sees a pile of wood near her cott, and as she picks up a sapling, Vandara emerges from a nearby clearing where she's been watching Kira. Kira doesn't know if Vandara has a "hubby" or children, but she knows that Vandara is respected, or feared, in the village. She's tall and strong, with a long scar that she's said to have gotten from a fight with a forest "beast." Children say that the fearsome animal attacked her while she was trying to steal an infant from another mother.

Vandara tells Kira that she's lost her space; it belongs to the women now. Kira insists that the space is still her property. She reminds Vandara that it belonged to her father and her mother before her. Other women come out of their nearby cotts and tell Kira that they need the space to build a pen for tykes. Vandara tells Kira that she's worthless because of her lame leg, and that she should have stayed in the Field with her dead mother. Kira notices that some of the women are carrying rocks. If even one of them throws a rock at her, the others will follow suit.

Terrified of being pelted with rocks, Kira thinks about her mother and father's spirits, which live on in her. She stands up straight and looks the surrounding women in their eyes. Most of them don't look back at her. Kira reminds them of the rules: in a village conflict that might involve death, the parties must go to the Council of Guardians. If they do not, and someone dies, then the person who causes death must also die. When the women hear this, they quickly drop their rocks. Eventually, even Vandara drops hers. She tells Kira that tomorrow she will take her to the Council of Elders, who will no doubt cast Kira out of the village. She reminds everyone that she has survived her fight with wild beasts because of her strength, and then tells Kira that she'll soon be sent among the wild beasts, too. The women nod and return to their cotts, leaving Kira alone by her ruined cott.

Kira doesn't know if the Council of Guardians will let her live in the village or not. In the meantime, though, she decides to continue rebuilding her mother's cott. She will go to Matthew, a carpenter and old friend of her mothers, and offer him her weaving in exchange for wood beams. She will also ask him for smaller pieces of wood, which she'll use to build a threading frame. Kira has always been good with her hands, but in recent years, she's become a creative, skillful weaver. She's eager to continue with her weaving, assuming that she's allowed to stay in the village.

Although Kira's life has been hard and challenging, it's trained her to adapt to new situations. Thus, she moves past the theft of her carrots, and eats tubers instead. A healthier person, used to eating carrots or meat, would be distraught—Kira simply moves past her pain. Vandara's hostility to Kira is clear: she's ambushed Kira. We begin to learn more about the mysterious "beasts" that populate the forest: although we're not sure what they look like, it's clear that they can do harm.



Kira argues that she should keep her space on the basis of family—it belonged to her parents. Vandara shows that she has no respect for the concept of family, both because she doesn't listen to Kira's argument, and because she wants to essentially keep her children, and other people's children, in a pen, like livestock. Kira remains intelligent and observant even when she could lose her life.



Kira derives inspiration from the memory of her parents. While it's not clear exactly what the village means by "spirit," the concept seems to suggest a combination of memory and love. Kira shows herself to be intelligent and quick-witted: she remembers the relevant law, saving her life. Vandara, by contrast, seems childish and petty by comparison. She boasts of her strength and courage, and tells Kira she's going to die. Kira chooses her words carefully, while Vandara speaks even when no words are required. But perhaps this is how Vandara maintains power among the other women—she threatens other people with words, only rarely having to use actual force.



Kira is hopeful, even when she faces death. In part, we see, her hope derives from her love for weaving. Without weaving to look forward to, it's unlikely that she would go about planning her schedule and rebuilding her cott so diligently. The end of this chapter establishes a conflict between the desires of the artist and the desires of the community—this conflict will be very important in the novel.



CHAPTER 3

The dawn after her encounter with Vandara, a messenger arrives at Kira's cott and tells her to come to the Council of Guardians in the late morning. The Council resides in a huge, impressive building that was built before the "Ruin," an apocalyptic event no occurred so long ago that memory of it exists only in a song that's performed for the village at an annual Gathering. The person whose only job is to sing this song, the Singer, prepares for his duties by resting and drinking special oils for his voice. The **Ruin Song** is long; it describes the rise and fall of many civilizations, culminating in cracks in the earth, poisonous fumes, and collapsing buildings. The villagers are required to listen to it. The Council Edifice is one of the only things that survived the Ruin. It contains several stained glass windows, and while some of its rooms are dark and shadowy, it's still far more impressive than the sheds and cottages in the village.

Kira arrives at the Council Edifice at the proper time. She hears men arguing, and knows that they'll be presiding over her meeting. Using a cane because of her lame leg, she walks slowly through the halls of the Edifice. As she walks, she remembers her mother telling her that she should take pride in her pain, since it makes her stronger than those who've never felt such pain. For her meeting with the Council she has combed and braided her hair and washed her body in the river.

Kira comes to a large door. She knocks and a door guard lets her in, announcing her as "the accused orphan girl Kira." Inside, Kira finds a huge chamber. She's been here a few times before for the Gathering, always noting a mysterious object made of two sticks connected to form a cross. In the past, she's heard, this object was rumored to hold great power. Even now, people bow to it in respect. She presses her hands together and nods to the object. The guardians nod, and Kira relaxes a little.

There is another knock at the door, and the door guard announces Vandara, "the accuser." Kira notes with some pleasure that Vandara hasn't cleaned herself for the Council. Kira thinks that she's won herself a small amount of respect by cleaning herself that morning. Vandara bows before the object, and the guardians nod. Kira is worried that she didn't bow, and thinks that she'll have to find a way to bow during the meeting.

Lowry begins this chapter with lots of information about the village's society. In a community characterized by its lack of compassion and lack of structure, the yearly Gathering seems to be the only thing that everyone can agree to respect. While Kira doesn't know much about the Singer, she clearly respects him for his difficult training and skillful performances. While we don't yet understand why the Ruin Song is performed, it befits a cold, cruel society to celebrate Ruin, rather than growth or hope. We also get some understanding of the mysterious Council of Guardians. The building Lowry describes seems like a church, based on its stained glass windows. It's perhaps appropriate that a religious building, one of the few kinds of buildings that are respected in every culture, has survived for centuries.



It's important to note that men, not women, preside over Kira's meeting—women aren't given many opportunities to preside over anything in the village. Kira's thought on pain and strength confirm everything we've noticed about her in the first few chapters: she's strong, and knows how to adapt to new situations, however hopeless they appear.



Clearly, the two crossed sticks are meant to suggest a crucifix. The irony is that the meaning of the crucifix—the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, his resurrection, and the mercy and compassion that stands at the heart of Christian tradition—has been forgotten in the village. Thus, the villagers are bowing to an object they don't understand. This is a profound metaphor for the way their society works; they obey the Council and respect it, but seem not to understand why.



Kira is perceptive enough to be conscious of her own appearance, and the appearances of others. This shows that she thinks like an artist—she's always thinking about how appearances influence an audience. She's also clever enough to know to respect the council, even if she doesn't remember to do so right away. Ultimately, it will become important that Kira doesn't have the same respect for the Council that the other villagers have.



An old, white-haired guardian with a four-syllable name begins the meeting. Kira immediately tells him that she wants to rebuild her cott and live her life. The white-haired guardian ignores this remark and asks Vandara to speak. Kira thinks that he is following the protocol for meetings. She also notes the books on the guardians' tables, and remembers how she's always wanted to learn how read, even though women aren't allowed to do so. A guardian addresses the white-haired man as "Chief guardian," and names the accused and the accuser. Kira stands up straight when she hears her name. She's almost as tall as Vandara, though Vandara is older and stronger.

The chief guardian directs Vandara to begin. Vandara says that Kira should have been taken to the Field of the Living when she was born, because she was lame and fatherless. Kira thinks to herself that she was allowed to survive because she was strong and her eyes were bright. Vandara continues that the village has tolerated Kira's presence, even though Kira has contributed nothing of value to the village: she can't plant, tend to domestic animals, and she eats a lot. Kira thinks that everything Vandara has said is true. Vandara argues that Kira was only allowed to stay because her grandfather was the chief guardian; now there's a wiser and more powerful chief. Kira wonders if Vandara's flattery will work, but also notes that the chief guardian's expression hasn't changed at all. Vandara adds that Kira's mother may have spread disease, and concludes that Kira should be sent into the wild.

After Vandara finishes her argument, the chief guardian looks to the eleven other guardians. He tells Kira that she isn't required to defend herself, since she's only a two-syllable girl. Kira instantly replies that she wants to defend herself; but the chief guardian signals her to be silent. He tells Kira to think carefully: she can defend herself or allow the guardians to appoint one of themselves to defend her. At first, Kira thinks that the guardians won't be able to defend her, since they don't know how she showed signs of strength as a baby. In her pocket, she feels a small square of **cloth** she wove long ago, and how she came to be a great weaver without any training. Nevertheless, she decides that she doesn't know what to say. She decides to let one of the guardians defend her, and the chief guardian appoints a guardian named Jamison.

Again, Kira doesn't obey the formalities of the court proceeding. It's here that we learn that women aren't allowed to read in the society of Gathering Blue, another clear indication of the society's sexism. Even if she doesn't know how to read, Kira wants to learn—this suggests that she's ambitious, and hasn't yet learned to accept her inferior position in the village.



Kira has a hard time defending herself because she doesn't have a clear alternative to the village's rules in mind. To us, it's obvious why Kira should be allowed to live: because she's a child and a human being, and therefore deserves to be taken care of. Kira has no sense of this, because she's lived in the village all her life. It's also important to note that Vandara attempts to influence her audience using flattery, but seems to fail—she's not as skillful as gauging her audience's reaction as Kira is.



Even after the trial is well under way, Kira doesn't entirely understand the rules of the courtroom—for instance, she speaks when it isn't her turn to speak. In part this is because Kira is a child, but it's also because she hasn't yet been conditioned to respect authority without understanding it. Thus, it wouldn't be fair to say that Vandara is cleverer or wiser than Kira—Vandara blindly accepts the Council's authority, and Kira does not. It's in this section that we first see Kira touching her cloth. This cloth, which she made, often seems like an extension of Kira herself—it tells her how to feel, and what to do.



CHAPTER 4

Jamison is unfamiliar to Kira, but this is because women and men barely associate past the time of childhood. Jamison is tall and still young, judging by his three-syllable name, and he wears a wooden ornament carved by Thomas the Carver, a boy whose talents are highly coveted by the few who can afford jewelry and decorations. Jamison looks through a stack of papers he carries with him, and Kira privately wishes that she could read.

Jamison says that he'll address Vandara accusations one at a time, and looks through his papers. Kira realizes that he wrote down everything that Vandara said, and realizes that writing has great value because it allows him to record things exactly so that there can be no arguments about it later. Jamison concedes that "it is the way" to let the deformed die when they're still babies, but he opens a large book and refers the guardians to the laws of the village, which state that there can be exceptions to the village's custom. He also concedes that Kira was born deformed and fatherless. The chief guardian notes that Kira's father was Christopher, and Jamison reveals that he was hunting with Christopher on the day that Christopher was taken by beasts; some of the other guardians nod to show that they knew Christopher as well. Because Kira's father was an excellent hunter, Jamison argues, Kira's case is an exception to the laws. The guardians nod and seem to agree.

Jamison continues to work through Vandara's accusations. He concedes that Kira is lame, but points out that Kira works in the weaving shed. Kira is surprised that Jamison knows this, since men usually ignore women's work. She nervously tells the council that she is strong with her hands and arms, but doesn't bring up her weaving. Jamison then asks Kira to demonstrate her lame leg, a request Kira finds cruel. Still, she obliges, and walks before the council. Jamison points out that Kira is lame, but also notes that Kira is a valuable, punctual worker at the weaving shed. He also disputes that she eats a lot, since she is thin. With this, Jamison calls for lunch. The council will address the other charges afterwards.

The door guard brings food into the room. Kira receives roasted chicken and warm bread, but is afraid to eat as much as she wants, remembering Vandara's accusation. Thus, she eats half of what she's been given. Afterwards, the guardians retire to eat by themselves, and the guard tells Kira that the court will reconvene a short while later, when the bell rings twice. While waiting, Kira walks outside the Council Edifice, noting even as the trial is happening that life goes on for everyone else: babies cry, tykes fight, etc.

Kira doesn't recognize Jamison's name because she knows barely any men—this is another indication that the village divides men from women, with men in the stronger position. It's unclear how we should regard Jamison, but it's interesting that he wears an ornament. Perhaps this suggests that he has respect for art and artists; this would certainly endear him to Kira.



Jamison shows that there is value in following court proceedings—it's not just pointless formality. By reading the accusations one at a time, Jamison makes it impossible for Vandara to change her claims later, or lie about what she said. The fact that Kira can recognize this shows that she's intelligent enough not just to want to learn how to read but to recognize how reading and writing can provide power. Even though the Council seems to believe that Kira should be saved from the Field, the terms under which they reach this conclusion are disturbing. Clearly, the Council doesn't have a problem with turning over children and babies to the wild—it's just that this particular child is an "exception."



Jamison's knowledge of Kira's work in the weaving shed makes us both trust him and distrust him—on the one hand, he's using his knowledge to save Kira's life, but on the other, why has he been watching Kira? We see this same ambiguity in the way Jamison forces Kira to walk around the courtroom—it's kind and cruel at the same time.



Even if she sometimes breaks the rules of the court, Kira understands how important it is to send the right message—the right image—to the Council. Thus, she doesn't eat much of her meal. This kind of self-control is impressive in anyone, let alone a child. Kira shows more maturity when she walks outside and notices how life goes on without her. The ability to see the world from other points of view is often considered a hallmark of maturity.



Kira sees Matt as she waits outside the Council Edifice. Matt tells her that he and other tykes have brought a pile of saplings to help her build, and asks her about her trial. Kira is privately surprised that Matt has heard about the trial so quickly, but she feigns bravery and says that it involves a lot of talking. Matt mentions that Vandara was accused of killing her own tyke by forcing him to eat a poisonous plant, but the Council found her innocent. He thinks that Vandara is cruel because her scar brings her pain. Kira thinks that her own pain makes her strong, not weak. She thanks Matt for his help, and, hearing the bell ring twice, returns to the Council Edifice.

Inside the Council Edifice, Jamison proceeds with his defense. Vandara has accused Kira of being kept against the rules because of her grandfather's influence. Jamison argues that exceptions can be made. As he does so, Kira feels the small piece of **cloth** in her pocket, and thinks about weaving. Katrina taught her how to dye threads; in fact, Katrina was responsible for coloring the threads used to decorate the **robe** that the Singer wore when he performed his **Ruin Song**. As a small child, Kira watched with fascination as Katrina made a small repair on the robe. Katrina once showed Kira's own weaving to a guardian, who seemed interested and asked to see Kira's work in the coming years. Katrina often said that Kira's skill would far surpass her own. Kira also remembers her mother complaining that she couldn't find a plant that could produce the color **blue**.

Kira stops daydreaming and realizes that Jamison is going down the list of accusations against her. She can tell that there has been a subtle change in the guardians' behavior, in her favor. Vandara notices it, too. Kira clutches the **cloth** in her pocket, which suddenly feels warm to her. She wove the cloth when her mother was dying. As she wove it, the threads seemed to sing to her. She showed the final product to Katrina, and though Katrina was too weak to reply, she smiled. As she sits in the Council Edifice, the cloth seems to tell Kira that she will be saved.

Matt's behavior shows that Kira isn't alone in her village—there are other people, Matt included, who feel compassion for others instead of only caring about themselves. It's important that the only two people like this we've seen so far are children. It's as if growing up in the village means gradually giving up all compassion. Matt casts some doubt on the Council's vision of justice when he mentions Vandara—it seems very likely that Vandara did kill her child, so the fact that the Council cleared her suggests that it often gets its verdicts wrong.



Instead of paying attention to Jamison as he defends her, Kira is thinking about her cloth, and about weaving. Clearly, Kira must love weaving if she can think about it when she's essentially on trial for her life. It's still unclear why Kira is thinking about weaving, but suggests the importance that her weaving will play in the novel. One hint that weaving will be important is the mention of the color blue. While we don't yet know what blue is meant to symbolize, evidently blue is important enough to make into the title of the novel.



Kira's cloth seems like an externalized version of her own thoughts and emotions. Thus, instead of feeling that she's going to win her case, she feels her cloth, which tells her that she's going to win. The cloth is also a source of hope for Kira—even when her future is uncertain, she turns to her cloth for comfort. This was the case when she wove the cloth in the first place, and it's the case as she feels it in the hall of the Council Edifice.



CHAPTER 5

As the council proceeds with its deliberation, Kira notices a large box that wasn't there before lunch. The chief guardian tells the guard to open the box, revealing the Singer's robe. Everyone, including Kira and Vandara, leans forward to get a closer look at the robe. Kira is more familiar with the robe, because her mother made repairs on it. Jamison asks Kira about her abilities as a weaver, and notes that Kira's skills are said to be even greater than those of her mother. When Jamison asks if Kira has learned the arts of coloring and stitching, Kira answers that she has, but thinks to herself that this isn't true; she hasn't had enough time to learn all of them, due to her mother's death. Jamison notes that Katrina's old teacher, Annabel, now so old that she's called Annabella, can be used to teach Kira.

Vandara impatiently says that the court must continue with the trial, but the chief guardian tells her that the trial is over. She claims she has the right to know the verdict. The chief guardian responds that she has no rights, but nonetheless tells her that Kira will stay in the village and continue her mother's work, repairing the Singer's robe—he points to a large undecorated patch of fabric on the back of the robe. Vandara, he continues, will receive Kira's land, and may build her pen. Vandara is furious, tells Kira that she will fail and be killed, and walks out. The chief elder tells Kira to gather her possessions and return to the Edifice, where she will be shown to her new living quarters.

Kira leaves the Council Edifice, and hears Matt calling her. Kira smiles and notes that Matt's curiosity equals her own. She notices his dog, named Branch, and remembers how Matt nursed it back to health after it was crushed under a cart. Kira tells Matt that she'll now live in a new place and that she must return to the Edifice when the bell rings four. Matt tells Kira that he saved some of her things, and that he'll bring them to her at the steps of the Edifice. They part ways.

When we see the robe, it becomes clear that the information about Kira's weaving abilities in the previous was highly relevant to what would come ahead in the novel. Based on bits of information we've learned so far—Jamison knew about Kira's work habits, a council guardian watched Kira sew when she was a child, etc.—it seems entirely possible that the Council was planning to have Kira weave the robe long before the trial ever came up.



This time, it's Vandara who doesn't respect the rules of the trial and speaks out of turn—this is Lowry's way of showing us that the tables have turned in Kira's favor, and Vandara is getting desperate (it's also an elegant way of suggestion that Kira is far more mature than the adults who surround her). Vandara also seems childish insofar as she's still angry with Kira, despite having gained Kira's land—Lowry suggests that Vandara wanted to banish Kira more than she wanted to build a pen for tykes. Here we also get another indication that women are inferior in the village—the chief guardian reminds Vandara that she has no rights. While this is a snappy comeback, it's still a nasty reminder that all women—Kira included—are subservient to men in the village.



Here, we learn more about why Kira and Matt are friends, in spite of their age difference. Both of them are highly curious (curiosity being a common indicator of intelligence). Even more importantly, though, Matt is a compassionate, caring person—he cares about his dog, just as Kira cares about the tykes in the village.



Kira walks by the weaving shed, which she hasn't visited since her mother's death. The women greet her in a friendly manner, so she walks inside. There, she notices that there's an empty loom where the woman Camilla usually works. She asks another weaver about Camilla, and learns that Camilla broke her arms by a stream. Since she won't be able to weave or work in the field, she'll probably be taken to the field, even though she has five children. The weaver then grins and asks Kira if she wants to work on Camilla's loom. Kira shakes her head and realizes that it's nearly time for the ringing of four bells. She leaves the weaving shed and decides to stop by her cott to say goodbye.

Even in the weaving shed, where the women were relatively decent to Kira, there's no escaping the fact that the village society is cruel and downright mean. Camilla, a woman the other weavers knew well, is going to die because she broke an arm, and the weaver only grins and laugh about it. It's on this gruesome note that Kira leaves her old life—if life in the Council Edifice is even mildly gentle, we realize, it's better than life in the village.



CHAPTER 6

The bell at the Council Edifice rings four times, and Kira and Matt meet at the steps outside. Kira is carrying an armful of things she stored near her house: threads, cloth, and soap. She notices that Matt is always dirty, even though he probably has a mother somewhere. Matt is carrying the objects he saved from the cott fire; he offers to carry them through the Edifice for Kira. Kira accepts Matt's help, but tells Matt to wait while she goes inside the building to ask if Matt can accompany her.

Kira's armful of possessions indicates the things that are important to her: weaving, and taking care of herself. In both cases, her values make her different from the other villagers. Matt proves that he's a loyal friend, and one of the few people who's willing to act selflessly instead of selfishly.



In the large room of the Council Edifice, Jamison is waiting for Kira. As she sees him waiting, she feels slightly irritated, since she is old enough to take care of herself. Indeed, she'd be preparing for marriage if it weren't for her leg. Kira tells Jamison that Matt is waiting outside with the rest of her possessions, and Jamison orders the guard to bring Matt and his dog inside.

Even in the few days covered since the book began, Kira has shown signs of maturing. Here, she shows irritation that others are caring for her—it's as if the experiences she's been through recently are teaching her to grow up at an accelerated rate. Jamison seems severe, but also fairly reasonable—even though the Council Edifice is a private building, he's willing to let Matt come inside.



Once the guards have brought Matt and his dog to Kira, Jamison leads the three of them through the corridor of the Edifice to Kira's new quarters. Matt and Branch stay outside the room, since Branch has fleas, a fact which amuses Jamison. Inside, Kira is amazed with her new home, since she's used to sleeping on a dirty floor and eating off a simple wooden table with handmade utensils. Her new room has many tables, a raised wooden bed, and windows. Jamison shows her that she has access to drawers of threads and other supplies for repairing the Singer's **robe**, which is kept in another drawer in her quarters.

Kira's reaction to her new lodgings reinforces how hard her old life was. Objects as simple as a bed and windows dazzle her, but only because she's never had them before. Even with this early description of her room, it's clear that Kira is here for one reason only: to weave the Singer's robe. Thus Jamison makes a point of showing her the supplies in her drawers.



Jamison shows Kira a bathtub with running water. He offers Matt the chance to bathe, but Matt says that he and his dog must leave. He asks Kira if she's a captive, a suggestion that Jamison quickly denies. Jamison tells Kira that Thomas, the boy who carved Jamison's ornament, lives nearby in the building. With these words, he leads Matt and the dog out of the building, leaving Kira alone in her new home.

That night, Kira finds it difficult to fall asleep, despite her new bed, because of all that happened to her that day. She looks at the moon through her window, and thinks of the things lying around her in the room, including her all-important threading frame, which Matt brought her. Matt has also brought Kira dried herbs, which Katrina used as medicines. She also thinks about her dinner that night: she was served a delicious soup with meat and vegetables in it. It was the most elegant, and the loneliest meal she'd ever eaten.

In bed, Kira feels the object she's put around her neck: a small rock pendant that her mother used to wear, and which Matt brought her. The rock feels small and cold, and doesn't bring her any comfort. She touches her **cloth**, which she's placed under her pillow. The cloth feels warm and comforting. Kira falls asleep. When she wakes up, the cloth is limp and insignificant-looking.

CHAPTER 7

For breakfast the day after she arrives at the Chief Edifice, Kira eats a delicious meal, including eggs, cereal, bread, and cream. With her mother, Kira ate cold food, and usually had to find it herself. Kira tries to bathe in her bathtub, but finds this unnatural. She prefers bathing in a stream. She decides to bathe outdoors in the stream every morning. She also notes that there's nowhere to bury waste in her quarters.

Kira dresses and combs her hair, and leaves her quarters to go for a walk. As she walks through the hall, a door opens, and a boy she recognizes walks out. He addresses her as Kira the Threader, and Kira realizes that he is Thomas the Carver. He shows her around his quarters; they're identical to her own, except that the window faces the central square of the village. Like Kira, he has a workroom and drawers of storage for his supplies. Kira mentions that she doesn't like her bathtub. Thomas explains that he has lived with the Council since he was a tyke. A guardian noticed his woodworking abilities. Shortly thereafter, he continues, his parents died in a storm, both struck by lightning. When this happened, the guardians took Thomas to live with them. Thomas is grateful to them, since he would have been given away to another family.

Though Jamison quickly dismisses Matt's question about whether Kira is a prisoner, once Matt's brought it up, we can't stop thinking about it. It's also in this section that we begin to get a better idea of how the Council works: other artists have been brought to the Edifice, presumably to do work similar to Kira's



Kira shows that she's feeling ambivalent about her new life. While she has more property and more luxury than ever before, she's also lonely—property can't replace her mother, who died less than a week ago. At times, Jamison has behaved like a kind of father figure, taking care of Kira and giving her a home. Yet it's clear that he's no replacement for Kira's real parents. He wants her in the Edifice not for herself but for her work.



The pendant around Kira's neck is similar to the cloth in her pocket—it externalizes her innermost feelings. But more obviously than in the case of the cloth, the pendant unites Kira with her mother. This shows that Kira isn't ready to move on entirely—she's still thinking about her past, both her parents and her old life.



Kira clearly isn't comfortable with her new life—there's even some light comedy in this section, when Kira isn't sure how to use a bathtub or a toilet (she doesn't understand that with a toilet she doesn't have to bury "waste"!).



It's a significant detail that Thomas's quarters face the square, while Kira's face the moon. This symbolizes Thomas's greater comfort with his new home and with the moral values of the village (this will become clearer as we go on in the story). We learn here that Thomas is an orphan, like Kira—this seems unlikely, to the point of being suspicious to the reader (two people being struck by lightning?), but neither Thomas nor Kira seem to recognize that suspiciousness. It's worth noting that Thomas's art is more stereotypically masculine—woodcarving has traditionally been a man's job—while Kira's is more stereotypically feminine.



Thomas explains to Kira that there are no rules among the council: the two of them can come and go as they please, as long as they do the work they've been brought there to do. The guardians will check Kira's progress every day. Thomas and Kira make plans to eat lunch together. Thomas also talks to a tender, a servant who works in the Council Edifice. The tender takes Kira back to her room and shows her how to use her bathroom properly.

Jamison enters Kira's quarters after Kira and Thomas eat lunch together. He asks Kira if she's slept well and eaten all her lunch. Kira answers him, but even as she does so Jamison examines the robe and begins to explain her duties to her. Kira's mother had begun repairing the robe, but the unadorned patch on the robe is meant to portray the future of the village's society. Jamison stresses that the robe tells the story of the world, and that the world depends upon the completion of the robe.

Jamison shows Kira the supplies she'll use to complete the robe: needles, threads, scissors, etc. Kira notices that the threads haven't been dyed; when Jamison reminds her that she said she'd been learning how to do this, Kira says that she learns quickly. Jamison says that he'll send Kira to Annabella, who lives in the woods. He also notes that Kira has plenty of time before she must complete the robe: the **Ruin Song** is performed several months from now, at the beginning of autumn. Kira is grateful for Jamison's help and encouragement, but she notices an urgent tone in his voice that she hasn't heard before. Overwhelmed with all that she must do before autumn, she resolves to go to Annabella tomorrow.

CHAPTER 8

The morning after her conversation with Jamison, Kira meets Matt and tells him that she wants to go to the woods to see Annabella. Matt wants to come with her, reasoning that she'll need his protection. Kira says that he'll get hungry, but gives in when he produces a piece of bread he stole from a baker.

Kira and Matt walk through the forest to Annabella. As they walk, Kira asks Matt about his father. Matt can't remember anything about his father. In the Fen, he explains, it's not unusual to have no father. He adds that many who do have fathers wish they didn't, because they hit their children. In Matt's case, his mother hits him. Kira says proudly that her father was a great hunter. She thanks Matt for bringing her mother's pendant yesterday. But when she says it was a "gift," Matt doesn't understand the concept, because gifts aren't given in the Fen.

Thomas is clearly more comfortable with his quarters than Kira is—in all probability, he had to go through the same process of learning how his bathtub and toilet worked (and he probably didn't have anyone to teach him).



Here, we get our first look at the robe that will be so crucial to the second half of the book. Even though she's only been in the Edifice for a few hours, Jamison is already making it clear that Kira's job is extremely important—indeed, the future depends on it. It's not clear what he means—the world's future can't "depend" on the robe in any literal way, after all. It'll take some time before we understand Jamison.



Kira notices the urgent tone in Jamison's voice—this shows a few things. First, as always, it shows that Kira is an intelligent and observant child, and thus well up to the monumental task Jamison has given her. Second, and more importantly, it suggests that Jamison is only taking care of Kira because she can weave. In other words, he doesn't have any fatherly feelings, or any affection at all for her—he would have been willing to let her die in the Field if she weren't an "exception," if she didn't have some purpose or job that was of interest to him.



Matt's escapades provide moments of light comedy throughout Gathering Blue—he's a welcome relief from the disturbing descriptions of death, disease, and infanticide.



Matt is cheery as he talks about his family, but it's hard for us to be cheery as we read what he says. In the Fen children are beaten and abused, and often they have to get by without any parents at all. While there's certainly something charming about Matt, in the way he runs freely through the Edifice and the village, it's also deeply sad. Matt also shows his lack of understanding of a basic moral concept: the gift. We'll return to this concept several times more.



After many hours of walking, which Kira finds difficult due to her leg, Kira and Matt reach a small cottage, inside which Matt sees an old woman. Kira enters the cottage, and finds Annabella sitting inside. She greets Kira, who introduces Matt and Branch. Annabella tells Kira to sit, noting that she must be tired from her long walk. Kira explains to Annabella that her mother died before she could teach her how to dye threads. Annabella replies that she knows her mother died, and Kira wonders how she knew this. Annabella says that she will give Kira threads and teach her the names of the plants used to dye threads.

Annabella gives Kira a lesson in weaving. Each plant corresponds to a different color: red, yellow, mauve, gold, brown, and green. After hours of this, Annabella gives Matt, Branch, and Kira water. She tells Kira that Katrina said Kira had great talent in her fingers. Annabella says that she herself was never a great weaver, since her hands weren't strong enough. Nevertheless, Annabella promises to teach Kira all the techniques of weaving. She shows Kira a pot containing one unlikely ingredient of dye: old urine, and chuckles.

By the end of the day, Kira has learned the names of plants with which she can produce a large number of dyes. Annabella gives her a bag of colored threads, but tells her that she must learn to make her own. Kira, noticing one color missing from what Annabella has showed her, asks Annabella if she knows how to make the color **blue**. Annabella replies that blue can be made from a plant called woad. The weaver must plant woad and wait for the first storm of spring. After this storm, she continues, a few shoots of woad will survive and begin to grow. Matt asks who might have woad, and Annabella tells him that the people “yonder” have it.

CHAPTER 9

It is the evening after Kira visited Annabella. Back in her quarters of the Council Edifice, Kira examines the **robe** she is to repair. There are a few spots of **blue**, but they're so faded that they're almost white. Thomas knocks on her door, and Kira shows him the robe and tells him about her day with Annabella. She wants to return to her mother's cott and find the garden plants she used for color, though she's afraid of running into Vandara. Even Thomas has heard of Vandara and her cruelty.

Annabella is clearly a kindly woman; unlike Jamison, for instance, she asks Kira if she's tired, and offers her rest. It could even be said that Annabella is the closest thing to a mother Kira has now, since Annabella knew Kira's own mother, and clearly has some maternal feelings for Kira herself.



While weaving involves many different arts and techniques, the most important for Gathering Blue is, as the title suggests, color dyeing. Dyeing is difficult and enormously challenging, and it's often rather disgusting—old urine, after all, isn't a very pleasant ingredient to work with. Annabella is highly experienced in her art—she's been using her urine to weave for so long that she laughs about it.



It's not yet clear what blue is meant to symbolize or suggest, but it's also clear that we're supposed to think of blue as something lacking in the village. This would suggest that blue corresponds to that which the village lacks most conspicuously—compassion and love. Lowry's brief mention of the people “yonder” will serve as a foundation for when they become more important later in the novel.



It's clear that the faded blue on the robe is a symbol of something—it remains to be seen what, exactly, it's a symbol of. For the time being, we can surmise that the village has “lost touch” with blue, hence the fading of blue into white. It's also worth noting that Kira is still worrying about Vandara—at this stage in the book, she's still very much a child of the village, not of the Edifice.



Thomas, who can read and write, offers to write down the names of the plants and their colors that Kira learned that day. Kira is unsure if this will work, since she won't be able to read the names—it's forbidden for girls to learn how to read. Thomas offers to read her the names when she needs him to, and she accepts. He writes down all the names Kira tells him; when he writes down "hollyhock," Kira notices that it is a long word with many lines, and thus looks something like the hollyhock plant itself. She turns away from the word so that she won't learn how to read it.

At sunrise the next morning, Kira goes to her mother's cott garden. Almost no one is awake. She sees that pieces of the old cott are being converted into a pen for tykes. This makes Kira sad, but she knows that there's nothing she can do about it. She finds her mother's garden nearby, and notices that women have been walking over it while they build the pen. Nonetheless, there are still plants growing there. She picks the plants she needs, except for those like bronze fennel, which can only be used fresh. As she works, the village begins its morning routine: men shout at their wives and slap their tykes. She senses that she no longer belongs to the village. As she returns to the Edifice, a woman sarcastically asks her if she's enjoying her new life, a question that lingers in her mind as she walks through the village.

A few days after visiting her mother's cott, Kira asks Jamison for a few things: a garden, an area for fire, pots for dyeing, and a drying area. Jamison tells her she'll be provided with all of these things. Kira learns from Thomas that he's given any kind of wood he asks for. One morning, Thomas tells Kira that he heard a child crying the previous night. Kira heard nothing, and he concludes that it must have been a dream.

When Kira asks Thomas what his work for the guardians involves, he explains that he re-carves the Singer's **staff** in the areas where it's been worn down. The Singer uses his staff to keep track of his place in the **Ruin Song**. There is a large place at the top of the ruin staff where Thomas will add his own carvings. He also gives Kira a gift: a small box, carved to resemble the plants Kira is learning. Kira places her piece of **cloth** in the box, and tells Thomas that the cloth speaks to her. Thomas shows her that he has a similar possession: a piece of wood he carved when he was a tyke. He adds that when he feels it with his fingers, he remembers the knowledge he had as a tyke. Kira is confused when Thomas talks about his knowledge in the past tense, but doesn't ask him about this.

Thomas helps Kira, but not too much; in other words, he helps her learn the names of plants, but he doesn't break the rules of the Council by teaching Kira to read. Lowry alludes to a well-established theory of language: letters were designed to look like the things they describe. There are many alphabets (Chinese, or Egyptian hieroglyphs, for instance), where this is the case.



Kira begins to distance herself from life in the village. Her lame leg has already distanced her from the village (she couldn't participate in games as a child, for instance), but now it becomes clear to her that she doesn't belong to the village at all. It's as if the Council is encouraging Kira not to care about the injustices she sees, such as the tykes being imprisoned in a pen. Kira will revise her opinion of the village later on, but for now, she seems content—with a little reluctance—with living in the Edifice.



In contrast to her life in the village, where no one receives anything for free, Kira is able to ask Jamison for whatever she wants and receive it in a few days. Yet there seems to be a dark side to this luxurious new life, symbolized by the baby's cry.



Like Kira, Thomas is a servant of the Council, and therefore an artist for the Gathering ceremony. The box he gives Kira is a gesture of friendship; at the same time, Thomas implies that he's lost a fundamental connection to his abilities as an artist. While it's not quite clear why this is the case, we can guess: Thomas has been employed by the Council for too long. Kira, who's only just arrived at the Edifice, can still access her creativity fully. This would imply that the Council, despite seeming to sponsor or act as a patron of art, somehow actually limits artists' abilities.



Kira falls into a schedule: she visits Annabella regularly, but spends most of her day working on the **robe**. She also begins to enjoy her bath instead of preferring the stream.

As she works, Kira examines the Singer's **robe** more closely. It tells a long, complicated history. One part of the robe shows a sea, full of enormous fish. Nearby, the robe depicts men armed with spears. This makes Kira think of her father, even though what the robe shows happened long before her father was alive. Rather than continue to look over the robe, Kira reminds herself that there's no time for her to waste. She begins to repair the worn parts of the robe, noting that whoever wove the original robe was very talented. Her work is very slow.

In the late afternoon, Kira stops to examine her work, and concludes that she's doing a good job. Her hands are tired, but when she takes her **cloth** out of the box Thomas gave her, she feels calm. When Kira goes to visit Thomas in his quarters, he points to the village from his window: a hunt is being organized. Kira notices with horror that Matt, armed with a tiny spear, is preparing to join the hunt. At first, Thomas can't understand why Kira cares about Matt and notes that there are too many tykes, anyway. But when Kira tells Thomas that Matt is her friend, he seems to understand. Kira feels her cloth and senses danger—she begs Thomas to help her stop Matt from joining the hunt.

CHAPTER 10

Kira and Thomas run through the crowd to stop Matt. Kira has very little experience in the world of men, as men lead separate lives from women. The hunters are boasting to each other. This is what attracts Matt, who has a childish tendency to brag. Thomas tells Kira that she shouldn't be there, that women are out of place. Kira notices the coarseness and loud noise, and agrees with Thomas. Nonetheless, she moves toward Branch and Matt.

Kira adjusts to her new life fairly quickly. The Council encourages her to live in the Edifice, not by forcing her, but by giving her nice things like baths.



Kira's first impressions of the robe are scattered, but they still tell us a lot. The robe is designed to tell the history of the world. Evidently, a large portion of this history consists of violence, warfare, and death, hence the men with spears. This is, unfortunately, probably a fair assessment of the history of the world.



For the time being, Kira derives great pride and satisfaction from her weaving. It's a little strange that it takes so long for Kira to convince Thomas to help her save Matt—Thomas seems amazingly unsympathetic and tactless, but of course, he's only echoing what he's learned in the village and the Council Edifice. It's important to notice that we see Matt carrying a spear, imitating older hunters, immediately after Kira examines the robe and sees that it depicts men with spears. In the grand scheme of things, Matt and the village hunters are one and the same: Matt imitates the hunters, and the hunters imitate the robe.



Kira's experience with the hunters in this section give us some idea of how men in the village behave: they're loud, crude, and impossible to reason with. Kira seems to think that this is simply how men behave, but in actuality, men have to learn to behave this way. We see this very clearly with Matt: every grown-up hunter in the village, Lowry suggests, was once a small child carrying a spear.



Kira shouts Matt's name, but he responds that his name is "Mattie" now—Kira insists that he won't be at two syllables for many years, and takes the spear away from him. Matt shows Thomas and Kira that he's covered his body in swamp grass so that he looks like he's hairy. Thomas and Kira decide to take Matt to the Council Edifice for a bath. That night, they bathe him, despite his protests, and share their dinners with him. Matt hates his bath but enjoys his food. He tries to grab Kira's pendant, but she tells him that it's a gift for her. Kira and Thomas send Matt back out of the building. By this time, the men have left for their hunt.

Later that night, Kira tries to explain how her cloth warned her about Matt, but finds it difficult to explain. Thomas suggests that the cloth speaks to Kira and Kira alone, but shows her the piece of wood he mentioned earlier. Kira is surprised to see that it's far more intricate than anything else she's seen Thomas carve. Thomas can't explain how he carved the wood. He says that it carved itself. He understands why Kira responds to her cloth, he says, because he can communicate with his wood in the same way. Kira thanks Thomas for understanding, and for helping her with Matt. As they laugh about Matt, they begin to feel like friends.

CHAPTER 11

A short time after the events of the previous chapter, Kira visits Annabella in her cottage. She goes there alone, a little frightened, since Matt has grown bored with their visits. When Annabella asks her why she's frightened, Kira tells her that a wild beast chased her. Kira is surprised when Annabella laughs at this news—Annabella has always been kind to her. Annabella tells Kira that they'll boil coneflowers today, and they get to work.

As Kira and Annabella boil coneflowers, Kira tells Annabella again that she was frightened about wild beasts on her walk. Annabella again laughs, but this time tells Kira that there are no beasts. Kira is confused—while it's true that there would be no beasts in the clearing where Annabella lives, since there are fires there, this doesn't mean that there are no beasts in the forest. Kira thinks that Annabella sounds as childish as Matt. She tells Annabella that she heard growls, but Annabella insists that Kira heard a human pretending to be a beast.

Matt clearly thinks that growing up and being a hunter are one and the same, and as far as the village is concerned, he's probably right. But we've already seen that there's no law that says men have to become hunters—they can also become artists, like Thomas, or guardians, like Jamison. Matt lacks any kind of education—thus, Kira has to struggle to explain the concept of "gift" to him. It's also interesting to see Kira and Thomas acting like a married couple: taking care of a small child together. This suggests that they're both maturing in the act of caring for other people.



At the end of this chapter, we get another hint that the Council of Guardians hinders artistry instead of encouraging it. While it's true that they give artists like Kira and Thomas a vehicle for their abilities, it's also the case that the Council forces artists to work on projects that have no special significance to the artists themselves. In spite of all this, we see that Thomas and Kira are artists: this means that they have an inexpressible intuition for what to create.



We have yet to learn why Annabella is laughing at Kira for mentioning wild beasts. The fact that Annabella is only changing her behavior now that Matt is no longer present in her cottage, however, suggests that Kira is privy to special, secret information.



We've heard about beasts previously—in fact, beasts supposedly ate Kira's father. At the same time, we haven't seen any beasts in the novel, meaning that Annabella's claim is a plausible one. The fact that Kira has spent her entire life afraid of beasts, even though she's never seen one, shows how greatly fear shapes her behavior—and presumably the behavior of the other villagers.



Later, when Kira is eating with Thomas, she asks him if he's ever seen a beast. Thomas points out that the hunters bring beasts back from their hunts, but Kira replies that the only beasts they bring are hares, birds, or deer—nothing dangerous to humans. She tells Thomas that her father was supposedly taken by beasts. Thomas can't think of anyone he knows who's seen a beast. While he finds it hard to believe that beasts don't exist, he suggests that he and Kira should believe Annabella, since her name has four syllables. Before they can discuss the matter any further, Thomas complains of a headache, since he's been hard at work all day, and retires to his room. Kira's day of walking outside has been exhausting, but satisfying, too; she thinks that Thomas should go outside more often.

Alone in her room, Kira wonders if it's true that there are no beasts. If this is so, she wonders what could have happened to her father. As she falls asleep, she thinks about her **cloth**—the cloth tells her something important about her father, but when she wakes up she finds that she can't remember it.

CHAPTER 12

The morning after her conversation with Thomas, Kira wakes up, conscious that something—she's not sure what—has changed. It's raining that day. Lately, Jamison has been inspecting her work twice a day, and seems very pleased with it. Two days before, he visited her and pointed to the undecorated area, which Kira would begin decorating after the Gathering that autumn. Kira touched the area, as if trying to feel its magic, but couldn't feel anything. Jamison assured Kira that the guardians would tell her what they want her to weave in the empty area of the **robe**. Kira said nothing, but thought that the guardians' instruction won't give the sense of magic she needs to weave.

As Kira thinks about her conversation with Jamison, it occurs to her that she can talk to him about the beasts. It also occurs to her that Matt might have seen beasts during his journeys through the forest.

Thomas is a little less suspicious of beasts than Kira is, and there are several reasons that this is so. First, his parents weren't killed by beasts, so he's less interested in them than Kira is. Second, he's been living in the Edifice for much longer than Kira, meaning that he's more likely to accept what the Council has told him. (Kira even thinks that Thomas needs to go outside more—in other words, he should be more curious.) At the same time, he and Kira are both highly respectful of the elderly; therefore, they agree that Annabella, with her four syllables, is probably telling the truth.



Kira's interactions with her cloth have an almost psychoanalytic feeling—there's a sense that she knows exactly what happened to her father, but can't put it into words.



Jamison has been spending more time with Kira. This could suggest that the Gathering is approaching quickly, and it could also suggest that Jamison is suspicious of Kira, and wants to keep an eye on her. Kira learns that she'll be told what to weave—this is alarming for her, because Kira has always created intuitively, not according to directions. Now we start to get a sense of the guardians want from their artists: for the artists to create art or stories that carry a message the guardians want them to. Put another way, the guardians want the artists to produce propaganda. Kira's sense that working to follow such instructions won't provide her with "magic" also shows how such directed art, or propaganda, is in fact the opposite of real art and creative action, which must be directed solely by the artist's own inspiration.



Kira remains intensely curious about her surroundings—whenever there's a mystery, she feels a strong desire to solve it. Her friendship with Matt proves to be useful: he can help her solve the mystery of the beasts.



Kira remains indoors studying the robe. She focuses on the patches of the robe in orange, red, and yellow: these signal fire. The robe has a pattern: impressive structures, destroyed by fire, replaced by new, even more impressive structures. Kira also admires the sections of the robe that show peace: here, there are flowers and sunlight, and humans embrace. Kira notices that even the skies, as they're depicted on the robe, are gray or green, never blue. She longs for blue, the color of calm, and remembers Annabella telling her that there is blue "yonder." As she thinks about "yonder," she wonders where Matt could be, since Matt is adventurous and loves to explore the unknown.

Thomas enters Kira's room, and tells Kira that Matt and Branch have come to the Edifice—Matt's mother threw him out for being a troublemaker. Thomas has also come to Kira's room to tell her that he heard the sound of a child crying again. At first Kira suggests that the sound was that of a cat or a goat. Eventually, however, she agrees to explore the source of the noise with Thomas.

Matt arrives at Kira's room; he's been finishing breakfast downstairs. Kira asks Matt if he's ever seen a real beast, and Matt tells her that he's seen billions. Thomas suggests that the three of them investigate the source of the noise. Matt is very excited about the prospect of this adventure, and the group goes off to explore.

CHAPTER 13

Matt, Branch, Kira, and Thomas are investigating the floor of the Edifice beneath the one on which Kira and Thomas. Branch is usually eager to run through new places, but now he's quiet and cautious—indeed, the only sounds are the tap of Kira's walking stick and her lame leg. Kira hears Jamison's voice around the corner. Even though Jamison has been her defender in court, and in large part the reason why she lives in the Edifice now, she is afraid of him in this moment.

Here, we begin to understand what Lowry is getting at with her color symbolism. All the colors of the robe symbolize certain emotions: orange and yellow, for instance, symbolize fire. It's blue, however, that interests Kira most. While Kira initially thinks that blue symbolizes calm, we can generalize this to say that blue symbolizes love and compassion—two qualities that the village, and the robe, conspicuously lack.



This time, it's Thomas who's suspicious, and Kira who's initially reluctant to investigate. This suggests that Kira's influence has made Thomas more curious and less willing to accept his luxurious lifestyle in the Edifice without question.



Matt's answer tells Kira and Thomas nothing—clearly he's exaggerating, or even lying altogether, about the beasts. Even so, Matt's behavior is endearingly courageous here—like Kira and (at times) Thomas, he's always eager to go exploring. Perhaps it's another indication of Matt's courage that he can seemingly walk in and out of the Edifice whenever he wants. In part, Matt can do so because Kira "cleared" him with Jamison. At the same time, Matt's freedom within the Edifice seems to be a product of his independence and indifference to the Council's authority. This suggests that the Council wields as much power as the villagers allow it.



Branch's behavior seems to externalize what the other three members of the group are thinking. It's significant that Kira is afraid of Jamison without having any reason to feel this way—she's an artist, and therefore a highly intuitive person. Her, her intuition steers her away from her guardian.



Kira hears a child's cry, following by Jamison's voice. Then, she hears a child singing, in a high, clear voice. Then the child begins to cry again, and Jamison speaks again, in a harsh tone that Kira's never heard before. After listening to the child's voice, Matt whispers to Kira that the child is a friend of his, Jo, who lived in the Fen. Kira, Matt, and Thomas decide to return to Kira's room and talk there.

Back in Kira's room, Matt explains how he knows the child from the lower floor. She was a gifted singer, he explains, and brought joy to everyone in the Fen who heard her. She is an orphan now, since her mother and father died—the same thing that happened to both Thomas and Kira's parents, they note. The child's mother died of sickness, Matt says, and her father stabbed himself in the Field after taking his dead wife there. Kira finds it difficult to believe that a man would kill himself and leave behind a tyke. Thomas notes that orphans are always passed on to other family, "unless they sing."

Later in the day, Jamison comes to Kira's room. By this time, Thomas has returned to work and Matt has left the Edifice. Jamison examines Kira's progress, and while his tone and expression are friendly, Kira can't shake her memory of the way he treated the child earlier in the day. Jamison tells Kira that her work is excellent, and better than her mother's. He asks Kira if she's able to walk to Annabella's cottage every day, and mentions that he'll install a fire pit in the Edifice so that Kira need not leave as frequently. Kira insists that she's strong enough for the walk, but tells Jamison that she's afraid of beasts. Jamison responds that she needn't be afraid as long as she stays on the path. Jamison encourages Kira to trust Annabella, with her four-syllable wisdom, but when Kira tells Jamison that Annabella told her there were no beasts, he responds that Annabella's mind is "beginning to wander." Without saying anything, Kira doubts Jamison: Annabella is an excellent teacher, whose mind is clearly very sharp.

Kira continues to question Jamison about beasts, asking him if he's seen the beasts himself. Jamison tells her that he's seen them many times, and reminds her that he saw her father being taken by beasts. He tells Kira that she's doing an excellent job with the **robe**, and leaves. Kira touches her **cloth**, but it brings her no comfort. She thinks she can hear a child crying.

In this section, Kira's intuition is proven to be correct: she was right to be afraid of Jamison, since he's being rough with a small child. Matt proves himself to be a useful companion: he knows many people who Kira and Thomas, with their limited access to the village and Fen, have never heard of.



It's becoming clearer how the Council brings children to the Edifice—their parents are all dead. This could mean that the Council murders the children's parents, and then lures them to the Edifice with promises of art and luxury. It's interesting that Kira refuses to believe that a man would kill himself when he has a child to care for. Almost everything we've seen so far in the village would indicate that this is actually quite possible—people have done far worse. Yet Kira continues to think the best of everyone.



Struck by what she's witnessed downstairs, Kira can't give Jamison the same respect she's given him previously. But it's also worth remembering that Kira already had some misgivings about Jamison—his behavior at the trial was somewhat cruel, and she had noticed the urgency in his voice. Kira's "intuition," then, might really consist of good observational skills more than anything else—she feels as if she can "predict the future" because she's reading the present. Jamison's behavior in this section is obviously contradictory—first he wants Kira to respect Annabella, then he wants her to ignore Annabella for being old and senile.



The chapter ends on a note of anxiety. All the usual things that brought Kira comfort—her cloth, Jamison, her art, her comfortable room—fail to make her feel better. Yet it's this same feeling of discomfort that has helped Kira mature. It's likely that her discomfort at this moment will help her grow even more.



CHAPTER 14

The morning after her conversation with Jamison, Kira wakes up groggy and prepares for her daily walk to Annabella's cottage. Before she leaves, she notices that Thomas's door is closed. He must be sleeping, she assumes.

Kira walks to Annabella's cottage. On her way, a woman named Marlana, who works at the weaving shed, greets her, and Kira stops to talk. Kira asks Marlana if she knew a tyke named Jo who used to sing; Marlana isn't familiar with the name "Jo," but says that she remembers a singing tyke who was orphaned. Marlana tells Kira that the tyke sang before she was taught, and that her songs told of things that hadn't happened yet.

Matt — who stole Marlana's lunch yesterday, Marlana says — arrives at the weaving shed with Branch, and tells Kira that Annabella was taken to the Field earlier that morning. Kira is upset and surprised to hear this, since she saw Annabella only two days previously. She decides to go to the Edifice and ask Jamison about Annabella. She tells Matt to wake up Thomas, and mentions that Jamison wears one of Thomas's carvings. Matt shouts out that he saw Jamison with Annabella in the Field that morning—Kira realizes that Jamison already knows about Annabella.

Inside the Edifice, Kira asks a guard where Jamison is, and he tells her shortly that he's probably in Kira's wing of the building, looking for her. When she asks how to get back to her wing without going back into the rain, he points her to a staircase at the end of the hall. Instead of walking back to her room immediately, Kira decides, "on a whim," to stay in the hall and find the area where Jamison spoke to Jo yesterday.

Kira locates the door where she heard Jamison talking to Jo, and finds that it's locked. She quietly calls Jo's name. To her surprise, Kira hears a response: Jo says that she's practicing. Through the closed door, Kira introduces herself. Jo, who sounds very young, says that she wants her mother. Kira thinks about the pen Vandara was building—at least there, the tykes were allowed to be with each other. It seems even crueler to leave Jo by herself. Kira tells Jo that she'll come back soon, and returns to her quarters.

Kira is more active and curious than Thomas—she walks around while he sleeps and stays indoors. Perhaps this is because she's arrived in the Edifice more recently, and thus isn't as comfortable there.



The information Kira learns about Jo reinforces the definition of "artist" that we've been given so far. Artists, even if they're only tykes, have an almost mystical ability to see the future, and to know things—how to sing, for example—before they're taught.



The news that Annabella has been taken to the Field—in other words, she's either dying or dead—come as a shock, but not only because Kira saw Annabella a few days ago. We've sensed that Jamison and the Council can't be trusted, and it seems likely that Jamison has Annabella killed so that she wouldn't reveal anything further about the beasts to Kira. It's especially suspicious that Jamison already knows about Annabella's death.



Inspired by her innate curiosity and her distrust for Jamison and the Council, Kira tries to find Jo. It's a little surprising that Kira's been living in the Edifice for so long (months, at this point), and only now begins to explore the building in any serious way. (She doesn't even know the building well enough to know how to get back to her room without asking someone.)



For the first time, Kira starts to compare the cruelty of the Council with the cruelty of the village. Even more surprisingly, she finds that the Council is actually crueler—at least tykes in the village were allowed to be miserable together. Kira shows herself to be a nurturing, caring person with an almost motherly persona: Jo wants her mother, but she gets Kira instead.



Back in her quarters, Kira finds Jamison waiting for her. He tells her, sadly, that Annabella has died. Kira, who's suddenly uneasy around Jamison, does not mention Jo to him.

In only a few days, Kira has become much more suspicious with the Council and with Jamison specifically. She's beginning to grow up—questioning everything around her and taking control of her life.



CHAPTER 15

It's the day after Kira learned of Annabella's death. She is standing in her quarters with Thomas, looking out her window at the workers who are building a dyeing-place for her. The workers have moved many of the plants and pots in Annabella's cottage to the Edifice. Kira tells Thomas that she's afraid she won't be able to remember how to weave without Annabella's help, but Thomas assures her that she will.

Thomas gives Kira great support throughout Gathering Blue, but here, he's only willing to help her so much. Just as before, he promises to help her learn the names of the plants, but he doesn't want to help her learn how to read. The novel seems to suggest that his longer time of being under the control of the Council has made him less able to see through its unfair rules or access his artistic ability.



Kira thinks about her conversation with Jamison yesterday. Jamison told her that Annabella had died peacefully in her sleep; she may have died because she'd completed Kira's education. Since she died without any sickness, Jamison says, there's no need to burn her cott. Kira agrees, but tells Jamison that she'll need to watch her spirit leave her body for the next four days. Jamison refuses to allow this, since the Gathering is approaching quickly. As Kira thinks about all of this, she wonders who found Annabella dead—how did they know to look in her cottage in the first place?

Jamison's explanation for why Annabella died seems highly manipulative; he even suggests that Kira is in part to blame for Annabella's death, since Annabella was only alive to teach Kira how to weave. This seems like a tactic to distract Kira the real issue—why Annabella died the day after Kira told Jamison what Annabella said about there being wild beasts. (In other words, it seems most likely that Jamison was responsible for Annabella's death)



As Kira and Thomas stare down from the window, Kira tells Thomas that she needs to tell him something. Thomas takes a moment before he looks away from the sights of construction below—Kira thinks that this is typical of boys. Kira tells Thomas that she found the door to Jo's room yesterday, and discovered that it was locked. This doesn't surprise Thomas. When he was brought to the Edifice as a one-syllable tyke, he was locked in his room, too. When Kira suggests that he was being held captive, Thomas says that he thinks he was locked in his room for his own safety. Kira tells Thomas that Jo was crying for her mother. Again, Thomas doesn't find this unusual—when he was brought to the Edifice, it took him a long time to accept that his parents were dead.

There's a brief, amusing aside about how all boys love construction. But it quickly segues into a more serious discussion of raising children in captivity. Again, Thomas's lack of compassion for Jo is a little disturbing—his argument boils down to, "I went through the same thing, so Jo shouldn't mind it." Thomas isn't a bad person, but he's a product of his environment: he was raised to have little to no compassion for other people, and thus he shows little to no compassion for Jo, at least not until Kira convinces him.



Thomas realizes that the three of them—Kira, Thomas, and Jo—are “artists.” Thomas has seen this word in books. As he understands it, it means someone who creates beauty. Kira points out that all three “artists” are orphans. She also tells Thomas about Marlana, who remembers that Jo’ had a mysterious “knowledge” of the future. She points out that she and Thomas have similar forms of “knowledge”: Kira’s **cloth** seems to speak to her, and Thomas’s **carving** speaks to him. Perhaps this is a special kind of magic knowledge, Kira suggests, that all artists have.

Thomas doesn’t know what to make of Kira’s theory of artistic knowledge. He shrugs and tells her that it doesn’t matter, since both he and Kira have good lives: food, work, etc. Kira is unwilling to forget about Jo, and tells Thomas that she plans to help Jo. At first, Thomas tells Kira that the guardians won’t like it if she helps Jo, but then he offers to help her by providing her with a key he carved. The key can open any lock in the Edifice, he tells her. Thomas agrees to come with Kira and help Jo that night.

Thomas, not Kira, recognizes that he, Kira, and Jo are all “artists.” This is an interesting detail—it suggests that simply knowing the word “artist” makes it easier to identify artists. Kira hasn’t learned how to read, yet it’s she, not Thomas, who goes one step further and points out that all three of them have a special “knowledge.” This suggests that Kira is naturally cleverer than Thomas, even though Thomas is more educated.



Thomas, for all his intelligence and training, simply isn’t as perceptive and curious as Kira. No only does he fail to understand Kira’s mentions of artistic knowledge; he has no desire to understand them, since he has a nice lifestyle in the Edifice. This shows how much power the Council wields over him—by giving him nice things, the Council has effectively turned him into an obedient servant. Nevertheless, his friendship with Kira is so strong that he agrees to help her free Jo.



CHAPTER 16

In the evening after her conversation with Thomas, Kira goes to Thomas’s room and stares down from the window at the village. She sees the filthiness of the butcher, and the progress of the women working in the weaving shed. She wonders if Matt is walking through the village with Branch, but can’t see him.

Thomas and Kira wait until night falls. Without knowing exactly why, Kira tells Thomas to bring his wood **carving** with him when they go to find Jo. Kira takes her **cloth**. To muffle their sounds, Thomas rips cloth off his shirt, and ties it around Kira’s walking stick so that it no longer “clacks” against the floor.

Thomas and Kira quietly walk to the Jo’s room on the lower floor. Kira’s **cloth** tells her that they’re not in danger. Thomas uses his key to open the door, and Kira softly calls Jo’s name. Inside, Kira sees that Jo is barely larger than a toddler. She’s amazed that such a tiny girl could produce such powerful song. Jo calls for her mother, and Kira tells her to be quiet, that she and Thomas are her friends.

Kira has had a hard life in the village, but she’s can’t entirely turn her back on it, because there are good people—Matt, for instance—who live there. Kira is empathetic and loving, even to those who don’t love her back.



Kira proves once again that she has a unique intuition; thus, she tells Thomas to bring his carving. Thomas, for his part, shows no such signs of intuition, but proves himself to be highly resourceful, muffling Kira’s stick.



When Thomas and Kira first lay eyes on Jo, it’s Kira, not Thomas, who’s most sympathetic. Kira tells Jo that she’s among friends, and is clearly saddened that such a small child could be locked away in a dark room without anyone to care for her.



Jo tells Kira and Thomas that the guardians make her learn new songs, and then she sighs like a much older woman. Thomas points to a chest of drawers in Jo's room, and suggests that Jo climb to the top of it so that she can tap on the ceiling and alert Thomas and Kira if she's ever in danger. Jo says that she used to climb in the Fen, though her mother beat her for doing so. Nevertheless, she climbs the chest of drawers now, and easily reaches the ceiling. Thomas gives her a hairbrush to use for tapping the ceiling.

Kira and Thomas leave Jo, and Jo tells them that she feels better knowing that she has friends. Kira tucks Jo into bed and kisses her on the forehead—a gesture that Kira has never performed before, but which feels right to her. Jo makes a sound of pleasure, and says that the kiss reminds her of her mother.

Thomas and Kira return to their quarters. Alone in her room, Kira thinks about Jo, forced to live by herself. Kira wonders why Jo is being forced to learn songs. She answers her own question: Jo, like Kira and Thomas, is an artist. Kira realizes that she is no freer than Jo: although she can come and go as she pleases, she's forced to work on the Singer's robe. As she realizes this, Kira realizes that she is losing all interest in repairing the robe. She remembers Thomas complaining of headaches, and sees that she, Thomas, and Jo are being forced to embark on artist projects they haven't chosen for themselves. She wants to be free of the robe, so that she can weave her own patterns and designs. She cries, wishing that she could leave the Edifice and return to her old life.

CHAPTER 17

It is midday, the day after Thomas and Kira unlocked Jo's door. Kira has just finished eating lunch with Thomas in his room; she suggests that the two of them take a walk outside. As she suggests this, she notices that Thomas has been working on the Singer's staff. Much like the robe, the staff has intricate carvings, but also an empty area at the top. Kira asks Thomas what he'll carve on the empty area, and he replies that the guardians will tell him.

Kira asks Thomas to go to the Fen with her. Thomas is at first skeptical, since he finds the Fen dirty and disgusting. Kira says that she wants to see where Jo lived. She adds, nervously, that she hasn't seen Matt in two days. Thomas agrees to go the Fen, suggesting that they'll probably find Matt on their walk over.

Jo gives us a few details of her life: she was beaten when she lived in the Fen; she's a preternaturally gifted singer; she's forced to sing for the Council. Much like Kira, Jo's suffering has made her grow up sooner than a toddler should; hence, she sighs like an older woman. Thomas isn't as immediately sympathetic with Jo, but he helps her out by teaching her how to climb.



Kira immediately knows how to take care of Jo, even though she's never done anything of the kind before. Jo makes it very clear that Kira is a mother figure to her; we've already seen plenty of evidence for Kira's maternal persona.



Inspired by her suspicions with the Council and with Jamison, and her contact with Jo, Kira begins to lose all interest in her art. When she thought that she was repairing the robe of her own free will, Kira was happy with her life in the Edifice—now, she sees that she's a prisoner in a sense: she's forced to work on an artistic project that she didn't choose. Kira cries for the first time in months—once again, Lowry juxtaposes a moment of extreme pain and sadness with a moment of epiphany and personal growth. The novel suggests you can't have one without the other.



By now, it's clear what the guardians are planning: they'll force Kira and Thomas to repair what exists of the robe and staff. Afterwards, they'll force their captive artists to continue working on these pieces of art, creating a vision of the future that reflects what the Council wants. This is a huge violation of Kira and Thomas's artistic freedom.



Thomas is reluctant to go to the Fen—even though he's lived in the Edifice his whole life, he remembers how dirty the Fen is. Kira, the most naturally bright and curious of the pair, encourages him.



Kira and Thomas walk through the village toward the Fen. As they walk, they ask women and workers if they've seen Matt, but everyone says that they're glad not to have seen him. A woman asks Kira when she'll return to the weaving shed, but another woman points out Kira's clean clothes, and says that Kira doesn't need the shed anymore. As she walks away, Kira hears a growl. She turns and sees Vandara imitating a beast and laughing at her.

Thomas asks a group of boys if they've seen Matt. The group tells him that Matt's mother threw a rock at him to punish him for stealing food, and he left to go on "a journey." They add that Matt can't be sick, since he's very strong and healthy. Kira is worried by this news, but Thomas assures her that Matt can take care of himself. They walk away from the village, into the Fen.

As they reach the Fen, Kira and Thomas notice various details of the place. There is a disgusting-smelling river, a mass of cottages, and a constant sound of tykes crying. In many ways, Kira thinks, the Fen is like the village, except that it's darker and dirtier. Kira wonders aloud why people have to live in such a place, and Thomas tells her, "It's how it is." Kira remembers from the [robe](#) that this is not true: there were times when people lived in better conditions. She tells Thomas that perhaps they are meant to fill in the blank spaces on the robe and [staff](#) themselves. Thomas says that he does not understand what Kira is trying to say; Kira thinks to herself that perhaps he never will.

As they walk through the Fen, Thomas and Kira hear a voice asking them what they want. Kira locates the voice from within a cottage; she's relieved to see that it belongs to a woman holding a tyke, and thinks about the unpleasant men she encountered on the day of the hunt. Kira asks the woman if she knows where Matt is, and the woman asks for food in return. Thomas gives her an apple he was saving for lunch, and the woman points them toward a cottage with a fallen tree outside it. Kira also asks about Jo; in response, the woman's face lights up with joy for a split second, and then looks sad again. She tells Kira that "they" took Jo away. She then retreats into her cottage and gives the apple to her young children, who begin to fight over it.

Kira is reminded of a few important things in this section. First, she's reminded that she, and she alone, cares about Matt—everyone else regards him as annoying, meaning that no one is going to look for him. Second, she's reminded that humans imitate beasts, just as Annabella told her.



It hasn't been completely clear until now what kind of child Matt is. Here, we learn from other children—who presumably wouldn't lie—that Matt is strong and healthy. Thomas's assurance that Matt is okay seems reasonable, considering what we've just learned about his strength, but it's also a sign that Thomas is less caring than Kira.



Although Thomas—and, it would seem, everyone else in the village—accepts that poverty, disease, and sadness are inevitable parts of the human experience ("that's how it is"), Kira uses her artistic knowledge to see through this falsehood. While it's certainly true that history is full of sadness and pain, it's also true that there are times of happiness and peace—it's not enough, then, to accept that there has always been pain and so everyone should just accept it. It's up to artists like Kira to lead the villagers toward better times by making them believe in hope and progress.



Kira is more comfortable around women than men. Still, this doesn't mean that women are easy for her deal with (Vandara's a woman, after all). No one in the Fen or the village seems willing to give away something for nothing—everyone is greedy, or (more likely) desperate for food. It's also in this section that we get a hint of how art can transform people—the woman's face lights up for a split second when Kira mentions Jo. By using their power to bring people happiness, it would seem, artists can change society.



Kira and Thomas reach the cott with the fallen tree outside. They knock on the door of the cott, and a woman opens it. Thomas asks where Matt is, and the woman suspiciously asks why they want to know. Kira notices that the woman has other children, and lives in a state of squalor: there are insects crawling everywhere, and the woman spits on the floor as she talks. The woman tells her and Thomas that she doesn't know where Matt is, but that she's glad he's gone. She shuts the door.

As Thomas and Kira turn to walk away from Matt's cott, a tyke, Matt's brother, runs out of the cott and tells them he knows where Matt has gone. He demands payment in return for the information. First, he asks for Kira's pendant. When she refuses, he asks for the leather cord she uses to tie her hair. Kira gives this to him, and he explains that Matt's mother beat him. Afterwards, Matt and Branch left the Fen to live with his friends. Kira realizes that she and Thomas must be these "friends." When she presses the tyke for more information, he tells her that Matt went to find his friends a gift. The tyke defines "gift" as something that makes its recipient like the giver "best of all." Kira brushes this aside, and asks the tyke what Matt's gift was to be. The tyke says that Matt was searching for **blue**. With this, the tyke's mother calls him inside, and he runs away.

Kira and Thomas walks back to the Edifice and talk about what they've learned. Kira tells Thomas that she was afraid the Council has kidnapped Matt the way it kidnapped Jo. Thomas replies that Matt has no skills that make him worth kidnapping. Kira says that Matt does have skills: he can make others laugh and smile. She wonders to herself where Matt could be.

CHAPTER 18

It is almost time for the annual Gathering, and everyone is preparing for it: the weaving shed has been closed, people are quieter, and some even bathe. Thomas is polishing the Singer's **staff** with thick oils. Matt has not returned from his quest to find **blue**, even though he's been gone for many days. Kira touches her **cloth**, hoping for consolation, but she feels none. Sometimes, she hears Jo chanting repetitively downstairs. Occasionally, Kira hears Jo singing a high, beautiful melody, as if she's been allowed a moment of freedom.

Kira and Thomas see the way many people in the village and Fen live. In the Edifice, they were shielded from these realities; here, they can't hide. This is an important realization for both of them, because it makes them more sympathetic to the villagers. Even so, the villagers and Fen residents aren't saints by any means. Their lack of love and compassion makes them cruel: Matt's own mother doesn't want him back.



Matt's brother, like nearly everyone else in the Fen and the village, refuses to give something up for nothing. Generosity and sympathy are rare or even nonexistent. Again, we see tykes struggling with the concept of a "gift." Kira refuses to give up her pendant, showing that she values not only the pendant itself, but also what the pendant symbolizes—her connection to her past, and to her mother. Kira feels personally invested in Matt's safety, because he was journeying to find blue for her. This shows that Matt is becoming more generous and compassionate to others.



Thomas doesn't seem perturbed about Matt's disappearance—he sees no value in anyone who lacks artistic skill (though he does seem to have accepted that the Council kidnapped Thomas and Kira). Kira recognizes that everyone has value, even if this value is something as simple as being able to make others laugh.



In this opening section, Lowry sets the scene for the next few chapters. There will be no more expository sections about art or the village—we're moving toward a climax. Lowry builds further suspense when she writes that Kira's cloth isn't telling her anything. The cloth has previously helped Kira see the future, but now—just when it seems like something big is going to happen—the cloth tells her nothing.



At night, Kira visits Jo. Jo no longer asks for her mother, but she holds Kira. Jo tells Kira that the Gathering is soon; when Jo becomes Singer, she says, she'll be allowed to create her own songs.

In the days leading up to the Gathering, Kira completes the robe. Jamison visits her and inspects the robe, and says she's done an excellent job. He's particularly impressed with her weaving in a section of the robe that depicts tall buildings surrounded by fire and explosions. Kira tells him that she found this section difficult to repair, since she has no understanding of large buildings, and hasn't paid attention to the **Ruin Song**. In response, Jamison says that Kira shouldn't be expected to listen to all of the Song. He tells Kira about how the Singer prepares for his performances: he begins studying the Ruin Song when he's a tyke, and rehearses it all year. While the Song is always the same, the Singer may emphasize different parts each year. He lives in his own quarters of the Edifice. As she listens to Jamison, Kira thinks about Jo, but doesn't say anything.

Jamison looks at another section of the robe, and recites the portion of the **Ruin Song** that corresponds to it. He explains to Kira that the verses of the Song refer to places that have been destroyed in the past. He then tells Kira that after this year's Gathering, she'll begin dyeing threads again. Kira, distressed at the thought of doing the same repairs year after year, asks Jamison what he means. Jamison explains that she'll begin embroidering the empty section of the robe: the future. Even though Jamison has mentioned this task before, Kira is surprised—she thought she would wait until she was much older before she began. Jamison tells Kira that the guardians have waited a long time for her.

CHAPTER 19

It is the day of the Gathering. Kira wakes up at dawn to hear the villagers gather at the plaza where the Gathering takes place every year. Everyone in the plaza is quiet and solemn, even tykes. Kira notices that Katrina's brother is standing with his son, Dan, but not his daughter, Mar. Kira wonders if Mar has been given to another family.

Kira goes to Thomas's room and asks him where the staff is. He tells her that the guardians took it yesterday, and she confirms that they took the robe, too. Thomas looks out at the crowd and notices Matt's mother. Kira is sad when she notices that Matt isn't standing beside her. The doors of the Edifice open, and the villagers enter. A guard comes to Thomas's room and tells them that it is time.

Kira takes on the responsibilities of a mother. This contrasts markedly with the cold, cruel "parenthood" the Council and Jamison provide.



Jamison's conversation with Kira reveals a few important things. First, it suggests that Jamison himself is most attracted to the sections of the robe that depict decay and death—he says that these are the sections where Kira has done the best work, but really, Kira's work in these sections seems no better than her work anywhere else. Second, Jamison suggests that the Singer—a mysterious presence in the novel so far—is as much of a prisoner as Jo. (Cleary, Kira makes this connection, too.) Finally, the fact that the Singer may emphasize different parts of the song suggests a way for Kira to reinterpret the robe without actually altering it: she can emphasize different parts of the robe—the sections depicting peace, instead of those that depict death.



Jamison's advice to Kira suggests that Kira is growing up even faster than we realized: she's already ready to begin work on the robe. It's unclear what sort of work she'll be asked to do on it, but it's clear that she herself will have little to no say in the matter. It's also in this section that we begin to understand how powerful Kira really is: even though it's the Council that's allowed Kira to live among them, Kira is the one with the power to depict the future.



The villagers' solemn behavior shows how important the Gathering is in their culture—ordinarily, they would be shouting and laughing, as they did on the day of the hunt. Kira proves that she's still curious and sympathetic to others, even those who, like her mother's brother, aren't sympathetic to her at all.



Thomas shows signs of being more invested in Matt's fate than he was previously: he's the one who notices Matt's mother, not Kira. Still, it's Kira who feels the most sadness when she notices that Matt isn't in the crowd.



Kira sits in the Council of Guardians hall, thinking about how it looked to her the last time she was there. Then, she was nervous and afraid. Now she's strong, healthy, and brave. She sees the Council of Guardians sitting in a row of chairs, and recognizes Jamison among them. She also notices three empty chairs on the other side of the hall; she and Thomas bow before the cross, and then sit in two of these chairs. As she sits down, a woman calls out that Kira doesn't need the village anymore. Kira thinks to herself that she does need the village, and that they all need each other.

The chief guardian, whose name Kira can't remember (it might be Bartholomew, she thinks) calls for the Gathering to begin. He calls for the cross, the Object, to be worshipped, and the villagers bow before it. He then presents the Council of Guardians, and the crowd nods in respect. He presents Thomas the "Carver of the future," and then Kira, the "designer of the future." Finally, he presents the "Singer of the future," who will wear the **robe** one day. When the chief guardian announces this, a side door opens, and guards push Jo forward toward her chair. Kira whispers that Jo should stand and look proud for a moment; Jo does so, and then climbs into her chair.

The chief guardian then presents the Singer, who enters, holding his **staff** and wearing his **robe**, which is bright and colorful because of Kira's work. Thomas mutters to Kira that he hears a noise: the clank of dragging metal. Neither of them can identify where the noise comes from.

The Singer stands in the center of the hall, and the scraping sound stops. He holds out one arm, on which the **robe** shows the scene of the origin of the world. Kira feels great pride in her weaving. The Singer begins to sing, without much of a melody. He will build up to melody later on.

CHAPTER 20

It has been several hours since the Gathering ceremony began. Thomas and Kira listen to the Singer perform the **Ruin Song** while Jo sleeps. Kira listens to the Song, and is surprised to find that she isn't bored by it. As the Song proceeds, she traces the story of the world through the sections of the **robe**. As she listens, she thinks of the weaving she'll do in the future, and she worries that she won't be able to remember the names of the plants she needs to make dyes. This reminds her that she's learned how to read some of the letters that Thomas writes in his pages. She tells no one this, not even Thomas.

The ceremonies at the Gathering are impressive, but they seem to have little to no substance. Thus, everyone bows before the cross without understanding what the cross symbolizes. This is an important moment, because it shows that the villagers respect the Council without understanding exactly why they owe the Council any respect at all. It's almost an important moment for Kira, since she realizes that she is invested in the village's happiness.



The fact that Kira still can't remember the chief guardian's name shows that she hasn't yet bought in to the pomp and pageantry of the Council—she's still a little skeptical. Kira acts like a good mother for Jo, whispering her directions and telling her when she should sit down. Kira's in an uneasy position—the Council has ensured that the village gives her great respect, but Kira herself doesn't respect the Council much at all.



It's not clear what the metallic noise means (it might remind us of the sound of Kira's lame leg dragging against the floor).



Kira may have some misgivings about the Council and about the robe, but this doesn't mean she isn't enormously proud of all the work she's done.



The fact that the Ruin Song doesn't bore Kira suggests that she's grown a great deal in the last year, when she could barely pay attention to the song. The death of her mother, her trial, her adoption by the Council, and her friendships with Annabella and Thomas have helped her to mature. One sign of her maturity is the fact that she's taught herself how to read some letters. This shows that Kira's growth directly conflicts with the laws of the Council—a clash is building up.



The Singer moves through a quiet portion of the **Song**, which corresponds to a green section of the **robe**. The “Green part” of the Song, as Kira thinks of it, is soothing and peaceful. As she listens, Thomas points her to a side aisle; Kira looks, and gradually makes out a small human crawling on all fours. As the human crawls forward, villagers turn to look at it, and Kira realizes that it is Matt. Kira is delighted to see him; he waves to her. Kira can see that he’s holding something in his hand, though she can’t tell what it is. She turns to look at the Singer, and when she looks back at the aisle, Matt is no longer there.

It is midday, and the Singer stops singing so that everyone can eat lunch and relax. As Kira and Thomas eat with Jo in Kira’s room, Matt rushes in, followed by Branch. Matt announces that he’s been on a long journey, and that he’s brought Kira two things, one big, one small. Though the big thing is yet to come, he says, he has the small thing with him: a dirty square of cloth. Kira is excited to see that the cloth is **blue**.

Matt explains how he found the **blue** cloth. After stealing food from his mother in preparation for his long journey, he followed Annabella’s advice that blue was out “yonder.” With Branch, he walked through the forest, never encountering any beasts. Eventually, he came to a new community, where the people give him food and treated him kindly. Everyone in the community, he explains, was lame, like Kira. He wonders aloud if this is what made them kind. Kira doesn’t ask Matt about this community, but she tells him that she loves the blue he’s brought her.

When it is time for the **Ruin Song** to begin again, Kira and Thomas leave Matt and Branch in Thomas’s room and walk back to the hall. The Singer enters with his **staff** and **robe**, and the village applauds him. Kira notices that his expression never changes—he only stares back at the village. Over the applause, Kira hears the same clank of metal; Thomas hears it, too, but no one else seems to. Kira sees something—we don’t know what—and realizes what the sound is.

Here, Lowry gives us another example of how colors symbolize emotions. Green, for instance, symbolizes the emotion of peace. It’s already been suggested that blue symbolizes love—Lowry will return to this later. For the time being, it’s nice to see that Matt has returned—given everything we’ve learned about the Council in recent chapters, it wouldn’t be at all surprising if they’d kidnapped Matt, or worse.



Earlier in the novel Matt didn’t even understand what a gift was. Now he is bringing two gifts to Kira—he has changed and grown. Matt’s small gift brings the color blue back into the equation. Again, it’s not clear what blue “means”—not in terms of the novel’s plot, and not in terms of its themes. Still, it’s clear that blue symbolizes something—we’re going to have to wait to find out what.



Matt associates the color blue with kindness and warmth. The people “yonder” treat him very well, unlike the people in the Fen and the village. Matt’s speculation that the people “yonder” are kind because they are disabled suggests that kindness for them was a necessity—that it was only through kindness that they could mutually survive. The implication here is that people are products of their environments: they’re kind if their situations require them to be kind, and they’re cruel if, as in the village, there’s an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. The novel will complicate this idea, though, in its final chapters.



Lowry builds the suspense by suggesting that there’s something wrong with the Singer—he’s accomplished a great deal by completing his Ruin Song, but he’s not the least bit proud or happy. In a way, the Singer represents Kira’s own future—both of them are artists in the Council’s employ. The fact that the Singer doesn’t seem happy doesn’t bode well for Kira.



CHAPTER 21

The Gathering ends with the Singer and Jo waving and bowing before the audience. Afterwards, Kira and Thomas walk back to their quarters. After what she's seen, Kira is afraid and sad. Before she can explain to Thomas what she saw, Matt runs up to them and tells Kira that her big gift is here. Kira walks into her room and sees a stranger sitting in her chair. He is about three syllables old, and about the age of Katrina's brother. Kira notices that he is blind and has scars across his face. Kira has never seen a blind man before. The blind are always taken to the Field before others can meet them.

Kira notices that the man's shirt is **blue**, and wonders where he came from. Matt shouts that he brought the stranger from "yonder," and the stranger acknowledges this, calling Matt an excellent guide and thanking Matt for helping him sneak into the Council Edifice. Matt points to a hole in the stranger's shirt and explains that this is where he got the blue cloth he gave Kira. The stranger shows Kira a handful of plants and explains that they are woad, the plant that's used to make blue dye. He says that he wants to show Kira the woad himself, adding that he has been to the Edifice before, a long time ago. He gives Matt the plants, and gently tells him to run water over them.

Kira doesn't introduce herself, but she offers the stranger a meal. Thomas says that he'll call for food. The stranger asks who's there, and Thomas introduces himself as the carver for the Gathering. The stranger replies that he knows all about the Gathering. He insists that no one call for food, since no one must know that he's there.

The stranger says that he can feel it getting dark. He had to rely upon his senses in this way when Matt led him through the forest. Kira asks him why he's come to the village, but as she asks, she notices that he's wearing a pendant that matches the one her mother gave her. The man addresses Kira by name, and tells her that he is Christopher, her father. As he says this, he begins to cry.

Just as Kira is about to explain what she saw to Thomas—and to us!—she's interrupted. The appearance of a scarred man in the Edifice is a great surprise, and it's not immediately clear what we're supposed to make of it. The fact that he's the same age as Kira's mother's brother would suggest that he's the same age that Kira's mother herself would be now. In this section, we also get a reminder of how barbaric life in the village is: the blind are left to die.



The man hints that he has a connection to the village, since he says he knows the Edifice well. At the same time, it's clear that he comes from the community of invalids and wounded people that Matt described in the previous chapter. With his feet in both camps—the cruel villagers and the sympathetic invalids—this man is a lot like Kira, who often feels that she's both connected to the village and not meant for it.



We get more hints that the stranger is a villager, or used to be a villager—he knows about the Gathering, after all. Lowry also builds the suspense when the stranger says that he mustn't be found—clearly, there's a conflict between him and the Council. How Matt was able to smuggle the stranger into the Edifice without anyone noticing is never explained. Perhaps it testifies to Matt's talent for deception (as well as the fact that it's the Gathering, meaning that the guards are probably off-duty).



The full significance of Kira's pendant becomes clear: her father had the same pendant. This provides proof that the stranger is who he says he is: Kira's father. We get further proof that this is the case when Christopher begins to cry—like his daughter, he's an emotional, caring person.



CHAPTER 22

Christopher goes with Matt to find a place where he can sleep safely. Before he goes, however, he tells Kira about what happened to him after beasts supposedly took him. He reveals that there are no beasts in the forest, only deer, squirrels, rabbits, and other harmless animals. Christopher was going to be appointed to the Council of Guardians, and there were many others who were jealous of him for getting the position. Kira notes that jealousy and rivalry is still the way of life in her village—since they're tykes, everyone is taught to fight and compete with one another. She adds that she would have been raised the same way had it not been for her lame leg. Christopher asks what Kira means, and Kira realizes that he can't see that she's lame; she tells Christopher that she was born lame. When she explains how her mother saved her from the Field, Christopher is proud.

Christopher continues with his story. On the day he was "killed," he was hunting in the forest. Someone clubbed him over the head and stabbed him from behind. Christopher isn't completely sure who did it, but he has one person, whom he doesn't name, in mind. When he came to, he found himself in the Field, having been dragged there to die. That night, strangers came to the Field. Christopher realized from the way they spoke and behaved that they weren't from the village. They nursed him back to health with herbs, though they couldn't repair his eyesight, which he'd lost when he was attached. Kira is surprised to hear this, since she knows of no one, other than Matt with Branch, who has nursed and comforted a wounded being back to health.

Christopher explains that as the strangers nursed him back to health, they carried him through the forest for days, until they reached their community. Kira asks who the strangers were; Christopher responds that he is one of them now. He explains how in his new community everyone helps everyone else, and Kira realizes that he's describing the same community of wounded and deformed people that Matt had tried to describe earlier. Christopher says that while his community used to consist entirely of such people, it has reached a point where the first generation has produced many healthy offspring. While he considers the entire community his family, he has never taken another wife, or had other children. Kira is about to tell Christopher that Katrina died of sickness, but Christopher interrupts her and says that Matt has already told him. Kira weeps for her mother for the first time in months.

Kira's conversation with Christopher is full of information—the information that she's been craving throughout the book, even if she's wasn't fully aware of it. Much of what Christopher tells her confirms what she—and we, the readers—already suspected: there are no beasts; the Council is treacherous and deceptive, etc. Perhaps the most significant part of their conversation, at least in this section, comes when Christopher shows that he's proud of Katrina for saving Kira from infanticide. Even though this is the first time that Christopher has been made aware that Kira is lame, he isn't disappointed at all—his love for his daughter as his daughter overshadows anything regarding disability or "productivity."



It's a little strange that Christopher waits to reveal the name of the person who he thinks stabbed him—we can probably guess the person's name, anyway. In any case, it becomes clear that the name "Field of the Living" isn't as ironic as it seems. The cripples and disabled people who are left to be eaten by wild beasts sometimes end up surviving and going to live in a community of wounded and disabled people like them. And despite their disabilities, their life is better, full of nursing and kindness as opposed to the cruelty we've seen occurring in the village.



We don't get a lot of information about the strangers who take Christopher away to live with them. What's important here, though, is that the kindness and caring of the disabled people has transferred to their own healthy offspring. Matt had speculated earlier that compassion was simply environmental: the disabled people were kind because they had to be in order to survive. But this new fact suggests that kindness and compassion can be taught and passed on. It's significant that Kira cries during this section. Once again, Lowry juxtaposes a moment of personal growth—Kira is learning a huge amount of information about her father, and thus, who she is—with a moment of sadness. There can be no maturation without some sadness to accompany it.



Kira, still weeping, asks Christopher why he's never come back to the village until now. Christopher responds that for years, he didn't remember what happened to him, due to the blows to his head. Then, he gradually began to remember a song Katrina used to sing, about how the **blue** sky always fades into night. Kira remembers this song, too. Christopher's memory slowly returned about how he was clubbed and stabbed, but he was scared to return to the village because he thought the same people would attack him again.

When Matt arrived in Christopher's new home, Christopher says, Matt said that he was looking for **blue** for his friend, a talented weaver. Based on this description, Christopher knew instantly that Matt must be talking about Kira. With this, Christopher yawns and says that he must sleep.

Kira tells him that he's no longer in danger. Christopher responds that he and Kira will leave the village tomorrow. Kira protests; she tells Christopher that her friend on the Council of Guardians will protect him from danger. When Christopher asks her what she means, Kira mentions how Vandara called her before the Council. Christopher says that he remembers how Vandara got her cut: a tyke grabbed her skirt, and she slipped on sharp rocks. Some time later, that same tyke died from eating oleander. Some people suspected that Vandara killed the tyke, but there was no proof. Kira responds that her friend, Jamison, will help Christopher. But when Christopher hears this name, he touched his scarred face. Jamison, he says, is the one who tried to kill him.

CHAPTER 23

It is almost dawn, after the night when Christopher reunited with Kira. Kira walks down to the dyer's garden at the foot of the Edifice and carefully plants woad there. She thinks about everything that has happened to her in recent months. Her mother's death, she thinks, was very sudden; it's possible that the guardians poisoned her to get to Kira to work on the **robe** for them. It's also possible, Kira realizes, that they killed Jo and Thomas's parents to gain control of other artists, as well.

It's important that Katrina's song concerns the inevitable departure of the color blue. It's this kind of pessimism about blue—and about love, it would appear—that Christopher's presence refutes. Blue can return—the literal color blue returns to the village, and love returns to the village in the form of Christopher.



There appears to be an almost magical connection between Kira and her father. We've seen magical connections of this kind before: Kira felt a magical connection to her cloth, for example. It's appropriate then, that Christopher seems to have the same kind of intuition. Simply hearing about the color blue, and about weaving, made him realize that he must have a daughter.



We learn two highly important things in this section. First, Vandara lied about how she sustained her scar. In general, this point suggests that cruelty is often based on lies, not genuine toughness. The people in Gathering Blue who claim to be powerful—Vandara, the Council—are bluffing. Second, and even more importantly, we learn that Jamison was the one who stabbed Christopher. Throughout the book, Jamison has been a false father figure to Kira—generous but not compassionate. Now, it's clear why: he's a jealous, ambitious man, who doesn't care about Kira or anyone else, but only wants to complete the robe so that he can maintain his power.



Kira doesn't have any illusions about the Council anymore. Now that she knows that Jamison tried to kill her father, she accepts that it's possible that he killed her mother, and Jo and Thomas's parents, too. This shows that the pain Kira experienced in the previous chapter had a purpose: it enlightened her and freed her from any naiveté.



Kira thinks ahead to the journey she and Christopher have agreed to make: they will leave the village. Kira reflects that she will not miss the squalor or violence of her old life, but she will miss Thomas, Matt, and Jo. As she thinks of Jo, she remembers what she saw at the Gathering. When the Singer finished his performance, he lifted his **robe** slightly, and Kira saw his feet, which were bloody and scarred, so that as he walked he left a trail of blood behind him. Kira also saw why: he was wearing ankle cuffs and a heavy **chain**.

[Kira realizes how the guardians maintain their power. By controlling artists—Kira, Thomas, and Jo—the guardians, who have no creativity themselves, can commission and control a vision of the future they want. Kira thinks of Annabella, who once told her that small woad shoots survive after a storm and go on to produce the color **blue**.](#) Kira senses that the woad she's planted in the grass will survive. And, as she contemplates the survival of the woad plants, she decides that she must stay in the Edifice.

Kira decides that Matt must lead Christopher back to his home. Later that same night, Kira meets Matt, Branch, Christopher, and Thomas at the edge of the village. Christopher is surprised with Kira's decision to say behind, but also completely accepting of it. Matt tells Kira that while she can't find a husband in the village, because of her lameness, lame people in Christopher's community marry all the time. He names one two-syllable boy who he thinks Kira could marry, and adds that the boy has **blue** eyes. Kira smiles and shakes her head.

As Christopher prepares to leave with Matt, he tells Kira that she will come to his community later, and adds that Matt will make sure of it. Kira agrees that she will reunite with Christopher, after she has finished an important "task" in the village. As she talks to her father, she thinks of the undecorated **robe** she must begin to weave. She senses that the future is in her hands. Thomas gives Christopher a pack of food to last him the length of his journey, and Christopher shakes hands with him.

Kira struggles with contradictory emotions. She has no reason to live in the village, since it despises her, but she also wants to stay behind for the sake of the few people who she cares about. It's also in this section that we learn that the Singer—and Kira herself—is a prisoner of the Council, forced to make art against his will to further the interests of the Council. The Singer's dead stare therefore becomes a kind of symbol of what happens to an artist forced to create "art" that does not come from his or her own inspiration.



Kira's realization in this section is both crushing and empowering. It's crushing because it reveals how much of a prisoner Kira has been for the last year. She's been kept in a strange building and forced to make art she doesn't care about. Yet this realization is also empowering, because it makes her see that, as an artist, she has the power to affect and change the future.



Acceptance and allowing someone to follow their own path, as Christopher does with Kira, is also a mark of love. The reference to the "two-syllable" boy with blue eyes is a reference to Jonas, the protagonist of [The Giver](#), which is the first book in [The Giver](#) of which Gathering Blue is the second novel. It would seem that the village that Jonas sees at the end of [The Giver](#) is Christopher's village of the wounded.



This part of the novel serves as a setup for the third book of The Giver Quarter, called The Messenger, which focuses on Matt, but also includes Kira as a character. That Kira has work to do on the undecorated part of the robe suggests that she wants to use her art to create a vision of the future that does not merely align with the Council's hopeless worldview.



Before he departs, Christopher gives Kira a gift: in the darkness she can see that he's holding threads. Christopher explains that because he's had to learn to do everything without sight he's become excellent with his hands. Earlier that night, he explains, he unraveled his blue shirt (the shirt he's wearing at that moment is one that Matt stole for him). Now, he concludes, Kira will have blue threads to weave with. Kira embraces her father, and then watches as he, Matt, and Branch walk into the forest. She returns to the Edifice, carrying the blue threads, which seem to be coming alive.

Lowry reveals the missing piece of Kira's decision to stay behind. Kira wants to work on the robe because she wants to introduce "blue"—both the literal color and what it stands for, love and compassion—to the villagers who have been taught by the Council to be selfish and cruel. Kira has always felt a strong desire to help other people, even if they don't appreciate her help. Therefore, she will join Christopher and Matt later, but for now, she will try to work against the will of the Council and teach her community how to be better people. The fact that the blue threads in her hand seem to be coming alive suggests that she will succeed.





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