

Das
IV. Reich

Novella

ALAN LEZAN

1 – The Day Without a Smile

Clara Winter knew something was wrong the moment Jonas walked into the classroom that morning and she didn't see him smile.

He stood in the doorway for a second, as if he had to make sure the room was still the same one he had left yesterday. His satchel hung crookedly over his shoulder, his fingers white-knuckled around the straps, clinging to them as though they were the only thing keeping him upright. Clara watched him without making a move. She didn't want to startle him. She only wanted to understand.

“Good morning, Jonas,” she said softly.

2

He nodded, but remained silent. He walked to his desk, sat down, and Clara saw him slip his hands beneath the tabletop—hiding the fact that they were trembling.

The other children filed in, loud and chaotic as ever. Yet Clara heard their chatter only as a muffled hum, as if filtered through a thick sheet of glass. Her eyes stayed on Jonas. Something was different. Something had happened.

As class began, Clara cracked open a window. The air outside was crisp and clear. She hoped a bit of fresh air might help Jonas. But he just stared at his notebook as though it were a foreign object.

“Today, we're going to write a few sentences about your favorite place,” Clara announced. “Just a few lines. Where you feel safe. Where you like to be.”

The children set to work writing. Jonas didn't move.

Clara moved slowly between the rows, glancing over shoulders, smiling, offering small corrections. When she reached Jonas, she stopped. His page was blank. Not a word, not a mark, not even a tentative start.

"Jonas," she whispered, bending close, "do you want to tell me what's wrong?"

He lifted his head. His eyes were bloodshot—not from crying, but from a complete lack of sleep.

"I... I'm not allowed to write about my favorite place anymore," he said.

3

Clara felt a knot tighten in her chest. "Who told you that?"

Jonas shook his head. "I'm not allowed to say."

Clara knelt beside him, bringing herself down to his eye level. "You're safe here," she said gently. "You can tell me anything."

Jonas pressed his lips together. Then, in a barely audible whisper, he said, "They came to my grandmother's house yesterday."

Clara's breath hitched in her throat. "Who?"

Jonas looked at her, and behind his eyes lay a terror no child should ever carry. "The men in the black jackets," he said.

“They told me to watch what I write. And what I ask. And what I think.”

A cold chill ran through Clara’s body—not just from the words themselves, but from the flat, recited tone in which Jonas spoke them. As if he had memorized them by heart. As if he were terrified of getting a single word wrong.

“Jonas...,” she began, but he shook his head again.

“I’m not allowed to smile anymore,” he said. “They said smiling is a sign of unrest.”

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a fraction of a second. Just long enough to hide how deeply those words struck her.

When she opened them, Jonas was looking at her as if hoping she could do something. Something big. Something brave. Something that would save him.

4

Clara placed her hand on his desk. “Jonas,” she said, “you are allowed to smile here. You are allowed to be everything here.”

He looked at her. And for the first time in weeks, Clara felt the weight of having spoken something dangerous.

Something that would not just protect Jonas—but could place them both directly in harm’s way.

2 – The Men in Black Jackets

Clara could barely make it to the end of the lesson. Her voice remained calm, but inside her, something had shifted—something dark that settled over her thoughts like a heavy shadow.

Jonas's words echoed within her, each one falling like a cold drop of water, leaving a indelible trace.

The men in black jackets.

She had never seen them herself, yet everyone knew who they were. They rarely appeared, and when they did, it was only where questions were being asked—questions that were never meant to be asked. No one spoke of them openly. No one knew where they came from. But everyone knew what it meant when they showed up on a doorstep.

When recess began, Jonas stayed behind in the classroom. He sat motionless, hands folded in his lap, as if terrified to make even the slightest move. Clara walked over to him slowly, careful not to startle him.

5

“Jonas... were they at your grandmothers for long yesterday?”

He nodded. “They said I’m not allowed to write about the forest anymore.”

Clara furrowed her brow. “The forest?”

“Yes.” Jonas’s voice was barely a breath. “They said the forest is a place where people think too much.”

Clara sat beside him. “And why... why is that a bad thing?”

Jonas looked at her, and in his eyes was a child’s raw desperation that tore at Clara’s heart. “Because thinking is dangerous,” he whispered.

Clara swallowed hard. She wanted to say something—something comforting, something brave—but the words caught in her throat. She knew Jonas was right. Not from her own direct experience, but from everything she had witnessed over the past few months: teachers who suddenly stopped coming to school. Parents who never picked up their children again. Students who grew quieter and quieter, as though their speech had been stolen away.

“Jonas,” she said softly at last, “you didn’t do anything wrong.”

He lowered his gaze. “They told me not to tell anyone.”

Clara’s breath hitched. “Why did you tell me, then?”

Jonas shrugged his small shoulders. “Because you’re... different.”

6

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a moment. Just long enough to blink back the tears gathering behind her eyelids. When she opened them, Principal Falk was standing in the doorway.

He looked at Jonas. Then at Clara. His expression was calm, but beneath that composure lay something that sent a chill straight down her spine.

“Ms. Winter,” he said, “may I speak with you for a moment?”

Jonas tensed. Clara placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “I’ll be right back.”

She followed Falk out into the hallway. The door clicked shut behind her—a sound far too loud, far too final.

“Ms. Winter,” Falk began, “it has been brought to my attention that Jonas had visitors yesterday.”

Clara felt her heart hammer against her ribs. “He told me about it.”

Falk nodded slowly. “He shouldn’t have.”

Clara lifted her chin. “He’s a child.”

“Which is precisely why,” Falk said. “Children must learn who they are permitted to trust.”

Clara felt a knot tighten in her chest. “He trusts me.”

Falk’s gaze sharpened. “And that is the problem.”

7

It took Clara a moment to grasp his meaning. When she did, an icy coldness washed over her.

“You want him to trust you instead,” she said quietly.

“I want,” Falk replied, “him to trust the State.”

Clara’s breath caught in her throat. “And if he can’t?”

Falk smiled. A thin, frail smile that held no warmth at all. “Then the men in black jackets will return.”

Clara stood frozen to the spot. Falk took a step closer.

“And this time,” he said, “they won’t just be speaking with Jonas.”

3 – Mira Winter Goes Underground

By the time Clara reached home, darkness had already fallen. The streetlights cast long, thin shadows across the asphalt, and every shadow looked like a figure unwilling to move. Clara shut the door behind her, leaned back against it, and drew a deep breath. But the air inside her apartment felt just as heavy as the air at school.

She went to sit down, but before she could, her phone buzzed. A text. From Mira.

“Not at home. Don’t call.”

Clara stared at the words as if they were a riddle she couldn’t solve. Mira never wrote like this. Mira was loud, impulsive, sometimes overly brave. But never terse. Never cold. Never so... final.

8

Clara dialed her number immediately. Busy. She tried again. Busy. Once more. This time, no connection at all.

She felt her heart begin to race. Mira was her little sister. The one who always laughed, even when there was nothing to laugh about. The one who used to tell Clara that you couldn’t let yourself be afraid, because fear only belonged to those who had nothing to lose.

Clara had a great deal to lose.

She grabbed her jacket and left the apartment. The night was crisp, though not cold. A strange wind swept through the streets, as if carrying something invisible in its wake. She

walked to the bar where Mira worked. The windows were dark. The door locked. A small sign hung from the glass:

“Closed for renovations.”

Clara knew that wasn’t true. The bar was never renovated. It was old, crooked, filled with stories no one was allowed to write down. Mira loved this place. She would never have simply shut it down.

Clara knocked. Once. Twice. Three times.

No answer.

She took a step back and looked around. The street was deserted, yet Clara felt she wasn’t alone—a sensation that had been creeping up on her more and more in recent weeks, as if someone were watching her without wanting to be seen.

9

She walked around to the side of the building. Behind the bar was a small side door known only to the staff. Clara pressed the handle. Locked.

Then she spotted something on the ground. A piece of paper, crumpled as if someone had dropped it while running.

Clara picked it up. It was a receipt. On the back, a single word was hastily scribbled, almost illegible:

“Underground.”

Clara felt her breath catch in her throat. Mira had written it. She knew it. The handwriting was frantic, but unmistakable.

Underground.

From whom? From what? From the men in the black jackets?

Clara pressed the paper to her chest. She wanted to cry, but no tears came. Only a feeling she had known for a long time: loss.

She walked back out to the street. The streetlights flickered. A car drove past slowly—too slowly, as if studying her. Clara didn't look up. She kept walking, head lowered, clutching the paper tightly in her hand.

As she reached the corner, she heard footsteps behind her. Swift. Heavy. Purposeful.

Clara froze. She didn't turn around. She knew you weren't supposed to turn around when you were afraid. Fear was a sound others could hear. 10

The footsteps drew closer. Then they stopped.

“Ms. Winter.”

Clara turned rigid. The voice was calm. Far too calm.

She turned around slowly. Principal Falk was standing there. Alone. Without a coat. Expressionless.

“You shouldn't be here,” he said.

Clara felt her heart pounding. “What do you want?”

Falk looked at her as though gauging whether she was still the same person she had been this morning. “Your sister,” he said quietly, “has been moving in circles that are not good for her.”

Clara pressed her lips together. “Where is she?”

Falk smiled. A thin, dangerous smile.

“Gone underground,” he said. “Like so many who believe they can evade the State.”

An icy chill spread through Clara’s body. “What have you done?”

“Me?” Falk raised his hands. “Nothing at all. But others... are watching.”

11

Clara took a step back. Falk took a step forward.

“Ms. Winter,” he said, “you should be careful. Your sister made mistakes. You don’t have to make the same ones.”

Clara looked at him. And in that moment, she knew: Mira hadn’t simply vanished. She had fled. From something Clara did not yet understand—but soon would.

Falk leaned in slightly toward her. “Go home,” he whispered. “And forget you were ever here.”

Clara stood rooted to the spot. Falk turned on his heel and walked away. His footsteps echoed through the night like a series of warnings.

Clara remained there for a long time. Then she turned and walked away slowly. Not toward home. Not toward the school.

Instead, she headed toward the one place she knew Mira went whenever she was afraid.

And Clara was afraid. For the very first time in her life.

4 – The Note in the Notebook

Clara arrived at school earlier than usual the next morning. She had barely slept. Her thoughts were a tangled mess of images: Mira, who wouldn't answer. Falk, standing in the dark like an omen. Jonas, saying he wasn't allowed to smile anymore.

When she walked into the classroom, it was still quiet. The chairs were lined up neatly, the chalkboard was blank, and the smell of chalk hung in the air like a memory. Clara sat down at her desk and placed her hands flat against it, as if needing to steady herself to keep from falling.

She opened her bag to take out her lesson materials. But as she opened her notebook, a small slip of paper fell out. A narrow, folded strip, barely larger than a thumb.

Clara froze.

She looked around. No one was there. No one could have put it there—except someone who knew she would arrive early.

With trembling fingers, she unfolded the note.

There was only a single word written on it. Hastily scribbled. Almost like a scratch.

“Watch out.”

Clara felt her heart hammer. She turned the paper over. On the back was a second word, smaller, almost hidden.

“Jonas.”

Clara closed her eyes. For a moment, everything went still. Only her breathing was faster than she wanted it to be.

She heard footsteps in the hallway. Children's voices. Life going on, even though hers had just ground to a halt.

Clara folded the slip of paper and tucked it into her jacket pocket. She didn't know who had written it. Mira? Jonas? Mr. Levin? Or someone wanting to warn her before it was too late?

13

The door opened. Jonas walked in.

He didn't look at her. He went to his seat, sat down, and Clara noticed immediately that he was holding his bag differently—tighter, as if hiding something inside it.

Clara walked over to him slowly.

“Good morning, Jonas.”

He nodded. His eyes stayed fixed on the tabletop.

“Jonas... is everything all right?”

He winced, almost imperceptibly. Then he nudged his notebook forward a fraction of an inch. Not much. Just enough for Clara to see that the first page had been written on.

She sat down beside him and opened the notebook.

It wasn't schoolwork. Not an essay. Not a sentence about his favorite place.

It was a message. Written in a scrawly hand, as if penned in the dark.

"They are coming back."

Clara felt her breath catch in her throat.

Jonas looked at her. His eyes were wide, filled with fear, but also with trust. **14**

"I wanted to tell you" He whispered. "But I'm not allowed to talk."

Clara placed a hand over his. "Jonas... who is coming back?"

He shook his head. "The men. The ones in the black jackets."

Clara felt an icy cold spread through her body. "When?"

Jonas lowered his gaze.

"Today."

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to hold back the panic surging inside her like a storm.

When she opened them again, Principal Falk was standing in the doorway.

He looked at Clara. Then at Jonas. Then at the notebook.

And he smiled.

5 – Visitors in the Classroom

Clara stood frozen as Falk rested in the doorway. His gaze drifted across the children, over the desks, across Jonas's notebook—and finally settled on Clara. It wasn't an open look, not one that spoke. It was a look that knew something.

“Ms. Winter,” he said calmly, “I will be sending a few observers into your classroom today.”

15

Clara felt Jonas tense beside her. “Observers?” she asked, though she already knew the answer.

Falk nodded. “Just a routine check. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

Routine. A word that used to be harmless. Now it was a harbinger.

Falk took a step back. “You should proceed. The children need stability.”

Then he left.

Clara stood there a moment longer before sitting back down beside Jonas. “Everything is going to be alright,” she whispered.

Jonas shook his head. “No.”

Clara wanted to disagree, but the door opened once more. Slowly this time. Deliberately.

Two men stepped inside.

Black jackets. Black boots. Black, hollow stares.

They said nothing. They simply positioned themselves at the back of the room, hands clasped behind their backs, as if they were part of the furniture.

16

The children fell completely silent. Some lowered their eyes. Others stared down at their notebooks as if trying to disappear into the pages.

Clara felt her heart hammering against her ribs. She forced a smile—a fragile, brittle smile that no one returned.

“We... um... will continue with the essay,” she said.

Her voice sounded foreign. Not like her own.

She walked between the rows of desks, but she could feel the men’s eyes pressing into her back. Every step felt as though she were wading through water. Heavy. Slow. Uncertain.

When she reached Jonas, she saw that he wasn't writing. He was clutching his pencil so tightly his knuckles had turned white.

"Jonas," she whispered, "you don't have to write if you can't."

He looked up at her. His eyes were wide, filled with terror, but also with something else—something Clara didn't immediately recognize.

"They're looking for someone," he whispered.

Clara swallowed hard. "Who?"

Jonas lowered his gaze. "Me."

Clara felt her breath hitch in her throat. "Why?"

17

Jonas shook his head. "I said something. Something wrong."

Clara knelt beside him. "Jonas... you didn't say anything wrong."

He looked at her. "I did. I asked why we aren't allowed into the forest anymore."

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to hold back the panic.

When she opened them again, one of the men was standing right beside her.

He had moved so silently she hadn't heard him approach.

“Ms. Winter,” he said, “we would like to speak with Jonas.”

Clara rose slowly to her feet. “He’s just a child.”

The man nodded. “Which is precisely why.”

An icy coldness swept through Clara’s body. “He hasn’t done anything.”

“We will be the judge of that.”

Jonas stood up. His hands were trembling. His eyes searched Clara’s—not for permission, but for an anchor.

Clara wanted to say something. Something brave. Something that would protect him.

18

But before she could speak, the man placed a heavy hand on Jonas’s shoulder.

“Come with us,” he said.

Jonas followed him. Slowly. Quietly. Like someone who knew that resistance was futile.

The second man lingered for a moment, eyeing Clara.

“You should be careful,” he said. “Children talk. Teachers do, too.”

Then he left.

The door clicked shut behind them.

And Clara Winter was left standing alone in the classroom, surrounded by children who had stopped breathing and were merely waiting.

6 – The Empty Desk

The next morning, the classroom was different. Not louder, not quieter—simply different. Clara noticed it the moment she opened the door. It felt as though someone had pulled a breath of air out of the room, a piece of warmth, a piece of life.

Jonas's seat was empty.

His chair was tucked neatly under the desk, his satchel wasn't there, his notebook wasn't lying open. It looked as though he had never been there at all. As if someone had erased every trace of him.

19

Clara stood still. Just for a second. Just long enough to allow the ache rising inside her to wash over her like a cold shudder.

The children filed in, one after another. Some looked at Jonas's empty spot, others didn't. A few paused briefly, as if sensing something they couldn't quite put into words.

"Where's Jonas?" a little girl asked quietly.

Clara forced a smile. "He... he'll be along later."

It was a lie. A small, helpless lie. But it was all Clara had.

The lesson began. Clara wrote something on the chalkboard, but her hand was trembling. She spoke, but her voice sounded foreign. She smiled, but it felt wrong.

Again and again, her eyes drifted back to Jonas's seat. The empty desk was like a hole in the room. A hole that grew larger the longer she stared at it.

While the children worked on a worksheet, Clara walked slowly between the rows. She looked over shoulders, offered corrections, helped. But every time she passed Jonas's desk, she paused for a fraction of a second.

She pictured him sitting there. Holding his pencil tightly. Trying to write even though his hands were shaking. Looking up at her with that expression that was equal parts fear and trust.

20

Clara placed a hand on the wooden surface. It was cold.

"Ms. Winter?" a boy asked.

Clara turned around. "Yes?"

"Is Jonas really coming later?"

Clara opened her mouth to answer. But in that exact moment, the door opened.

Principal Falk stepped in. The children went dead silent.

He looked at Clara. Then at Jonas's seat. Then back at Clara.

"Ms. Winter," he said calmly, "Jonas will not be joining us today."

Clara felt her heart hammer. “Why?”

Falk smiled. A thin, controlled smile.

“He was invited for questioning.”

Clara felt her breath catch in her throat. “He’s a child.”

“Which is precisely why,” Falk replied. “Children often say things that adults wouldn’t.”

Clara pressed her lips together. “When is he coming back?”

Falk held her gaze for a long moment. Far too long.

“That depends,” he said, “on how cooperative he is.”

21

An icy chill swept through Clara’s body. The children looked at her. They looked at Falk. They looked at Jonas’s empty desk.

And in that moment, Clara Winter knew that Jonas was not merely absent.

He had vanished.

Not lost. Not away. Not sick.

Vanished.

And no one except her was going to ask about him.

7 – The Decision in the Staffroom

The staffroom was unusually quiet that morning. Normally, you could hear the clinking of cups, the rustling of papers, the hushed laughter of colleagues trying to buoy one another's spirits. But today was different. Today, it was a room filled with people who had nowhere to put their fear.

Clara walked in and felt the eyes on her immediately. Not hostile. Not curious. Just cautious.

Mr. Levin sat by the window, his hands white-knuckled around a mug as if it were the only thing keeping him warm. Mrs. Berger was flipping through a workbook without actually reading a single page. Two younger teachers stood close together, whispering as though terrified that even the walls might be listening.

22

Clara sat down at her desk. Nobody spoke to her. Nobody asked about Jonas. Nobody asked about the men in the black jackets.

Yet everyone knew.

Mr. Levin finally looked up. "He's not coming back, is he?"

Clara swallowed hard. "I don't know."

Levin nodded slowly, as if expecting that exact answer. "They're picking up children more often now," he said softly. "Not just here. In other schools, too."

Clara felt her heart hammer. "Why?"

Levin looked at her for a long moment. “Because children haven’t learned how to stay silent yet.”

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to admit the truth she didn’t want to hear.

“Ms. Winter?”

Clara turned around. Mrs. Berger was standing beside her, hands nervously clasped together.

“I... I heard you were out in the city last night.”

Clara froze. “Who said that?”

“Word... got around.” Berger lowered her gaze. “It’s not wise to be out late these days.”

23

Clara felt a knot tighten inside her chest. “I was looking for my sister.”

Berger nodded. “I know. But... you have to be careful.”

Clara opened her mouth to speak, but at that moment, the door clicked open.

Principal Falk walked in.

The staffroom went completely silent.

He looked around, as if checking that everyone was present. Then his eyes locked onto Clara.

“Ms. Winter,” he said calmly, “I’d like a word with you.”

Clara stood up. Her legs felt heavy, as if turned to stone.

Falk took a step closer. "There are... questions regarding your behavior."

Clara felt her breath catch in her throat. "My behavior?"

"You were seen last night in places currently under surveillance."

Clara pressed her lips together. "I was looking for my sister."

"Your sister," Falk said, "has been moving in circles that are not good for her."

Clara felt anger rise inside her. Quiet. Dangerous. New.

24

"She is my family."

Falk nodded. "And you are a teacher. You have a responsibility. To the children. To the school. To the State."

Clara stared at him. "And what about Jonas?"

Falk smiled. A thin, cold smile.

"Jonas is being looked after."

Clara felt her heart break. "He's just a child."

"Which is precisely why," Falk said. "Children must learn who they are permitted to trust."

Clara drew a deep breath. Then she said something that surprised even herself.

“I trust him.”

Falk’s expression shifted. Only a fraction. But Clara saw it.

“Ms. Winter,” he said slowly, “you are standing at a crossroads where you must decide which side you are on.”

An icy coldness washed over Clara’s body. “I am on the side of the children.”

Falk nodded. “Then I hope for your sake that the children are on the right side.”

He turned on his heel and left the staffroom.

25

Clara remained standing. Every eye in the room was fixed on her. Nobody said a word. Nobody had to.

Because in that moment, Clara Winter knew she had made her decision.

Not loudly. Not heroically. Not by design.

But with absolute finality.

She would not give up on Jonas. She would not give up on Mira. And she would not give up on herself.

Even if it cost her everything.

8 – The Search for Mira

Clara didn't leave the school that afternoon as she usually did. She didn't walk slowly, deliberately, or with her eyes cast down to the ground. She walked fast. Her footsteps were heavy, resolute, almost furious. The air was warm, yet Clara felt a chill—a shivering that came not from the weather, but from the sense that something inside her had begun to burn.

Mira had vanished. Jonas had vanished. And Clara knew the two were connected.

She took the path Mira used to walk whenever she needed "a breath of fresh air"—an expression that had taken on a new meaning over the past few months. Clara knew the places where Mira hid when she was afraid. Places no one else knew about except the two of them.

26

The first place was the old playground behind the library. A spot children no longer visited, ever since the new regulations had banned "unmaintained facilities." Clara sat on the swing, which creaked softly in the wind. She looked around. No one. Only the wind moving through the leaves as if whispering.

She stood back up.

The second place was the small bridge over the river. Mira used to sit there often, legs dangling over the water, saying the river calmed her because it just kept flowing, no matter what happened. Clara leaned over the railing. The water was dark. Swift. Restless.

"Mira?" she whispered, though she knew no one would answer.

She kept walking.

The third place was the old warehouse on the edge of town. A place Mira had called "the safe house"—half ironically, half in earnest. Clara pushed the door open. It creaked. Inside, it smelled of dust and metal. A few old crates were scattered about. A broken chair. A window through which the light fell like a narrow strip of hope.

Clara stepped inside. "Mira?"

Silence.

She sat on the chair. Her hands were shaking. She pressed her lips together to keep from crying.

27

Then she saw it.

A small object on the floor, half hidden under a crate. Clara knelt down and pulled it out.

It was a bracelet. A thin, red fabric band that Mira had worn for years. A band Clara had given her when Mira turned eighteen.

Clara clutched it tight. It felt warm. Not from the room—but from Mira.

She had been here. Recently.

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to let in the surge of relief that cut through the darkness like a faint ray of light.

When she opened her eyes again, she heard footsteps behind her.

Slow. Deliberate. Not hurried—controlled.

Clara stood up. Her heart hammered against her ribs.

“Mira?” she whispered.

The footsteps drew closer.

Then someone stopped.

Clara turned around.

It wasn't Mira.

28

It was one of the men in the black jacket.

He looked at her as if he had been searching for her for a long time.

“Ms. Winter,” he said calmly, “you shouldn’t be here.”

Clara squeezed the bracelet tight in her fist. “Where is my sister?”

The man smiled. A thin, dangerous smile.

“She’s where people end up when they ask too many questions.”

Clara felt an icy cold wash over her body. “I want to see her.”

“That is not possible.”

Clara drew a deep breath. “Then tell me if she’s alive.”

The man stared at her for a long moment. Far too long.

“That depends,” he said, “on how cooperative you are.”

Clara felt her heart break. Not because of the words—but because of the way he said them.

“What do you want from me?” she whispered.

The man took a step closer.

“We want you,” he said, “to help us find Jonas.”

29

Clara froze.

“Jonas is just a child.”

“Which is precisely why,” the man said. “Children don’t run far. But they hide well.”

Clara felt her breath catch in her throat.

“And you,” the man said, “are the only one he trusts.”

Clara stood there, the bracelet clutched in her hand, her eyes locked on the man, knowing:

This was the moment she had to choose.

For Jonas. For Mira. For herself.

Or for fear.

9 – The Night of the Decision

Clara walked home without knowing how she got there. Her steps were mechanical, her breath shallow, her thoughts a blur of images: Jonas's trembling hands. Mira's bracelet. The man in the black jacket saying that Jonas needed her. That Mira needed her. That she herself was in danger.

When she closed the door behind her, the apartment was silent. Too silent. Clara leaned back against it, dropped her head, and felt the night wrap around her like a heavy cloak.

She walked into the living room, sat down on the sofa, and opened her hand. The bracelet lay inside it. Red. Warm. Alive.

30

Clara ran her thumb across it. "Mira...", she whispered.

She looked around. The apartment was small, but it was her home. Here she had laughed. Here she had cried. Here she had pinned up Jonas's little drawings, which he had given her because he said she was "the nicest teacher in the world."

Now everything was different.

Clara stood up and walked to the window. The city lay quiet, only an occasional streetlight flickered, as if growing nervous. A car drove past, slowly, too slowly. Clara took a step back.

She knew she was being watched. Not constantly. Not openly. But enough to feel that every wrong step would carry consequences.

She sat back down. Placed the bracelet on the table. Took Jonas's note out of her jacket pocket.

“Watch out.” “Jonas.”

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to let in the fear she had held back all day.

Then she opened them again.

And in that moment, she knew she had to act.

Not tomorrow. Not eventually.

31

Tonight.

She stood up, went into the bedroom, and opened the wardrobe. She pulled out an old bag—one she hadn't used in years. She packed a few things inside: water, a jacket, a notebook, a photograph of Mira she always kept close.

Then she paused.

She looked down at her hands. They were shaking.

“I can't do this,” she whispered.

But then she saw Jonas's note. And Mira's bracelet. And the empty apartment, which suddenly felt like a place she could no longer remain.

Clara drew a deep breath.

“I must.”

She picked up the bag, put on her jacket, and walked to the door. Her hand rested on the handle. She hesitated.

Outside was the night. Outside were the men in the black jackets. Outside was the danger.

But outside were also Jonas and Mira.

Clara opened the door.

The air was cool. The street silent. The darkness thick.

32

Clara stepped out. She shut the door behind her without looking back.

Because on this night, Clara Winter made her decision:

She would find Jonas. She would find Mira. And she would no longer stay silent.

Not for Falk. Not for the men. Not for the State.

But for the people she loved.

And for those whom no one else would protect.

10 – The Tracks in the Dark

The night was quiet as Clara walked through the streets. Not the usual stillness that settles over cities after midnight, but a silence that felt as though someone were listening. The streetlights cast pale yellow circles onto the asphalt, and Clara kept strictly to the edges of the light, as if terrified of being seen.

She didn't know precisely where she was going. Only that she had to keep moving.

Jonas was somewhere out there. Mira was somewhere out there. And Clara was the only one who could follow them.

She went to the old playground first. Not because she truly believed she would find Jonas there, but because children seek out places that feel familiar. The sandbox was empty. The swing moved gently in the wind, as if someone had only just stepped off it.

33

Clara knelt down and ran her fingers through the sand. It was cold. Untouched.

She stood back up.

The second place was the bridge. The river rushed beneath it, darker than usual, faster than usual. Clara leaned over the railing. "Jonas...", she whispered.

No echo. Only water.

She turned to leave, but then her eyes caught something. A small footprint in the mud along the bank. Not large. Not deep. But unmistakable—a child's foot.

Clara knelt down. The print was fresh. Maybe an hour old. Maybe less.

Her heart hammered in her chest.

She followed the path that trailed along the shoreline. A second print. Then a third. Then nothing.

Clara looked around. The path led toward a small underpass cutting beneath the road. A place children usually avoided. A place adults ignored. A place that now gaped like an open gullet.

34

Clara drew a deep breath and stepped inside.

The air was damp. The walls cold. Her footsteps echoed despite her efforts to walk quietly.

Then she saw it.

A piece of paper lay on the ground. Crumpled. Half wet. Clara picked it up.

It was a page torn from a school notebook. Jonas's handwriting. Scrawly. Hastily written.

"I am hiding."

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to allow the surge of relief to cut through the darkness like a faint ray of light.

He was alive. He was free. He was somewhere close by.

She turned the paper over.

On the back was a second word. Smaller. Almost illegible.

“Forest.”

Clara felt her breath catch in her throat.

The forest. The place Jonas was forbidden to write about. The place the men had banned. The place where Mira used to say you could "finally think."

35

Clara tucked the paper into her pocket and kept moving through the underpass. At the far end, the ground opened into a narrow footpath leading out of the city.

The forest lay just ahead. Dark. Silent. Waiting.

Clara paused for a moment. The night was deep. The wind cold. The danger near.

But Jonas was in there. And perhaps Mira. And perhaps answers.

Clara pulled her jacket tighter around herself and set off along the path.

Every step was a risk. Every step was a choice. Every step was a promise.

She would find Jonas. She would find Mira. And she would not turn back.

Not anymore.

11 – The Forest Forbidden to Enter

The path narrowed the further Clara went. The city lay far behind her, reduced to a distant shimmer of light and noise that felt almost like a memory. Ahead of her lay the forest—dark, silent, and so dense that the night within it seemed blacker still.

Clara stood frozen.

36

The forest used to be a place where children played, families went for walks, and teenagers secretly smoked. Now it was a place no one talked about anymore. A place erased from the textbooks. A place Jonas was forbidden to mention.

A place that was forbidden.

Clara drew a deep breath. She knew she wasn't supposed to be here. She knew she might be watched. She knew every single step was a risk.

But Jonas was here. And perhaps Mira. And perhaps answers.

She stepped across the invisible border—one no one had marked, but everyone knew.

The forest swallowed her instantly.

The air was damp, heavy, filled with scents Clara hadn't consciously noticed in years: wet earth, moss, decaying leaves. The darkness was not empty—it was alive. Every snapping twig sounded like a intake of breath. Every shadow loomed like a silhouette.

Clara walked slowly. She didn't want to stumble. She didn't want to draw attention. She didn't want Jonas to be frightened if he saw her.

After a few minutes, she paused. Something lay on the ground. A small object, half-hidden beneath the fallen leaves.

Clara knelt down and picked it up.

37

It was a pencil. A cheap school pencil. The exact pen Jonas always used because he said it felt “just right in his hand.”

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to allow the surge of relief to pass through the cold like a warm spark.

He was here. Recently.

She slipped the pencil into her pocket and kept walking.

The woods grew thicker. The sounds quieter. The darkness heavier.

Then she heard it.

A faint rustling. Not large. Not threatening. But unmistakable.

Clara stopped in her tracks. “Jonas?” she whispered.

No answer.

She took a few steps forward. The rustling came again. Closer this time.

Clara knelt down to make herself smaller. “Jonas... it’s me. Clara.”

A moment of silence. Then a whisper.

“Ms. Winter?”

Clara’s heart hammered. “Yes. I’m here.”

38

The rustling turned into footsteps. Small steps. Hesitant steps.

Then she saw him.

Jonas was standing between two trees, arms wrapped tightly around himself, his eyes wide and filled with terror. His face was smudged with dirt, his clothes damp, his hair disheveled.

But he was alive.

Clara rose slowly. She didn’t want to startle him. She didn’t want to rush him.

“Jonas... come here.”

He hesitated. Then he took a step. Another. And another.

When he reached her, he threw his arms around her.

Clara held him tight. He was trembling. He was cold. He was exhausted.

“I knew you’d come,” he whispered.

Clara closed her eyes. “Of course I came.”

Jonas clung to her. “They’re looking for me.”

“I know.”

“They can’t find me.”

Clara nodded. “I will protect you.”

Jonas looked up at her. “How?”

Clara opened her mouth to answer. But in that exact moment, she heard something.

A loud snap. Not from Jonas. Not from her.

A heavy crunching sound. A footprint.

Then another.

Then a voice.

“Ms. Winter.”

Clara froze.

She turned around slowly.

Standing between the trees were two men. Black jackets. Black boots. Black, hollow stares.

“We’ve been looking for you,” one said.

Jonas clung even tighter to Clara.

The second man took a step closer.

“And we found what we were looking for.”

12 – The Escape Through the Trees

Clara felt Jonas’s hands on her arm, small, cold, desperate. The men stood only a few steps away, their black jackets looking like shifting shadows in the dark. The forest had grown silent, so silent that Clara could hear her own heartbeat. 40

“Ms. Winter,” one of the men said, “hand the boy over.”

Jonas clung to her even tighter. Clara placed a protective hand on his back. “No.”

The word was quiet, but firm. A word that surprised even her.

The man took a step closer. “You don’t know what you’re doing.”

Clara drew a deep breath. “Yes, I do.”

She grabbed Jonas’s hand. “Run.”

Jonas hesitated. Only for a second. Then he ran.

Clara ran right behind him.

The men reacted immediately. Heavy footsteps. Fast. Purposeful.

Clara heard them behind her, heard the snapping of branches, the rustling of jackets, the harsh sound of breathing. The forest was suddenly no longer a place, but a maze of darkness and obstacles.

“Jonas!” she called out softly. “Not straight—left!”

Jonas veered off, disappearing between two dense bushes. Clara followed him, feeling branches scrape against her arms, roots clawing at her feet from below. The ground was uneven, wet, dangerous. 41

A branch whipped across her face. She stumbled. Caught herself. Kept running.

The men were close. Too close.

“Stop right there!” one shouted.

Clara ran faster.

Jonas was a few meters ahead of her, small but swift, a shadow moving through the dark like someone who knew the woods. Clara felt her lungs burning, her legs growing heavy, fear paralyzing and driving her all at once.

Then she heard it.

A scream. Jonas's scream.

Clara didn't slow down. She sprinted toward the sound.

Jonas had tripped and was sprawling on the ground, hands over his head. One of the men was almost upon him, just two paces away.

Clara threw herself between them.

She shoved the man with every ounce of strength she possessed. He stumbled backward, caught off guard—not hurt, but disoriented.

“Run!” Clara screamed at Jonas.

42

Jonas scrambled to his feet and bolted again, deeper into the forest.

The second man grabbed Clara by the arm. His grip was hard, painful.

“You’re making a mistake,” he hissed.

Clara wrenched herself free. She didn't know how. She only knew that she did it.

She ran. Not gracefully. Not fast enough. But she ran.

The men didn't pursue her immediately. They went after Jonas.

Clara heard their heavy strides, heard their voices, heard Jonas's ragged breathing growing faster and faster.

She had to catch up to him. She had to protect him. She had to save him.

"Jonas!" she called out. "Over here!"

A rustle. A small shadow. Jonas appeared beside her, breathless, but alive.

"They're right behind us," he gasped.

"I know."

Clara gripped his hand. "We have to go deeper into the woods. They don't know the way in there."

43

Jonas nodded. He trusted her. Blindly. Completely.

They kept running until the sounds of the men began to fade. Until the darkness grew thicker. Until the forest swallowed them whole.

Clara came to a stop. Jonas stopped too.

Both were breathing heavily. Both were shaking. Both knew they were not safe.

But they hadn't been caught.

Not yet.

Clara knelt down and rested a hand on Jonas's shoulder.

“I’m with you,” she whispered.

Jonas nodded. “I know.”

Clara stared into the dark. She knew the men were still searching. She knew they wouldn’t give up. She knew the forest was vast—but not vast enough.

Yet she also knew something else:

She would not let go of Jonas again. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not as long as she still had breath.

13 – The Hideout in the Heart of the Forest

44

Clara and Jonas stood in the darkness, both out of breath, both trembling. The sounds of the men had grown quieter, but they had not disappeared. The forest was vast, yet not vast enough to be safe. Clara knew it. Jonas knew it. And the forest knew it, too.

“We have to keep moving,” Clara whispered.

Jonas nodded. He was exhausted, but he held on. Children could do that—they could endure when adults would have given up long ago.

Clara took his hand and led him deeper into the woods. The ground grew softer, the trees denser, the darkness heavier. It was a part of the forest Clara didn’t know. A part Jonas knew.

“Here,” he said suddenly.

Clara stopped in her tracks. “What’s here?”

Jonas pointed to a spot between two ancient, gnarled trees. Their roots rose out of the earth like fingers, and between them lay a narrow gap, barely visible, as if the forest had hidden it on purpose.

“I’ve been here before,” Jonas whispered. “With Mira.”

Clara felt her heart skip a beat. “With Mira?”

Jonas nodded. “She said you’re allowed to think here.”

Clara knelt down and peered into the opening. It was larger than it appeared—a kind of natural cave formed from roots and soil, sheltered by moss and shadow. A place no one would find unless they knew it existed. 45

“Come,” Jonas said.

He crawled inside. Clara followed him.

Inside, it was cramped, but warm. The roots formed a canopy that kept out the dampness. The ground was soft, as though someone had prepared it. It smelled of earth, of wood, of something old and reassuring.

Clara sat down. Jonas sat beside her. Both were breathing heavily.

“Mira said we’re safe here,” Jonas whispered.

Clara placed a hand on his shoulder. “Then we are.”

Jonas looked at her. “Do you really believe that?”

Clara wanted to lie. She wanted to say everything would be fine. That the forest would protect them. That the men wouldn't find them.

But she couldn't lie. Not now. Not to Jonas.

“I believe,” she said softly, “that we have time here.”

Jonas nodded. He understood. Children often understood far more than adults gave them credit for.

Clara leaned back against the roots. She felt the coldness of the wood, the warmth of the ground, Jonas's presence beside her. She heard the forest breathing. She heard her own heartbeat. She heard the silence that wasn't empty, but filled with meaning. 46

Then she saw something.

Etched into the wall of the root cavern was a small scratch. Not natural. Not accidental.

A sign. A letter: **M**

Clara touched it. The scratch was fresh. Not old. Not weathered.

“Mira,” she whispered.

Jonas nodded. “She was here. A few days ago.”

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to allow the surge of relief to pass through her like a warm current.

Mira was alive. Mira had been here. Mira had hidden Jonas. Mira had used the forest to protect him.

Clara opened her eyes again.

“Jonas,” she said softly, “we’ll stay here until daybreak.”

Jonas nodded. He rested his head against Clara’s shoulder. His breathing grew steady. His body relaxed.

Clara wrapped an arm around him. She listened to the forest. She listened to the night. She listened to the men off in the distance, searching without finding.

47

And she knew:

This was not just a hideout. This was a place where decisions were made. A place where people became who they had to be.

Clara Winter was no longer just a teacher.

She was now someone who hid children. Someone who ran against men in black jackets. Someone who entered the forest even though it was forbidden.

Someone who could never go back.

Clara didn't know when she had fallen asleep. Perhaps it hadn't been sleep at all, but a state suspended between waking and dreaming, in which the forest held her like a wild animal that didn't know whether it wanted to protect or test her. Jonas lay beside her, curled up like a small shadow, his breathing steady, his body finally at ease.

When Clara opened her eyes, the forest was no longer black. It was gray.

The dawn crept through the trees, hesitant, as if afraid to chase away the darkness. The first streaks of light filtered through the roots of the cavern, resting on Jonas's face like slender fingers.

48

Clara smiled. A small, exhausted smile.

Jonas stirred. "Is it morning yet?" he whispered.

"Almost."

He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and peered outside. "The forest sounds different."

Clara heard it now, too. The night had been dead silent, but the dawn was not. It was filled with voices.

Not human voices—the voices of the forest. Birds beginning to sing tentatively. Leaves rustling as though whispering to one another. The soft dripping of dew falling from the branches.

It was a sound that reminded Clara of times past. Of days she had spent here with Mira before the forest was forbidden. Of times when no one was afraid to think.

Jonas looked at her. “Are we safe now?”

Clara shook her head. “No. But we have time.”

Jonas nodded. He understood. He always understood.

Clara crawled out of the root cavern. The ground was damp, but the forest felt brighter, kinder, almost curious. She stood up and looked around.

No men. No footsteps. No voices other than those of the forest.

Jonas stepped out beside her. “Mira said the forest is braver in the morning.”

Clara smiled. “Did she really say that?”

“Yes. She said in the morning you see things you can’t see at night.”

Clara gazed into the distance. Between the trees lay a narrow path she hadn’t noticed the evening before. It was barely visible, but it was there—a faint streak of light amidst the deep green.

“Jonas,” she said softly, “did Mira go that way?”

Jonas nodded. “She said the path leads to a place no one knows about.”

Clara felt her heart beat faster. “What kind of place?”

Jonas looked up at her. “A place where you can’t be found.”

Clara drew a deep breath. The forest was not merely a hideout. It was a network. A space filled with secrets that Mira knew—and that Jonas knew because Mira had shown them to him.

“We’re going down that path,” Clara said.

Jonas nodded. He trusted her. Blindly. Completely.

They set off. The path was narrow, but distinct. The dawn grew brighter, the voices of the forest louder, and Clara felt something within herself shift.

She was no longer just a teacher. No longer just a sister. No longer just a frightened woman. **50**

She was someone leading a boy through a forbidden forest. Someone running against men in black jackets. Someone searching for Mira. Someone who could never turn back.

When they had gone a few yards, they heard it.

A voice. Soft. Hesitant. Not threatening—familiar.

“Clara?”

Clara froze in her tracks. Her heart hammered against her chest. Jonas grabbed her hand.

The voice came from a distance. Between the trees. Out of the morning light.

“Clara? Is that you?”

Clara turned around slowly.

And saw a figure. Slender. Familiar. With disheveled hair and an expression that held both terror and hope.

Mira.

15 – Mira in the Light of the Forest

Mira stood between the trees as if the forest had placed her there gently, cautiously, like something fragile. The morning light settled over her face like a thin veil, and Clara needed a moment to realize that she was truly standing there.

51

“Mira...,” she whispered.

Mira took a step closer. Her face was pale, her eyes tired, but within them burned a spark that Clara recognized instantly—the spark that had always stayed with Mira, even in the darkest moments.

“You’re really here,” Clara said.

Mira nodded. “I was looking for you.”

Jonas squeezed Clara’s hand tighter. “Mira,” he said softly, “they were right behind us.”

Mira looked at him, and in her eyes was something Clara had never seen before: fear. Not for herself—for Jonas.

“I know,” Mira said. “I heard them.”

Clara stepped toward her. She wanted to wrap her arms around her, but Mira raised a hand, stopping her.

“Not now,” she whispered. “They’re still in the forest.”

Clara felt her heart hammer in her chest. “How close?”

“Close enough,” Mira said. “But not close enough to see us.”

Jonas looked back and forth between them. “Mira... where were you?”

Mira knelt down so she was at eye level with him. “I was where no one can find you.”

52

Jonas nodded. He understood. He always understood.

Clara sat down on a fallen tree trunk. Her legs felt heavy, as if they had been fighting against the forest all night long.

“Mira,” she said softly, “what happened? Why did you go into hiding?”

Mira looked at her for a long moment. Too long. Then she sat down beside Clara.

“They started asking questions,” Mira said. “About me. About you. About Jonas.”

Clara felt her breath catch in her throat. “About me?”

“Yes.” Mira looked off into the trees, as if searching for answers among them. “They know you care about Jonas. That you protect him. That you won’t stay silent.”

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to allow the fear to rush through her like a cold current.

“I didn’t do anything,” she whispered.

“You did,” Mira said. “You thought.”

Clara opened her eyes. “That’s not a crime.”

Mira gave a sad smile. “To them, it is.”

Jonas sat down between them, small, yet determined. “What do we do now?”

53

Mira rested a hand on his back. “We go deeper into the forest.”

Clara looked at her. “Why?”

“Because there’s something there,” Mira said. “Something they don’t know about. Something that can help us.”

Clara felt a knot tighten in her chest. “What do you mean?”

Mira stood up. “I’ll show you.”

Jonas scrambled up immediately. Clara followed more slowly.

Mira led the way, light-footed and confident, as though the forest knew her. Jonas followed, trusting her completely. Clara

followed them both, even though she didn't know where they were heading.

The forest grew brighter. The voices of the morning louder. The air warmer.

Then Mira stopped.

Before them lay a clearing. Small. Circular. Hidden.

In the center stood an ancient tree, grander than all the others, its bark dark, its branches spread wide like arms holding something safe.

“Here,” Mira said. “This is where it begins.”

Clara stepped closer. “What is this place?”

54

Mira looked at her. “A place they don’t know. A place they don’t control. A place where we can decide what to do.”

Jonas placed a hand against the trunk. “It feels warm.”

Mira nodded. “That’s good.”

Clara looked back and forth between the two of them. “Mira... what are you planning?”

Mira stepped up to her. Her voice was quiet, but steady.

“I’m done running.”

Clara felt her heart leap into her throat. “And what will you do instead?”

Mira gazed across the clearing. “I’m going to fight.”

Jonas looked up at her. “How?”

Mira smiled. “By starting to tell the truth.”

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to grasp the weight of those words.

When she opened them again, she knew:

This was no longer a hideout.

This was a beginning.

16 – The Tree of Truth

The tree stood in the middle of the clearing like a guardian that had been waiting for decades for someone to look at it again. Its bark was dark, almost black, and the ridges within it looked like characters of a forgotten language. Jonas ran his fingers over them cautiously, reverently.

“It’s warm,” he said.

Clara placed a hand on the bark as well. Jonas was right. The tree felt alive—not merely like a piece of wood, but like something that knew they were there.

Mira stood beside them, arms crossed, her eyes fixed on the trunk. “We used to sit here,” she said. “Before everything was banned.”

Clara looked at her. “Why right here?”

Mira took a deep breath. “Because this place wasn’t forgotten.”

Jonas sat down at the roots, as if instinctively sensing that the tree could offer protection. Clara followed his lead, and Mira sat across from them so they formed a small, closed triangle.

“Clara,” Mira began, “you need to know why they’re after Jonas.”

Clara felt her heart beat faster. “Tell me.”

Mira looked at Jonas. “He saw something.”

Jonas lowered his gaze. “I didn’t mean to see it.”

Clara rested a hand on his shoulder. “What did you see?”

Jonas hesitated. Then he lifted his head. His voice was quiet, but clear.

“I saw them take someone away.”

Clara felt her breath catch in her throat. “Who?”

Jonas shook his head. “I don’t know him. He was old. He asked why the forest was forbidden.”

Mira nodded. “And Jonas asked why anyone shouldn’t be allowed to ask.”

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to absorb the truth that coursed through her like a cold draft.

“They heard him,” Mira said. “And they saw Jonas.”

Jonas pulled his knees tight against his chest. “I just wanted to know why.”

Clara placed both hands over his. “You did nothing wrong.”

Mira looked at Clara. “Not to us. But to them, he did.”

Clara felt anger rising inside her. Quiet. Dangerous. New.

“And that’s why they hunt a child?”

Mira nodded. “Because children haven’t learned to keep quiet yet.”

57

Clara looked up at the tree. The bark resembled a web of stories no one told anymore. “What does this place have to do with it?”

Mira rested a hand against the trunk. “People used to talk here. About things you weren’t allowed to say. About freedom. About fear. About hope.”

Clara met her gaze. “And you believe that here we can... what?”

Mira smiled faintly. “That we can start here.”

Jonas looked back and forth between them. “Start what?”

Mira leaned in toward him. “With the truth.”

Clara felt something shift inside her. Not loudly. Not suddenly. But deep.

“Mira,” she said softly, “what are you going to do?”

Mira looked out across the clearing. “I’m done running. I’m done keeping quiet. I’m done waiting for them to come take us.”

Clara swallowed hard. “And what does that mean?”

Mira looked her in the eyes. “It means we are no longer alone.”

Clara frowned. “What do you mean?”

58

Mira stood up. She placed a hand on the tree, as though asking for its permission.

“There are others,” she said. “People who meet here. People who refuse to stay silent. People who know the forest isn’t forbidden because it’s dangerous—but because it’s free.”

Clara felt her heart hammer. “Others?”

Mira nodded. “They are coming at sunrise.”

Jonas leaped up. “Now?”

“Yes,” Mira said. “Today.”

Clara stood up as well. “Mira... what have you done?”

Mira looked at her. “I told them you were coming.”

Clara froze. “Why?”

Mira took a step closer. “Because you’re the only one who can protect Jonas. And because you’re the only one left who still believes children should be allowed to think.”

Clara felt her breath catch. Felt the truth spread through her. Felt the forest wrap around them.

Then they heard it.

Footsteps. Quiet. Many of them. Approaching from different directions.

Jonas grabbed Clara’s hand.

Mira smiled.

“They’re here.”

59

17 – The Gathering in the Light

The footsteps came from all directions. Quiet, cautious, but not fearful. They were the steps of people who knew they had to stay hidden—yet came anyway.

Clara stood beside Jonas, Mira a few paces ahead, her eyes fixed on the clearing. The dawn had grown brighter, a soft, silvery light spreading across the ground like a promise.

Figures began to emerge from between the trees.

First two. Then four. Then more.

Men, women, teenagers. No children except Jonas. All of them with tired eyes, but alert faces. All carrying a posture that declared: We are afraid—but we are here regardless.

Clara felt her heart hammer in her chest. She didn't know who these people were. She didn't know if she could trust them. She only knew that Mira trusted them.

And that had to be enough.

A woman stepped forward. She was perhaps in her mid-forties, with streaks of gray in her hair and a gaze that was both strict and warm.

60

“Mira,” she said softly. “You really brought her.”

Mira nodded. “She had to come.”

The woman looked at Clara. Not suspiciously—searching, assessing.

“You’re Clara Winter.”

Clara nodded. “Yes.”

“The teacher.”

“Yes.”

The woman stepped closer. “You hid Jonas.”

Clara rested a hand on Jonas's shoulder. "I protected him."

The woman nodded slowly. "It's the same thing."

Jonas looked up at Mira. "Who are they?"

Mira knelt beside him. "People who refuse to stay silent any longer."

A man stepped forward. Tall, with a face that looked as though it had endured far more winters than summers.

"We've been waiting a long time," he said. "For someone like you."

Clara frowned. "Like me?"

61

"Someone who doesn't just think," the man said, "but acts."

Clara felt a knot tighten in her chest. "I only helped Jonas."

"Precisely because of that," said the woman. "You did the right thing, even though it was dangerous."

Mira stepped up beside Clara. "They know what you've risked."

Clara looked around the circle. "What do you want from me?"

The woman smiled. A small, tired, but genuine smile.

"We want you to help us."

Clara felt her breath catch in her throat. "With what?"

The man looked at Jonas. “With protecting the children.”

Jonas squeezed Clara’s hand. “I don’t want them to take me.”

Clara knelt down. “I won’t let them take you.”

The woman stepped closer. “Then you’re one of us.”

Clara looked at her. “What does that mean?”

The woman pointed toward the tree. “This place is our meeting point. Our beginning. Our truth.”

Mira nodded. “Here we talk about what isn’t allowed to be said.”

62

Clara felt the clearing shift. Not on the outside—on the inside. It transformed into a sanctuary made not merely of trees and soil, but of courage, fear, and hope.

“And what am I supposed to do?” Clara asked.

The man looked at her for a long moment. “You’re a teacher. You know the children. You know who is at risk. You know who thinks.”

Clara swallowed hard. “I can’t hide all of them.”

“No,” said the woman. “But you can teach them how to think without making noise.”

Clara felt her heart beat faster. “And what about Jonas?”

Mira placed a hand on Jonas's shoulder. "He stays with us. Until it's safe."

Jonas looked at Clara. "Are you staying here too?"

Clara opened her mouth to answer. But before she could speak, she heard something.

A snap. Not loud. But wrong.

The people in the clearing froze.

Mira turned around slowly.

Between the trees, a shadow moved.

Then a second.

Then a third.

Clara felt her breath catch.

The woman whispered: "They found us."

Jonas clung tightly to Clara.

Mira stood up, her eyes narrowing, her body tense.

The man said softly: "Everyone fall back. Into the dark."

But it was too late.

The men in the black jackets stepped into the clearing.

And this time, there were far more than two.

18 – The Circle Closes

The men stepped into the clearing, one after another, like a dark current forcing its way through the trees. Their black jackets looked even harsher in the pale morning light, their footsteps heavier, their gazes sharper. Clara felt Jonas's hand trembling in hers.

Mira stepped in front of them both. Neither tall nor imposing—yet steadfast. Like someone who understood that courage did not need to be loud.

The woman from the gathering raised a hand. “Stay calm.”

But no one was calm. Not really.

64

The men came to a halt, forming a line that cut the clearing in two. An invisible divide between those who thought—and those who prohibited it.

The man in the middle stepped forward. He was the same one who had cornered Clara at the warehouse. His eyes were cold, but far from mindless. He knew precisely what he was doing.

“Ms. Winter,” he said quietly. “You’ve given us quite a lot of trouble.”

Clara felt her heart hammer against her ribs. “I protected a child.”

“A child,” the man repeated. “Who asks questions.”

Jonas squeezed Clara's hand tighter. "I only wanted to know why the forest is forbidden."

The man looked at him. "And that is exactly why you are dangerous."

A murmur rippled through the gathering. Low. Angry. Hurt.

Mira took a step forward. "He's a child. You're hunting a child."

The man smiled. A thin, calculated smile.

"Children are malleable. If they are shaped incorrectly, we must intervene."

Clara felt anger surge within her. "You're afraid of children." 65

The man locked eyes with her. "We are afraid of people who think."

The woman from the gathering stepped up. "You have no right to be here."

"We have every right," the man said. "The forest belongs to the State."

Mira shook her head. "The forest belongs to no one."

"It does," said the man. "To us."

He raised a hand. Two men stepped forward, advancing toward Jonas.

Clara threw herself in front of him. “No.”

The man looked at her. “Ms. Winter, step aside.”

“I will not step aside.”

“Then we take you, too.”

The gathering moved. Not in chaos—in unison. Like a circle pulling close.

The people stepped forward, closing around Clara, Jonas, and Mira, placing themselves between them and the men. It was not an attack. It was a boundary.

The man raised his hand once more. “You know you cannot win this.”

66

The woman answered. “We know that we will no longer stay silent.”

The man stared at her for a long moment. “You are making a mistake.”

“Perhaps,” the woman said. “But it is our mistake to make.”

A beat of silence. Heavy. Dense. Perilous.

Then they heard it.

A snap. Not from the men. Not from the gathering.

From the trees.

A second snap. A third.

The men turned around.

Clara felt Jonas's breath catch.

Mira whispered: "They're not alone."

More figures emerged from the woods. Not in black jackets. Not armed. Not shouting.

People. Dozens of them. From every direction. From different corners of the city. From different walks of life.

They stepped into the clearing, positioning themselves behind the gathering, forming a second outer ring.

67

The man in the black jacket looked around. For the first time, he did not appear confident. Nor superior. Nor unwavering.

"What is this?", he asked.

The woman replied: "This is the forest."

Mira stepped beside Clara. "And the forest will no longer be silent."

The man glared at Clara. "You did this."

Clara shook her head. "No. You did this."

A silence fell over the glade. Then the man took a step back.

"This isn't over," he said.

“It is,” said Mira. “For today.”

The men exchanged glances. They were outnumbered. Too exposed. Entirely isolated.

They retreated. Slowly. Furious. But they retreated.

When they had disappeared into the brush, silence returned to the clearing. Not an empty silence—a quiet stillness.

Jonas looked up at Clara. “Are we safe now?”

Clara knelt down beside him. “No. But we are no longer alone.”

Mira rested her hand against the tree. “The circle has closed.” **68**

The woman nodded. “And now, something new begins.”

19 – The Decision of the Clearing

The men were gone. Not far—but gone. Their footsteps had dissolved into the forest, their voices had fallen silent, their presence reduced to little more than a shadow hanging between the trees like the lingering remains of night.

The clearing was still. Not empty—still.

The people stood shoulder to shoulder, a ring of bodies and gazes holding one another fast. Jonas stood beside Clara; his small hand locked firmly in hers. Mira stood on the other side; her eyes fixed on the path the men had taken.

No one spoke. No one moved. No one knew how long the silence was permitted to last.

Then the woman from the gathering stepped forward. She looked at Clara, then at Mira, then at Jonas.

“We have to decide,” she said.

Clara felt something tighten inside her. “Decide what?”

“Whether we keep going,” the woman said. “Or whether we go into hiding.”

A murmur rippled through the group. Low. Uncertain. Pained.

The tall man with the weathered face stepped up. “They will return.”

69

Mira nodded. “Yes.”

“And next time with more men.”

“Yes.”

Clara looked back and forth between them. “What do you want to do?”

The woman looked her in the eye. “That depends on you.”

Clara froze. “On me?”

“You opened the circle,” said the woman. “You protected Jonas. You held off the men. You showed us that we can no longer wait.”

Clara shook her head. “I only did what was right.”

“Precisely because of that,” said the man. “That is why they listen to you.”

Clara looked around the circle. The people were watching her. Not like a hero—but like someone who had done what they themselves could no longer do.

Jonas squeezed her hand. “They need you.”

Clara knelt down beside him. “Jonas... I’m no leader.”

“You are,” Jonas said. “To me.”

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to allow the truth to pass through her like a warm current.

Mira stepped up to her. “Clara... you have to decide whether we fight or flee.”

Clara looked at her. “What do you want?”

Mira took a deep breath. “I’m done running.”

Clara stood up. She looked across the clearing. Into the faces. Into the hope. Into the fear.

“If we fight,” she said softly, “they will hunt us.”

“They are hunting us already,” said the woman.

“If we flee,” Clara said, “they will find us.”

“They are finding us already,” said the man.

Clara looked up at the tree in the center of the clearing. It seemed larger than before. Stronger. More watchful.

“Then there is only one choice,” Clara said.

The people stepped closer. Jonas looked up at her. Mira held her breath.

Clara placed a hand on the tree. The bark was warm. Alive. Like a heartbeat.

71

“We stay,” she said.

A moment of silence. Then a collective sigh. Soft. United.

The woman nodded. “Then we stay.”

The man placed a hand on Jonas’s shoulder. “Then we protect him.”

Mira stepped beside Clara. “Then it begins now.”

Clara looked out across the clearing. At the people. At the forest.

“We stay,” she repeated. “And we speak. And we think. And we will never stop again.”

Jonas smiled. A small, tired, but genuine smile.

The woman raised her hand. “Then it is decided.”

The circle closed tighter. Not out of fear—out of resolve.

And the forest listened.

20 – The Night of Preparation

The sun had long since set, and the forest was once again enveloped in darkness. Not the ominous darkness of flight, but a darkness that settled over the clearing like a protective cloak. The people stayed, just as Clara had said. No one left. No one expressed doubt out loud. No one questioned the decision.

72

Clara sat at the base of the great tree, Jonas beside her, Mira across from them. The others had dispersed throughout the area; some kept watch, some whispered among themselves, others sat silently, listening to the forest.

The woman from the gathering stepped over to them. “We must make use of the night.”

Clara nodded. “What exactly do we need to do?”

The woman sat down. “We have to figure out how they found us.”

Mira gazed into the dark. “They follow tracks. Sounds. Fear.”

The tall man shook his head. “No. They follow information.”

Clara felt a knot tighten in her chest. “Someone told them we were here?”

“Not necessarily,” the woman said. “But they know that people are disappearing. That children are asking questions. That teachers are no longer staying silent.”

Clara looked at Jonas. He was tired, but alert. “They know Jonas is here.”

“Yes,” Mira said. “And they know you are with him.”

Clara pressed her lips together. “Then we have to make sure they don’t find us again.”

The man nodded. “Precisely.”

73

The woman looked at Clara. “We need someone who can protect the children. Someone who knows how they think. Someone who can teach them how to ask questions without getting caught.”

Clara felt her heart beat faster. “You mean me.”

“Yes,” said the woman. “You’re a teacher. You are the bridge.”

Clara looked down at her hands. They were trembling slightly. Not out of fear—out of responsibility.

“And what about Mira?”

Mira smiled faintly. “I know the paths through the forest. I know the people who are in hiding. I can guide them.”

Jonas looked back and forth between the two of them. “And me?”

Clara rested a hand on his shoulder. “You are the reason we are doing this.”

Jonas nodded. He understood. He always understood.

The woman stood up. “We need to prepare. We need to know what to do if they return.”

The man stepped closer. “We must set up watches. Secure the routes. Agree on signals.”

Mira nodded. “And we have to use the forest. It is vast. It is ancient. It protects us if we know how.”

74

Clara stood up as well. “What can I do?”

The woman looked at her. “You can speak to the children. Not right now—but soon. You can teach them how to think without making noise. How to ask questions without getting caught. How to protect themselves.”

Clara felt something shift inside her. Not suddenly—but deep down.

“I can do that.”

“We know,” said the woman.

Mira stepped up to Clara. “And you have to decide whether you’re going back to the city.”

Clara froze. “Why should I go back?”

“Because you are needed there,” Mira said. “Because that’s where you’ll find the children. Because that’s where you can spread the truth.”

Clara looked across the clearing. At the people. Into the forest.

“And if they take me there?”

Mira placed a hand on her shoulder. “Then we’ll bring you back.”

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to grasp the weight of those words.

75

When she opened them again, the decision was clear.

“I’m going back tomorrow,” she said.

Jonas looked up at her. “Alone?”

“No,” Clara said. “With the forest at my back.”

The woman nodded. “Then the preparation begins now.”

The people moved. Quietly. Purposefully. Like a single body that had learned to breathe as one.

Clara stared into the darkness.

She was no longer just a teacher. No longer just a sister. No longer just a woman who was afraid.

She was someone who had made a decision. Someone who led a community. Someone who stepped into the forest, even though it was forbidden.

And the night was her ally.

21 – Return to the City

The morning was cool when Clara left the forest. Not cold—cool, like a breath whispering: *You must go now, but you are allowed to return.* Jonas was still sleeping, wrapped in a blanket of moss and weariness. Mira sat beside him, awake, watchful, serene.

Clara stood at the edge of the clearing. The people of the gathering had dispersed; some slept, some kept watch, others sat quietly listening to the woods. No one spoke. No one hurried her. No one held her back.

76

Mira stepped up to her. “You know what you have to do.”

Clara nodded. “I’m going back.”

“And you will come back here.”

Clara looked at her. “If I can.”

Mira placed a hand on her shoulder. “You will.”

Jonas shifted in his sleep, muttering something unintelligible, and Clara felt her heart tighten. “Take care of him.”

“As I would of myself,” Mira said.

Clara smiled. A small, exhausted, but genuine smile.

She set off.

The forest was different in the dawn light. Not threatening—alert. Not dark—observant. Not silent—breathing.

Clara felt it accompanying her. Not as a shield, not as a boundary, but as a reminder: *You are not alone.*

When she caught sight of the city's first houses, she stopped in her tracks. The city felt foreign. Not because it had changed—but because Clara had changed.

She kept walking.

77

The streets were empty. A few streetlamps were still lit. A car drove past, slowly, too slowly.

Clara felt the eyes upon her. Not directly—yet she felt them all the same. The city saw her. The city knew she had been gone. The city knew she was back.

She reached her apartment. The door was untouched. The hallway was unchanged. The key fit just as it always had.

Yet as she opened the door, she knew:

Nothing was as it used to be.

She stepped inside. The silence was heavy. The air was cool. The room was empty.

Clara sat down on the sofa. She folded her hands in her lap. She took a deep breath.

She was back. But she was no longer the same person.

She was someone who had guided a boy through a forbidden forest. Someone who had found a community. Someone who had made a decision. Someone who could no longer remain silent.

She looked out the window. The city lay quiet before her. But Clara knew that the silence was a facade.

She knew that the men in the black jackets were looking for her. She knew that the children were asking questions. She knew that Mira was waiting in the forest. She knew that Jonas trusted her. 78

And she knew that the forest had not forgotten she would return.

Clara stood up. She walked over to the table. She took a sheet of paper. She wrote only a single word upon it.

“Begin.”

Then she set the pen down.

And the story went on.

22 – The First Steps

Clara stood by the window of her apartment, her hands resting on the frame, her gaze fixed on the city. It was late evening, the streets lay quiet, and the streetlamps appeared like small islands in a sea of darkness. The city was the same as it had always been—and yet, to Clara, it was no longer the same.

She had the forest at her back. She had Jonas in her heart. She had Mira in her mind. And she carried the clearing within her.

Clara took a deep breath. The air was cool, but not cold. It felt like a beginning.

She sat down at the table. The sheet of paper she had written on that morning lay there. A single word written upon it. **79**

“Begin.”

Clara ran her finger across it. It was not a plan. Not a manifesto. Not a call to arms.

It was a step.

She took a fresh sheet. She wrote slowly, without haste, without fear.

“Children are allowed to think.”

She set the pen down. She looked at the sentence. It was simple. It was clear. It was dangerous.

Clara stood up. She walked over to the shelf. She retrieved Jonas's drawing—the small sun he had once given her—and placed it on the table. She looked down at it.

"I will start with them," she whispered.

She knew what that meant. She knew it was risky. She knew the men in the black jackets would be watching her. She knew that the school was no longer merely a place of learning—but a place of silence.

Yet she also knew that silence was no longer an option.

Not for her. Not for Jonas. Not for Mira. Not for the clearing.

Clara sat back down. She kept writing. Short sentences. Simple thoughts. Words that children could understand—and adults 80 feared.

"Questions are not a mistake."

"The forest is not forbidden."

"Knowledge is not a crime."

She heard footsteps in the hallway. Soft. Hesitant.

Clara froze. She stood up. She walked to the door.

A note lay on the floor before it. Folded. Unlabeled.

Clara picked it up. She unfolded it.

Only a single word was written inside.

“Tomorrow.”

Clara closed her eyes. Just for a second. Just long enough to absorb the weight of its meaning as it coursed through her like a warm current.

Mira. Or someone from the gathering. Or someone who knew that Clara was back.

She placed the note on the table. She looked at her words. She looked at Jonas’s drawing. She looked out the window.

Then she smiled. A small, quiet, but genuine smile.

“Then we begin tomorrow.”

81

She stood up. She turned off the light. She went into the bedroom.

And the story went on.

Not loudly. Not heroically. Not wrapped up in a tidy conclusion.

But open. Like a forest. Like a question. Like a child who thinks.

Epilogue – The Quiet Beginning

The next morning, Clara walked to school. She walked no faster than usual, no slower—but differently. She walked like someone who knew that every step carried meaning.

The city was awake, but unobservant. People went to work, children to school, cars drove past. Everything was as it always was. Except Clara.

When she entered the school building, she saw the children. Their faces were tired, their eyes cautious, their voices quiet. They didn't know what had happened in the forest. They didn't know that Jonas was there. They didn't know that Clara had returned to begin something.

Clara sat down at her desk. She placed the sheet of paper in front of her. She looked at the words.

“Children are allowed to think.”

She knew it was dangerous. She knew it was right.

82

When the first students walked in, she smiled. A small, quiet, but genuine smile.

“Good morning,” she said.

And in that moment, something began that was larger than herself. Not loudly. Not visibly. Not all at once.

But it began.

Like a forest. Like a question. Like a child who thinks.

Note:

The term *Reich* possesses a long tradition within German linguistic and political history, dating back to the early medieval kingdoms of the 6th to 9th centuries. In historical scholarship, however, only three political entities are retrospectively designated as "Reiche" in the sense of German statehood or governance:

- I. **Holy Roman Empire (962–1806):** In academic research, it is not referred to as the "First Reich," but rather as a supranational, legally complex governing entity of medieval and early modern Europe. It was not a German nation-state, but a supranational empire with a highly decentralized structure.
- II. **German Empire (1871–1918):** The term "Second Reich" is a subsequent historiographical construction that emerged in the 19th century. The Empire was the first modern German nation-state, founded under Prussian hegemony.
- III. **National Socialist Germany (1933–1945):** The term "Third Reich" was a propaganda self-designation used by the National Socialists and is used in scholarship only with detachment or in quotation marks. The regime was a totalitarian dictatorship that ideologically inflated and politically abused the concept of the *Reich*.

An "IV. Reich" does not exist in historical research. The term appears exclusively in political propaganda, conspiracy

narratives, or fictional contexts, and possesses no scientific foundation.

In the novella, the expression therefore functions not as a historical continuation, but as a literary cautionary motif reflecting the problematic instrumentalization of the *Reich* concept.