

Mama didn't hear the whispering but little Haddon did. It was coming from the bedroom. He threw down his toy hammer and went to investigate. The whispering was louder over by the trunk where Mama kept all the old clothes that were too small for Haddon now. He ran over and pushed on it with all the weight of his tiny body. It didn't move. He gave a huff of frustration and bent to put his ear up to where the trunk backed up to the wall. He could still hear it. What was it saying? It sounded sad. He needed to help.

“Papa!”

Mama came into the bedroom, one hand bracing her back. “Papa's not here right now, baby. What do you need?”

Haddon pointed urgently at the trunk. “They need help, Mama!”

“Who needs help?”

Haddon jumped up and down. “I don't know! Listen, Mama! They're sad!”

He patted the wall. “Right here! Right here!”

Mama shook her head and rubbed her back again. “Baby, I don't hear anything.”

Haddon grabbed her hand and pulled her to the trunk. “Push it!” he demanded.

She sighed and pushed the trunk away from the wall, straightening up slowly. Haddon squealed and clapped his hands, brown eyes wide. The whispering filled his ears. The wall behind the trunk warped and churned, strange colors shooting through it. It made his tummy hurt. He wanted to touch it.

He reached out a chubby hand. Mama screamed and snatched him up. Before Haddon knew what was happening, they were standing in the kitchen and Mama was squeezing him way too tight.

“Mama!” he protested, trying to push away. She wouldn’t let go. He wanted to get down and listen for what the whispering was saying. He was sure he could understand it if Mama would just put him down.

They both looked up when Papa rushed in. “Listeners!” Papa was out of breath. He must have been running fast. Papa could run very fast. “Are they coming here?”

Mama nodded. “Haddon. He heard it.” She made a funny sound in her throat. “This is my nightmare. I won’t let them take him.”

Now Papa was squeezing them both. Too tight. “Papa. They’re sad.”

Papa held Haddon’s face in his big, rough hands. “Haddon.” he looked very serious. “The Listeners are coming. They’ll fix the rift. Be very quiet while they’re here. Don’t say anything about what you hear. Do you understand?”

Haddon pulled his face away and looked back toward the bedroom. “Look at me, son.” Papa said.

Haddon looked back at Papa. “You stay right here with Mama. Yes?”

Haddon frowned. “Yes, Papa.”

Mama finally put him down. She ran her fingers through the wispy brown hair that curled around his ears and then licked her finger and scrubbed at his cheek. He pushed her hand away, feeling grumpy. Why wouldn’t Papa let him go look at the wall? The whispering pulled at him.

Mama’s breath caught and Haddon looked up to see a group of strange grown ups gliding in through the door Papa had left open. Haddon’s eyes went wide as the strangers went right into the bedroom without even looking at Mama and Papa and Haddon. The brightness and smoothness of their clothes stood out in the brownness and roughness of his home. Even with all that brightness and smoothness, he couldn’t see their faces tucked back into the darkness of their hoods.

Mama gave a small gasp as Haddon dodged around her and followed the bright smooth ones into the bedroom. She grabbed his shoulder, pulling him up short just inside the doorway. Papa slipped in and stood just in front of them. The strangers didn't even turn around. They clustered around the place in the wall that called to Haddon. Mama's grip on his shoulder tightened. He ducked away from her and crouched under Papa's legs, peering out between them.

Haddon's serious brown eyes widened when the Listeners leaned in, plunging their outstretched hands into the warping and churning. He reached his own little hand out. Papa picked him up and held on to both of his soft, chubby hands with one of his rough, lean ones. A strange whispering filled little Haddon's ears. Mama leaned on Papa, a low whimper escaping her, her hands spread protectively over her swollen tummy. Haddon wondered if the baby Mama had said was growing there could hear the whispering too. He leaned forward. Papa pulled him back, pushing Haddon's head down on Papa's bony shoulder. Haddon squirmed. He wanted to see. He wanted to touch. He could hear. He stopped squirming so he could listen better.

Suddenly, the whispering stopped. Papa's hand fell away from Haddon's head. Haddon looked. The Listeners were gliding through the door. Papa put him down. Haddon ran to the space on the wall. He touched. It was back to being still and brown and rough. He listened. It was quiet.

“Haddon. Now.”

His father's voice was quiet but there was an implacability to it that even a fourteen year old boy couldn't ignore. Haddon scowled and tossed the tiny wooden animal he had been carving onto the work table, perhaps harder than was strictly necessary. His mother stood at the door of the woodshop and he felt a pang when he saw how the worry had hollowed out dark shadows under her eyes. The Listeners had been coming more and more frequently. Papa had said this

would happen. Rifts seemed to open up more around people who could hear them. The Listeners always figured out who it was eventually. It still made Haddon angry that they had to accept it as inevitable. His little sister, Mol, peered around her mother, her brown eyes large in her pinched face.

Haddon hugged Mama like he always did. It was still strange being taller than her now. He ruffled Mol's hair. She glared at him. He grinned at her. Then, with a sigh, he turned toward where Papa stood holding the trap door open.

"Love you, son," Papa said as Haddon crouched.

Haddon met his father's eyes. "It won't be today, Papa. They won't take me today."

The now familiar crease appeared between Papa's eyebrows but he nodded. Haddon sighed and dropped into the damp, cold space beneath the workshop that seemed to grow tighter and darker each year. The trap door closed overhead and dirt sprinkled into his face. The sound of the heavy work table being dragged over the top of the door vibrated his eardrums.

Haddon closed his eyes and began to count his breathing. They would be here soon. He had to focus on something that was not the open rift next door. This one spoke of mourning and desperation. Papa had said that the Listeners fixed the rifts but to Haddon it seemed more like they killed them. The whispering would be cut off, sometimes abruptly, sometimes it seemed to drain off weakly into silence. The Listeners usually took a child as soon as it was clear the child could hear the rifts. Papa said a child needed to be raised by his parents who loved him, that he could go with the Listeners soon enough. Haddon thought it was nearly time. He wasn't a child anymore after all. And something needed to be done to truly fix the rifts that swelled open all over the city. Something wasn't right.

5 The Boy and the Rift

Overhead, the sound of the whetstone started back up as his father resumed sharpening his wood ax. His sister's voice faded away as she followed their mother back into the house. Everyone would be hard at work when the Listeners arrived. Everyone would be pretending that Haddon did not exist.