

Chapter 5: The Four-Cornered Grove

Nick Parker appeared out of the shadows of the Grove and moved slowly toward the kids. Charlie's father was six feet tall and wore a blue workman's jumpsuit. Pockets of all different sizes covered his legs, some empty while others bulged with gardening tools of all shapes and sizes. In his right hand he gripped a large shovel, gleaming gold in the morning sunlight. With each step, the handle of the shovel left a small pot mark in the dirt path of the trail that snaked its way into the Grove.

He stopped in front of the classmates, lifted his head, and smiled. "Welcome, children. Today you will become part of Devon Grove, and Devon Grove will become part of you." Raising his hands and the shovel, he made a grand gesture back to the Grove. Applause rippled through the crowd, and for the first time he let his eyes leave the companions to survey the crowd.

The past few years had seen fewer people coming to the Talent Day ceremony. Rumors of poor-quality apples and the scarcity of the true magical talents had dwindled the number of townsfolk who still attended. Today, however, the crowd was larger than it had been for many years, perhaps because the Keeper's own children were to accompany him into the Grove.

"There is no need to be afraid. You should be very excited. The Grove is a magical place, and today that magic is for you, and you alone."

Penny's smiled broadly, and Charlie could feel her grip loosen on his hand. Unable to contain herself any longer, she squealed, "Daddy!" and threw her arms around her father with as much strength as she could. Kneeling down, Nick Parker, for the moment no longer the caretaker of the Grove but a proud father, brushed aside strands of ashen blonde hair from Penny's face. "My Penny," he whispered hugging her back, "today it is your day."

Standing up again, he smiled and looked at the others, "It's each of your's day. Let's get going. It is a long walk, so I hope you had a good breakfast."

Nick held Penny's hand in his left and the shovel in his right and started off through the large iron gate. Charlie, Ted, Gideon, Margaret, and Nicholas followed closely behind with excited steps. Fear turned rapidly to anticipation as they moved closer and closer to the gate, the Grove, and their gift. Behind them, the crowd continued to cheer, broken only by the occasional tear of joy or sobbing into a handkerchief by a proud parent.

A minute later, all of the companions had passed through the large iron gate, its double doors wide open. Nick Parker stood, back facing toward the crowd, some few hundred feet behind them. He looked at the companions, studying their expressions, "We have entered the Grove. You have been chosen. We must move forward. There is no going back. You will see some things that may worry you, but I urge you to keep it

secret, because we do not want to alarm the rest of the town. Do you all understand me?"

Nodding the companions agreed, uncertain how to react to the ominous warning. With a start, Margaret yelped, pointing at the gate, "What's that? The...the...the tree, it's alive!"

Behind Margaret, the doors of the gate began to silently swing inward, the crowd disappearing as it closed shut. The trees beside the gate creaked loudly, and their leaves rustled as branches began to stretch and grow, intertwining the thick gnarled wood with the iron gates themselves. Before long, it was impossible to see where the gates started and the trees ended. It was as if there was no longer a gate at all.

"Wow," Gideon gasped. "How did it do that?"

"It's magic, remember, Gideon Freakamore." Nicholas gently shoved Gideon from behind. "I would have thought you knew all about magic, what with all the time you spend playing those computer games where you fight wizards and dragons."

"Yeah, he seemed to do a good job of making his mother disappear." Ted chuckled.

Gideon did not respond. Instead, he picked up a stick from the ground and gripped it tightly in his fist. Charlie knew the expression on his face; he was frustrated and angry. The kids at school teased Gideon constantly about the way he dressed, about his mother, or about anything else that would crack his restraint. Charlie knew it hurt him, especially when they spoke about his mother.

"That's enough now." Nick Parker interjected, "You may find that this experience brings you closer together." Looking directly at Nicholas and Ted, he added, "For some that may be a very good thing." He put his hand on Margaret's shoulder and patted her gently, "And don't worry. The Grove will show us the way out when you all have your apples. That is the way it has always worked, even before the fence was erected. You will see many amazing things here, most of which we don't know why they happen, save that the Grove is a truly magical place."

Margaret relaxed visibly, and the companions stepped forward, deeper into the Grove. They watched in awe as the trees moved as if they were alive, studying their new visitors with curiosity. Branches grew and contracted, twisting and turning in the canopy. Where a branch hung bare moments ago, leaves would sprout that bloomed into a flower before becoming an apple the size of a basketball. The apples swelled in front of their eyes before dropping to the ground with a dull thud, tossing up fallen leaves that covered much of the Grove's undergrowth.

Penny and Margaret turned, hands outstretched as a mass of orange butterflies lazily swooped in and around, teasing the companions with their gentle gliding dance.

“Why are there so many butterflies here, Mr. Parker?” Nicholas asked quizzically as a bright yellow butterfly landed gently on Margaret's head, causing her to yelp and quickly brush the harmless insect away.

“Don't really know,” Mr Parker replied, “There are plenty of them in the outer rings of the Grove, but as you pass through the middle rings you'll see less of them, until you never see any around the inner rings, or the Talent Tree itself. They used to be there too, when I was your age, but not anymore. I don't know why. They are harmless, though, connected in some way to this place like everything in here.”

“Are there any other animals in the Grove?” Nicholas asked, looking around to see whether he could see any signs of animal tracks in the leafy undergrowth or the dirt trail that they followed.

“I have seen a few during the day from time to time,” Mr. Parker responded, “but nothing much to worry about. The occasional fox skulking between the trees looking for scraps or a bird or two perched in a tree pecking at an apple for a quick snack, but nothing more, really. Now nighttime, that's a different story, I have seen some strange creatures roaming the Grove. It's not a good idea to be in here after dark, but we don't have to worry about that; we will be back in town long before then.”

“Have you seen any---um---ravens?” Charlie turned, looking at his father.

“Ravens? Charlie are you still thinking about what you saw yesterday? I told you not to worry about that,” Mr. Parker replied, his eyes fixed on Charlie.

“I know, Dad, but it's just that I saw another one on the way to the Grove this morning, and it sounds stupid, but it looked at me like it knew me,” he finished off in a voice not much higher than a whisper.

“A raven that knows you, Charlie?” Penny rolled her eyes. “You are such a baby sometimes.”

“I read that the raven is the sign of the Seekers,” Gideon said in a low uncertain voice.

“Trust you to know about that,” Nicholas shoved Gideon again. “I bet you like that stuff.”

“It's true. I read about it,” Margaret nervously added. “There are a few books in Mrs. McGuire's bookstore that talk about how the Seekers use the ravens as spies.”

“The Seekers are just a myth. Everyone knows that, don't they, Mr P.?” Ted asked.

The blood from Mr. Parker's face had drained away, and he shifted his grip on the handle of the shovel as if hiding something. "Myths have a strange way of coming true," he mumbled under his breath before continuing. "To answer your question, Charlie, yes, there are ravens in the Grove. Quite a few in fact."

He changed the subject quickly, "Now let's move on. It is going to take us some time to reach the clearing." Without waiting, he pressed forward, moving quicker than before.

The companions followed, keeping the brisk pace easily. Charlie studied his father from behind. Something seemed to be worrying him. Every few minutes he turned, staring at the other kids, before scanning the sky, as if afraid something was watching them.

For some time, the group walked in silence following the winding path ever inward toward the center of the Grove. Charlie could see the sun above, and drawing on his hiking skills, he estimated that it had been about thirty minutes since the discussion of the ravens. Maybe it was the thoughts of raven spies playing tricks on his mind, but he had the feeling they were being followed. The feeling was similar to when he was hiking and knew there was a deer nearby. You couldn't see anything, but you just knew it was there. Sure enough, a few minutes later the deer would cross the trail and vanish into the undergrowth again. Perhaps the same would happen here.

His father kept a quick pace at the front of the companions, the end of his shovel leaving shallow imprints in the dirt. Absently Charlie noticed the imprints were not as deep as they had been near the gate. The soil seemed more arid here, and as his father had said, the butterflies had become scarcer.

Eventually, Mr. Parker stopped at a section of the path where a small wooden post was firmly thrust into the ground. Atop the post a short crossbeam was affixed with an iron chain dangling down. Connected to the chain was a small wooden sign that contained two ornately carved words: *Middle Rings*. As the companions came closer to the sign, they could see a faint golden line arching out in either direction from the path before disappearing into the trees of the Grove.

Shovel thrust firmly into the ground, Mr Parker stopped. He turned to the companions, eyes resting on each of them before speaking in a hushed tone. "Here, we enter the Middle Rings. So far I have managed to stop it spreading to the Outer Rings, but I am not sure how much longer I can." Wiping his forehead with his sleeve, he continued, "You will see something once we pass this sign that you may not want to see, but I warn you it will get worse before it gets better. If you are afraid, you can wait here, but you will not be able to collect your apple."

Pulling a small metallic object from one of the many pockets, he raised it to his mouth and blew. No sound came from the whistle, but from his father's puffed cheeks Charlie knew there should have been. At first nothing happened, and the companions

shifting uneasily in place. Then a rustling in the distance grew louder, and a shape approached, bounding through the Grove.

Before long, a shaggy doglike creature panted beside Mr. Parker, drool dripping from its mouth, its tongue lolling to one side. The creature was about 3 foot tall and was covered in a mass of tangled, auburn hair. With a snort, the creature reached up and stood on its back legs to reveal a face more doglike than human, but definitely human---once.

“This is Damien, Damien Price. He will stay with you if you wish to remain here.” Damien's eyes blinked, and his mouth moved as if trying to speak, but no words came out, only more drool.

"It can't be!" Penny gasped. "Damien disappeared years ago. No one has seen him since. Mom says his mother was furious when he didn't return. That's why she holds a grudge against us now."

"That's right, she was." Mr. Parker spoke. "It was the second or third year after I started tending the Grove. Damien, like you, entered the Grove on his Talent Day, and we all walked up this very path to the Talent Tree. Damien...well...like some kids, he was not the athletic type, and his hand-eye coordination wasn't the best. When his turn came and he stood underneath the tree, the apple fell, but unfortunately he failed to catch it. It was the strangest thing I had seen: the apple seemed to change direction as it fell."

Mr. Parker sensed Margaret's growing concern; she certainly was one of those kids not blessed with great athleticism. "If you are quick and pick up your apple before it lies on the ground too long, it is fine. Perhaps the talent may not be as potent as an apple that has not touched the earth, but it doesn't turn to a dark fruit unless it is there longer than a few seconds. Damien's apple, however, landed on one of the Talent Tree's roots and bounced off into the woods. I tried to stop him, but before I could reach him, he had retrieved his apple and taken a bite. I didn't think it had rested long enough to become poisonous, but he turned into this." Damien's pawed feet shuffled in the dirt as if reliving memories of the day, long past.

"Sometimes the talent comes on quickly; other times it takes years. For Damien, it started straight away. First fur sprouted over his body, then his hands and feet changed, and finally his face and nose." Resting his hand on Damien's scruffy head, Mr. Parker scratched him behind his floppy ears. From beneath the mass of hair and fur, human eyes still absorbed everything that was happening. "Damien didn't want to go home. He couldn't face his mother, so he decided to stay in the Grove.

"Did someone ever tell Mrs. Price?" Margaret asked.

“I tried, but she wouldn't listen,” Mr. Parker frowned. “She was furious and threatened to burn down the Grove to find her son. I can understand her grief of losing a child, but it was as if something snapped inside. She no longer listened to reason, and yes, you are right, Penny. Ever since then, well, she has held a grudge against our family. She blames me---I understand that---but sometimes the Talent Tree just has a way of doing what it thinks is right. Everything has its purpose; Damien just hasn't found his yet.” Damien shook his head in agreement and then dropped back down on all fours stretching, as if tired of the conversation.

“Anyway, he knows the paths and the Grove well and can keep you safe from trouble if you want to stay here until I return.” Pausing for a moment, Mr. Parker looked around, waiting to see whether any of the companions might accept his offer.

“Right, then. On we go, but be warned you might not like what you see.”

With a step, Mr. Parker crossed the line into the middle ring.