

McGuire's Book Emporium was stuffy, and hot. The typical fall winds had failed to appear this year, leaving Devon Grove sweltering.

"It's not good for the books," Lucy McGuire, owner of the small bookstore situated just beside the town square, "The ink will smudge, and the glue in the binders will turn tacky. Not good at all."

"I know. I have a fan at home I can lend you if it helps?" Margaret said, dabbing a handkerchief at her temples. She was careful not to drip sweat onto the thick book she had been studying.

"Oh thank you my dear," Lucy said, "I am sure this hot spell will be over soon. It can't last for too long."

Margaret nodded, and resumed her studies on a small table in the corner of the cramped store. She was not so sure about the heat though. Something told her there was more to the weather than a seasonal abnormality. It was early August, almost a year from the day she had traveled to the Talent, and receive Treed her apple, only to have it stolen from her shortly afterwards by the Seekers. She needed something to hold onto, a purpose in ---life. Without her talent, she felt as if a part of her was missing.

*No one else loose their Talent like I did, she thought, There has to be something I can do. And I am sure it has to do with the weather. I just don't know what.* She turned the page, continuing.

The book, titled *Central Coast Weather and the influence of Magic*, contained almost a hundred years of historical statistics covering everything from annual precipitation, average temperatures, and any correlation of talents received to weather phenomena. The only connection of any relevance Margaret had been able to find was a reference to talents outside of the Shards; but that didn't really make any sense: there were no talents outside of the shards.

Margaret closed the cover of the book, and reached for her notepad. As she reached across the table her sleeve, unbuttoned at the wrist, knocked a pencil onto the floor. It clattered onto the ground, and rolled off under one of the many bookshelves lining the store.

"Argh," she sighed, pushed the chair back, and climbed under the table to retrieve the pencil.

The bells on the door chimed loudly, causing Margaret to look up quickly, and bang her head on the desk, "Ow, that hurt." she muttered raising her hand to head.

From underneath the table, she saw a pair of black leather boots, dusty and worn, walk through the door. Peeking out further, Margaret saw more of the visitor; a woman of medium height with black boots, frayed jeans, and red cotton blouse. The woman's dark hair hung in a mass of tangled knots partly obscuring her face. It didn't matter, however, Margaret knew exactly who she was.

"Hello Mrs. Filamore. So pleased to see you. It has been a while. What can I do for you." Lucy McGuire said in a pleasant tone.

Nancy Filamore, Gideon's mother, closed the door. She stepped towards the front counter, "Are you still buying jewelry, and other collectables? I have something I want to sell." She looked around nervously, casting a sideways glance out the shop's front window.

"Oh yes," Lucy said, "I am always looking for interesting items. Perhaps one day I will have to sell some of the items I buy; But I just can't seem to part with any of them. They are all so special to me."

"That's why I thought of you. This item," Margaret heard a noise, like the jingle of a glass, as Mrs. Filamore placed something on the counter. From her hiding place, Margaret could not make out what it was.

"Oh my, that is remarkable," Lucy exclaimed, "Where did you get it? Why would you want to part with something so lovely?"

"Someone gave it to me a long time ago, but I don't want it anymore. Are you interested or not? I don't have much time" Mrs. Filamore said, a note of impatience in her tone.

"Well, I would like to examine it closer: to study the gems you understand. I do not doubt their quality; they look exquisite, expertly crafted, but I want to be sure. Perhaps I could keep it overnight, and let you know a fair price in the morning?"

"I don't have time for that," Mrs. Filamore snapped. Margaret heard the jingling noise again, and saw the boots stride quickly past the table. The bells on the door chimed loudly as Mrs. Filamore pulled the door open, and left.

"You can come out now my dear," Lucy said, "She is gone."

Margaret climbed out from under the table, "What did she want to sell you?"

"A most wonderful necklace," Lucy started before a woman's scream interrupted her.

Margaret ran out the door, searching for the source of the scream.

Margaret emerged from McGuire's Book Emporium, and looked around. She ran up the street towards the source of the scream. It appeared to have come from near the town square. In the middle of the square Mrs. Filamore appeared to arguing with Mrs. Fairweather, the head of the town council. Ever since Charlie had planted the new Talent Tree, Margaret had noticed the councilwoman had been acting oddly, and her hair had appeared to be changing from silver back to a salt-and-pepper black.

*There was something more than just the weather wrong here,* Margaret thought watching the two women yell at each other.

"I'm not giving it to you!" Mrs. Filamore cried, pulling her hand free from Mrs. Fairweather's grip.

"Don't be silly now. You are having another one of your episodes. Let me help you. Please, come to my office, and we can have a cup of soothing tea. No need to make a scene is there?" Mrs. Fairweather said, staff tucked under one arm, while trying to put her other arm around Mrs. Filamore.

"I said no!" Mrs. Filamore's body turned to blue smoke, and swirled past Mrs. Fairweather towards the gates to the four-cornered Grove. Her body became solid again, "And don't think I don't remember who you are."

A crowd had started to form in the square, watching the two woman argue. Margaret moved between the crowd trying to get a closer look. She could see something in Mrs. Filamore's hand. It looked like the necklace she had just tried to sell. The bright

sun glinted wildly off the necklace tossing beams of light around the square. What was going on?

"You are not well," Mrs. Fairweather said soothingly, taking a step towards the other woman.

Mrs. Filamore backed away; She was now less than ten feet from the entrance to the Grove, the gates having been left open ever since Charlie had planted the new Talent Tree. "First me, now my son. I don't want to hide anymore." She turned, and dashed into the Grove.

Margaret gasped. Charlie was in there. She had spoken to him just before she went to McGuire's. He had wanted to check on the tree, and see if it had begun to bear fruit. He was concerned what would happen if there were no apples for Talent Day.

"Excuse me" Margaret apologized, pushing her way through the crowd, and running towards the Grove. She dashed past Mrs. Fairweather who had gathered up her staff and skirt, and was making her way towards the Grove as well.

As soon as Margaret passed by the large iron gates, a sense of peace enveloped her. The Grove felt safe, still teeming with the magic Charlie had re-ignited. She ran deeper, the tree's canopy offering welcome relief to the heat. Margaret caught a glimpse of Mrs. Filamore, running along the twisting trail ahead.

*I will never beat her to the clearing.* Margaret thought, running as fast as she could.

"Jump on," came a voice from beside her. Margaret turned, and saw Damien Price, running on all fours, beside her, "I know a shortcut."

With a burst of speed, Damien moved in from of Margaret, and she leapt onto his back.

"Hold tight," he cried, and bounded forward at an alarming speed.

Trees whizzed past Margaret. Damien swerved left and right, crashing through the undergrowth with ease. Time, and distance behaved differently in the Grove, a result of the ancient magic, Tom Wallace had once said. There could be times when a trip to

the clearing took hours, and only minutes the next. At this speed, Margaret suspected they would be arrive at the clearing in less than ten minutes.

Between the trees Margaret saw Mrs. Filamore again. She was shifting from ethereal blue smoke, to solid, passing directly through the trees. Damien must have noticed too, and picked up the pace even more.

Damien had chosen to remain in the Grove, even after revealing himself in front of the town, when he had exposed his mother as the Seeker. Margaret wasn't sure why he had made this choice but she was happy he had: Damien knew the Grove better than anyone.

She tightened her grip on Damien's furry neck, and closed her eyes. They had to make it in time.

A moment later they emerged into the clearing where the fledgling Talent Tree grew.

"Charlie! Charlie! Where are you?" Margaret called, climbing off Damien's back. She looked around the clearing anxiously. No blue smoke yet. *Good, she thought, We beat Mrs. Filamore here, but where is Charlie?*

"Margaret, um hi. I didn't expect you to be here." Charlie said surprised, appearing from behind the Talent Tree, "You know, you are not really supposed to be here though."

It had been almost year months since Charlie had planted the Seed of Hope, as the town now called it. During this time the tree had grown at an amazing rate. The tree was nearly thirty feet tall, and it's trunk almost as wide as many of the older trees in the Grove.

Damien growled, the hackles on his back, standing on their end, "Someone is coming"

"What?" Charlie exclaimed looking around, "Who is it? No one is supposed to be here."

"I'll explain later, right now you have to trust me; We have to hide." Margaret grabbed Charlie's hand and led him to the edge of the clearing. They hid behind a large bush which had grown close to the base of a tree.

Damien hid behind another tree to their left, his voice, a low guttural growl, "It's not Mrs. Filamore."

Charlie opened his mouth to respond, but Margaret put her finger to her lips, motioning for him to be silent.

A gentle rustling sound rose from the other side of the clearing, and Mrs. Fairweather appeared from between the trees. She walked forward slowly, her cane held out protectively, "We can talk freely now; We are alone."

A blue wisp of smoke swirled past the Talent Tree, and rose into the air, directly in front of Mrs. Fairweather. With a pop, the smoke changed into Mrs. Filamore. Charlie gasped, and Margaret clapped her hand over his mouth, "shhhh."

"My business is my business, I am done with you. The necklace is mine to do what I want with." Mrs. Filamore hissed.

"That is where you are wrong, your business *is* my business. You see, your son has the talent as well. It seems you did something for him after all; You passed your gift onto him. I have an unexpected---vacancy, and need a new apprentice. Gideon will do very well. He has already shown a lot of potential."

Mrs. Filamore staggered backwards, "No! You leave him alone. He has nothing to do with this. It is between you, and me." She jumped at Mrs. Fairweather, and transformed into blue smoke. The smoke curled around the councilwoman's feet momentarily, before dissipating.

"It is far beyond that my dear" Mrs. Fairweather said softly, before pulling something from her sleeve.

"What is it?" Margaret asked peaking further over the top of the bush.

"It, It looks like a knife?" Charlie whispered. Perhaps ten inches in length, the knife had a sinuous blade, and was made of a strange dark metal, with flecks of silver. The metal reminded Charlie of a starry night sky. Or maybe of the Shimmering.

Knife in one hand, and cane in the other, Mrs Fairweather walked to the Talent Tree. She hesitated an arms length from the trunk of the tree, and scanned the clearing. Charlie and Margaret ducked behind the bush, peering through the branches.

"What's she doing?" Margaret asked

"Is she going to..." before Charlie could finish, Mrs. Fairweather thrust the blade deep into the trunk of the Talent Tree.

"Nooo!" Charlie screamed, leaping over the bush towards the councilwoman. Damien growled, and pounced from his hiding spot.

Mrs. Fairweather spun in surprise, yanking the knife from the tree. Pointing her cane towards Charlie and Damien a wave of energy erupted from its tip. The wave rippled across the clearing tossing Charlie and Damien to the ground.

"Well well, young Parker and his---pet. I didn't want you to find out till I was ready, but I guess I can't hide it anymore now can I?"

"What were you doing to the tree?" Charlie asked between clenched teeth. He tried to stand but felt an invisible weight holding him down.

"That is not important right now. What is important is that you know that the cataclysm is coming. You have done so well this far, much better than I even imagined. I really should thank you for your efforts, but for now I must depart. We will meet again soon, first however, I have some unfinished business to attend to."

Mrs. Fairweather lowered her cane, and a shifting surface of blue light appeared, hovering a few feet above the air. She stepped into the light, and it winked out, taking the councilwoman with it.

Margaret jumped out from behind the bush, and ran to Charlie, "Are you ok?" she asked.

"Yeah I'm fine," he said, testing the air around him; The invisible weight was gone. He slowly rose to his feet, rubbing his back.

"You know what this means?" Margaret said. Charlie nodded.

"Mrs. Fairweather is a Seeker."