

Charlie's head spun. For his entire life he had been living down the street from not one, but two Seekers! He recalled his mothers warning before he had planted the Talent Tree. She had suspected something was going on between Mrs. Price, and Mrs. Fairweather; but could she have ever dreamed it was this?

The councilwomen had also mentioned Gideon. No-one had seen or heard from him since his betrayal, and disappearance in the cavern right before it had collapsed. Charlie knew, however, that one day he would have to face his former friend. Gideon blamed Charlie for taking away his teacher, and a chance to learn how to control his dark talent. Gideon would not let that go easily.

Another rustle of branches at the edge of the clearing caught Charlie's attention. Why hadn't Damien growled in warning? His heightened canine sense of smell, and hearing should have alerted the kids much sooner. Two figures appeared at the edge of clearing, and Charlie understood.

"So, our suspicions were correct eh Tom?" Jesper Higgins said, clapping his hand on Tom Wallace. Wiping the sweat from his brow, Jesper stepped forward, "Ah Charlie my boy, We should have known you would be here. Good, good this will make it quicker; No need to explain everything to you, or your friends it seems: Good day Ms. Shaw, and Master Price."

Damien sat down on the green grass, and Margaret offered a quite "Hello", before Charlie spoke, "You knew about Mrs. Fairweather? Why didn't you tell me? She tried to...to cut down the tree?"

"No, I am afraid not lad." Jesper said supportively, "We had our suspicions but we could not prove it. After all, why would a Seeker want to help you find your talent when they took it in the first place? But then Damien gave us the missing piece of the puzzle. After that it all fit together. Still we had nothing to prove it all---until now."

Damien stood on his back legs, and cocked his head, "What do you mean I gave you the missing piece?"

"Your little speech when you exposed your mother as a Seeker. You said you overheard other Seekers planning to punish

her. Tom and I started to think that perhaps your mother wasn't supposed to steal Charlie's apple. What if that wasn't the plan at all? What if the plan was to use the Talent Tree for something else, and whatever that is, could not be accomplished if there was no Talent Tree."

"Are you saying Mrs. Fairweather wanted me to find the Bag of Brakka, and plant a new Talent Tree?" Charlie asked incredulously.

"Exactly" Jesper said triumphantly, "I knew you would see it too. It took Tom, and I a lot of late nights to come to that conclusion. When we saw Mrs. Fairweather's hair turning black, we were convinced we were correct."

"Seeker's spend their lives dedicated to searching for immortality, and eternal youth" Tom added, noticing the kids puzzled expressions "The closer they come to finding it, the more effect it has on them."

"You mean the Nexus?" Margaret said, "I have read about it. The Nexus is supposed to be source of the ancient magic. Some books even say that the Nexus is a person, and not a place."

"No one knows, my dear" Jesper said, "There are many stories about the Nexus. One tale says it is a well filled with magical water tended by a boy called Nexus. The legend says Nexus drew water everyday from the well to tend a large tree which grew nearby. Over time, that tree began growing talents, as we know them now. As a reward, Nexus was allowed to pick the fruit as often as he desired. Other stories however, suggest the Nexus is some sort of consciousness, and the Shimmering is its collected thoughts. But you are right, all the stories agree that the Nexus is where the magic originated from. If the Seeker's actually found the Nexus they could control the ancient magic. If this occurred they would be unstoppable."

Charlie listened intently to Jesper's words about the Nexus, and how closely the boy and the well sounded like the role of the Keeper. He swallowed, and spoke in a croaked voice, "We can't let that happen. We have to stop them."

"I am glad you agree; that's why we need your help." Jesper pulled two objects from his pocket, and held them out to Charlie. "Here lad, take these."

Charlie took the two items from Jesper's outstretched hand, and studied them. The first item was a pair of glasses with lens tinted a dark yellow. The frames were made of thin silver wires, twisted tightly together. The second item was a spherical golden cage about the size of a baseball. In its center a small silver bell chimed softly with every movement. Charlie turned the cage over, and saw a small hexagon shaped indent. "Is there is something missing?" he asked.

"The key," Tom answered, "We don't know where it is, and without it you can't open the cage"

"But there is nothing in it, except for the bell." Charlie said confused.

"Not yet" Jesper smiled, "That's what we need you for. You see this is a Talent Trap. It was made long ago by the great caretakers, the same people who made the Lantern of Safe Return you used so well before."

"That's why we thought you could open it" Tom added.

Jesper cast a glance toward Tom, and continued, "The great caretakers used this trap to collect escaped talents. You see, they couldn't have talents running around, and potentially escaping into the non-magical world now could they? Even with the Shimmering, there is a chance talents can escape."

"What happens if they escape into the non-magical world?" Margaret asked, thinking about the references in the book she had been studying to Talents outside of a Shard.

"Now that is the critical part of the story," Jesper said, "When talents escape into the non-magical world, they draw --- bad luck--- around them causing no end of mischief. At first, the talents cause only minor inconveniences: causing people to trip, or drop what ever they are carrying, and the like. But if they are left too long these minor inconveniences can grow until they threaten the entire world. "

Jesper turned to the Talent Tree, selecting a small branch, and bending it, "Do you mind if I break this off to demonstrate?"

Charlie nodded, "Sure."

Jesper broke the stick off using it draw a circular shape with a gap at the top. He tapped the middle of the circle with the stick, "The Talents belong here," Then he draw a line to the gap.

"They escaped through the crack in the Shimmering after I killed Mrs. Price" Charlie said realizing his part in the story.

"Yes," Jesper said flatly, "We fear that the talents are the cause of the unusually warm weather we are experiencing. If it is true, they are growing quickly, and must be returned to the Devon Grove Shard. They must be released back where they belong."

"So this Talent Trap captures the talents?" Margaret asked.

"Indeed it does. At least that is what it is supposed to do," Jesper smiled, "We've never really had a need to try it before."

"But if I can't open the trap, how am I going to release them?" Charlie asked running his finger around the shape on the golden cage Tom had indicated was the keyhole.

"We think that if we can capture the talents we can stop them from getting any stronger. This will give us some time to work out what to do next, and how to open the trap." Tom said.

"Ok, since I let them out, I guess I need to get them back." *As if the responsibility of being the Keeper wasn't enough already for a kid*, he thought. Focusing his attention on the wire-framed glasses, Charlie continued, "And what about these, what are they for?"

"Put them on, and you will see," Jesper beamed with pride, "These are one of my own inventions."

Charlie had had some experience with Jesper's inventions: the flight down from the Fingers of Heaven in the rocket-powered tugboat was one experience he had no desire to repeat any time soon. Tentatively, he put on the glasses.

"Look up at the tree. What do you see?"

Charlie looked up at the Talent Tree, and staggered backwards, almost tripping over the bush he and Margaret had hid

behind before. The tree was covered in swirling colors of smoke that shifted through the canopy like a dense fog.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It is the talents, waiting to grow into apples, and be eaten." Jesper smiled.

"Then how come they are not growing?" Charlie asked. "I've been thinking I did something wrong when I planted the tree and the tree couldn't grow any apples" Charlie dropped his eyes, and avoided looking at Margaret. He still felt responsible for her losing her talent, and now with Talent Day approaching he was going to disappoint the entire town.

"That is another piece of the puzzle we don't know yet," Tom said, "Maybe in time apples will grow, but if we don't get the missing talents back, that will be the least of our problems."

Charlie nodded, and took off the glasses. "So I can use these glasses to see the talents when I go beyond the Shimmering?" He hadn't thought of it until now, but in order to return the talents to Devon Grove he would have to pass through the Shimmering, and out into the non-magical world. Even when he had retrieved the Bag of Brakka, he had never gone beyond the Shimmering.

"Leaving the shards, and going to the non-magical world can send you insane." Margaret said defensively, "Charlie can't go. We need him to care for the Talent Tree."

Charlie stared at Margaret. What did she mean insane?

"Yes it is true---technically," Jesper said, "You have done your research. We do not usually tell children that until they receive their talent; Before then, they are completely safe. You see leaving the shard slowly weakens your talent until it is gone for good. It is the longing for your lost talent, that actually drives you insane." Jesper finished softly, realizing how close the subject of lost talents was to Margaret.

He waited for a moment before continuing, "But it takes time before the effect is noticeable. We think Charlie will be back from San Francisco within a few days with no adverse effects at all."

"San Francisco?" Charlie sputtered, "You wan't me to go to San Fransciso?"

"Of course," Jesper said matter-of-factly, "Where else could a talent cause more trouble than in a big city?"