

Charlie waited until Jesper and Tom were far down the path out of the Grove, before he looked at Margaret and Damien, "So, what do you think? Can we trust them? Dad, um, he thought so" Charlie's voice trailed off. He hadn't told anyone about the letter his father had left him. He hadn't seen the need, but now, perhaps it was time.

"I think so," Margaret responded, "but I want to do some more research. I still haven't found anything that connects the escaped talents and the weather."

"Maybe the others have some ideas?" Charlie asked.

"It's a good idea. Let's get the others, and decide what to do. We should also see who is going to go with you to San Francisco." Margaret said.

"I was just going to go alone." Charlie said, "Jesper didn't say anything about bringing someone else along."

"Charlie, you may have planted a Talent Tree and killed a Seeker, but you are still just 13 years old," Margaret said in an affectionate tone, "Even you need help some times."

So much had changed since Charlie, and the companions had returned from their adventure with the Bag of Brakka. Many of these changes were obvious to everyone: Charlie had planted a Talent Tree, Mrs. Price was a Seeker, and of course, his father's death. But there were more subtle changes as well that Charlie had grown to rely on; One of these was the bond of friendship between the other kids. Charlie knew that no matter what, his friends would be there.

Charlie smiled, and pocketed the talent trap and glasses, "Come on, let's get going. If Jesper wants me to leave tomorrow, we don't have much time to get a plan together."

An hour later Charlie, Margaret, Penny, Nicholas, and Ted were sitting at a table at Surfs. Damien, as usual, had decided to stay in the Grove. Surfs was a favorite hang out for kids on a hot day in Devon Grove. The small shack served burgers, fries, and the best, old-fashioned thick-shakes.

Ted, hair wet from swimming, put his bare feet on the table, "So Mrs. Fairweather is a Seeker; figures I guess. She always kind of creeped me out with the whole seeing the future

thing. San Fran sounds cool though. I could go with you if you like?"

"What about Nicholas?" Penny said, "I heard San Francisco is really busy, everything moves so fast there, maybe Nicholas' talent of stopping time would come in handy?"

"No I don't think so," Nicholas said, grabbing a fry before a nearby seagull could take it from his plate. "I can only stop time on a small area around me. It might draw too much attention to us if people started freezing in the middle of the street, while everything else just kept going."

Penny nodded, taking a fry from Nicholas's plate, and throwing it into the air. The seagull launched into the air, catching the food in it's beak.

"You're welcome," she said, giving Nicholas a cold stare, "He was hungry too ---he just wanted one."

"What about you?" Margaret said facing Penny, "You could talk to the birds in the city, like you did with the seagull. I bet they could search the city much quicker than any of us could do it on foot."

The others nodded, and Charlie had to admit it was a good idea. With Penny's talent, they may be able to search the entire city in a few days. He still wasn't sure how to find the missing talents in the first place, but with the help of the birds he could look for signs of mischief.

"Fine be me." he said.

"Ok it is settled then," Ted said, "I can go back to surfing, and when you get back we can have a shake, and you can tell me all about the city."

Penny pulled her chair closer to Ted's and whacked him on the back of the head. "If I am out risking my life in San Francisco, you better do more than that!"

The companions laughed, and finished their food. Charlie nibbled on his hamburger watching the waves crash against the shore. What if he couldn't find the talents, and spent too long beyond the Shimmering? Who would tend the tree, and discover why it had not produced any fruit yet? He had a responsibility to the kids of the town, and to Margaret.

He shifted his attention from the waves to Margaret. She had her curly red hair tied back in a pony tail, and was engrossed in a book on her lap. Did she ever think about the talent she lost?

The sun sat low in the afternoon sky when the companions left Surfs, and headed home. Charlie and Penny said their goodbyes, and the others wished them good luck. Charlie crossed the square in front of the gates to the Grove, and peered into the shadows.

"It will be ok for a while Charlie," Penny said, "Damien will make sure nothing happens while we are gone. Look at this way, If we don't go, and bring the talents back, Devon Grove may end up like Solum. The weather is getting warmer by the day; we have to do something."

"I know," Charlie said, "I just wish Dad was here to help. He would know what to do."

"Yeah," Penny said weakly, "Come on let's go. Mum will be wondering where we are by now."

They walked in silence for the rest of the way home. Charlie tried to plan what he would need to bring, and how they would get to San Francisco. He mentally devised a list in head, just like he did when preparing for a hike: clothes, compass, money, anything else? Pushing open the door to their house, Charlie saw his mother sitting in the living room with two backpacks, stuffed full, on the ground beside her.

"You know already?" Charlie asked.

"Yes," Mrs. Parker said, "Jesper came by an few hours ago. He told me about Mrs. Fairweather, and how the council needed you to go to San Francisco."

"Are you mad?" Penny asked.

"Oh no my dear," Mrs. Parker said smiling, "You two, and your friends are the heros of the town. I'm not angry; I'm proud, and a little scared."

"At least you know where we are going this time." Charlie said.

"Yes I do," Mrs. Parker laughed, "I have already packed your bags, and Tom Wallace will be here in the morning to take you to the train station. He wants you ready to go by seven-thirty. Dinner is in the oven, so go get cleaned up, and we talk more then. Right now I have a few things to finish off."

Charlie started towards the stairs. His mother shifted in the chair, and he noticed a yellow envelope in her lap. She had re-read the letter from his father dozens of time. He didn't understand whether she expected to find some clue in the words written, or it was just her way of dealing with the loss. She had read it so many times, Charlie was worried the paper would rip, and the ink would fade away. It didn't matter, however, he had the whole thing memorized:

*If you are reading this, then I am likely gone. I made a terrible mistake, and we all will pay for it. The Grove is becoming a dangerous place, and I fear the Talent Tree is dying. There are those in town who know much more about what is really going on here than I do, but my advice is to trust the inventor. He can make wonderful things out of supple, new-growth wood.*

The bannister on the stairs was smooth under Charlie's hand, as he walked towards his bedroom. The inventor was clear---that had to be Jesper Higgins. But the reference to new-growth wood was still a mystery. Charlie had brought it up to Jesper one time about a month after Mrs. Price's death. The inventor had said new-growth wood was good for intricate carvings, usually for decorative purposes: sculptures, ornamental staffs, and bows for musical instruments. Dismissing the thoughts as useless, Charlie closed the door to his room, and sat on his bed.

A warm breeze blew through the window fluttering the white curtains. The breeze stirred the papers on Charlie's desk, sending them flying around the room. He stood up from his bed, picked up the papers, and put them on his desk. Placing his computer keyboard atop the pile to stop the papers blowing away again Charlie found himself thinking about Gideon again.

*Where had he gone for the past year?* Charlie thought, returning to his bed, and pulling the Bag of Brakka from underneath. Did he had something to do with the strange weather? Was he looking for the missing talents too? Last time Charlie had seen his former friend, he had been standing in the middle of a collapsing cavern, frantically gathering as many of the

escaped talents as he could. The thought of facing Gideon again scared Charlie. He needed to be prepared.

Carefully, Charlie opened the bag: just a crack. A thin beam of bright light escaped from between the soft dark leather. It danced on the ceiling of his bedroom; enticing him to open the bag wider. Charlie had resisted opening the bag many times since his return, but now he had to know what was waiting for him in San Francisco. Was it a trap, or did he really need to find the missing talents? That was another thing which had changed in the past few months; aside from the companions, he found it very hard to trust anyone. Hesitantly, he opened the bag wider, and looked inside.

Colors leapt out of the bag drawing Charlie in. He felt his consciousness slip into the depths of the bag. The kaleidoscope of colors, and scenes washed over him, threatening to pull him further away from his body. Scenes flashed before him, flickering past too quickly to comprehend. Then the shifting stopped.

Rusted cars, and piles of scrap metal lay all around him with tall buildings visible in every direction. The sky above was filled with birds flying in a large circle. *Where was this place?* Charlie thought.

The scene shifted. He was drawn forward toward the center of what he now suspected was a junkyard. Sitting on the dusty ground was the talent trap. It looked different. The bell in the center was gone, or at least no longer visible. The cage was filled with a pulsing light of undulating colors.

The colors, and scene vanished.

Charlie fell back on his bed, his head spinning. The Bag of Brakka lay closed in front of him.