

Verja

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THE HIDDEN GROVE SERIES: BOOK 2

VERJA

Be The Good Publishing

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SAMPLE

HE STARTED TO whistle the Robin Song.
It helped ease my growing nerves of what lay ahead.

Sure enough, in the distance the path opened out to reveal two old trees intertwined with one another, forming an arch. My heart skipped a beat. I wasn't insane after all. Dad's whistling stopped abruptly.

"Hey—look at that!" he said.

I took a deep breath and kept walking, straight through the arch, head held high. A veil lifted from my eyes to reveal perfect rows of towering trees, each with their little quirks—the one directly in front seemed frail, the next one along spartan. The Hidden Grove, with its hidden powers.

I heard Dad's footsteps following behind me into the Hidden Grove. He sucked in a breath.

"Impossible!" he said.

I didn't have a chance to explain the magic to him or how the trees led as portals to other worlds. All of my senses heightened as I focused my attention on the grove for any sign of William. I hurried along in the direction of the Purlieu tree with Dad scrambling behind.

I passed the tree leading to the world flooded by rain where Tiffany and I had been stuck in the mud while being pursued by William. Then there was the world with the warehouse on the beach followed by the tree to Celoso with its impenetrable wall. We turned right and passed a tree with low-hanging grey tendrils of old man's beard, signifying the Bayartai tree where the wild natives had tried to burn me alive. I'd only seen these strange and terrifying worlds because William had lied about which was the Earth tree, the tree that led back home. All the same, I was grateful for it—that pursuit by him had revealed one key piece of information that without it, I would have been all the more haunted these past months: William's power ceased at the border of his world.

There in front on the left was the Purlieu tree. I stopped and stared at the white lichen and the worn branches and let out a shaky breath. William's power did not exist here in the Hidden Grove of Earth.

I don't know what I'd expected to find. Perhaps that it had shrivelled up like some

of the other trees where the master had used too much power. But there it was, just as it had been three months ago, standing proudly, beckoning.

“This is just incredible,” Dad said, catching up. “They’re all the same.”

He wandered on past me, looking up in awe.

“Wow, except for this one here,” his voice echoed through the stillness.

I followed him and found him standing by the Earth tree. It was wider, grander than the rest of the trees. But I knew that if I were to climb it right now, I wouldn’t find a portal at the top because we were already on Earth. After all, you can’t walk through a doorway the same way twice.

The Earth tree started to shake. I looked up just in time to see a shadow cast over me and a young man falling from the lowest branch, knocking me down, thrusting my head into the grass. William had come to get me. What was I thinking, coming back to the Hidden Grove? He’d been here, biding his time, just waiting to take me back to Purlieu. I was doomed.

I blinked the grass away from my eyes and rolled over.

He was dressed in a sleeveless mustard tunic, his skin stark white and sickly like candle wax, a shock of platinum blonde hair tied back into a ponytail. It wasn’t William at all.

The young man’s blue eyes were wide with surprise. He turned to survey Dad and those eyes locked on the locket dangling from Dad’s neck. He sprang to his feet and yanked the gold locket from around Dad’s neck.

“Hey!” Dad yelled.

Dad lurched out to grab him but the young man smashed a ceramic vial against the base of the tree. Thick, grey smoke erupted and filled the space between us. He turned and disappeared, headed away from the Earth tree.

Dad helped me to my feet.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

I broke through the paralysis, annoyed I’d shut down when faced with what I thought was my fears.

“Yes.”

“He took your mother’s locket,” he said.

Tears welled in his eyes. He hesitated, turned on the spot, and raced after the thief.

Through the clearing smoke and the bouncing branches above, I spotted the young man scampering up a tree several over. Dad had spotted him too and was making his way up the tree. My stomach sank.

“Give it back!” he yelled.

“No, Dad. Stop!”

What if that tree led to a world on different time? Like when I’d gone to Bayartai for not even twenty-four hours and returned to Purlieu only to find that weeks had passed.

There was no way I was going to wait around for Dad to return—who knew how long that could be? I’d much rather be stuck in a world with an unfavourable time difference and be gone from Earth forever, but with Dad, than to be on Earth indefinitely without him.

I pushed my resisting body into a quick sprint across the grass to the tree. Ignoring all my previous fears of heights, I began the climb, a long way behind them both.

PURLIEU

Up, up, up I scampered, clinging to the branches and then launching myself onto the next one above, desperate to close the gap between us.

The young man had reached the top of the tree and Dad had caught up to him. Just as he was about to grab him, the young man disappeared and Dad toppled forward after him, disappearing too.

Even though I knew they'd both gone through the portal, the sight was still disconcerting enough to make my stomach drop. I sucked in a deep breath and continued up the tree after them.

It felt like an age that I was alone in the grove, struggling to make quick work of reaching the bough of the tree. I tried not to meditate upon the potential time difference or that I could be stepping into mortal peril or a trap. Finally, body shaking, I stood on the bough of the tree, a flat space only a few paces wide. I stepped across the centre of the bough and through the invisible portal. Lightning on pause filled my vision and disappeared as quickly as it came as I planted my foot on the other side.

I never thought I'd have to do this again.

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