



^{the}
CRYSTAL
THRONE

KATHRYN SULLIVAN

*The very air seemed to tremble
as a shrill scream ripped
through it.*

“What was that?” he exclaimed.

“Peter!” Jeanne pointed.

Gliding swiftly towards them across the windless sky was something that resembled a red-violet dragon. Its cruel beak opened in a horrid grin as it shrieked again.

“Wow! Great special effects!” Peter said. “You can’t see any wires or blue matte outlines. Wonder how they’re projecting that pteranodon?”

The thing was not far from them now.

“Two legs, so that’s a drake, not a dragon,” Jeanne muttered.

“No, definitely a pteranodon,” Peter said.

Jeanne could see the huge eyes on either side of the ugly, wedge-shaped head. A chill wind suddenly rose, cutting through her jacket as the massive wings angled toward the ground. The long body swung forward, the giant talons opening.

“This is too large to be radio-controlled,” Peter observed.



“If you feel like losing yourself in a fantasy adventure, I would highly recommend this book.” — Rhannon West, *Timeless Tales*

“Anyone who holds a fascination for the world of magical creatures will undoubtedly enjoy the fantasy as well.” — Brenda Gayle, *The Write Lifestyle*

Bibliography

Also by Kathryn Sullivan

Agents, Adepts & Apprentices

Talking to Trees



THE CRYSTAL THRONE



KATHRYN SULLIVAN



ZUMAYA THRESHOLDS

AUSTIN TX

2019

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

THE CRYSTAL THRONE

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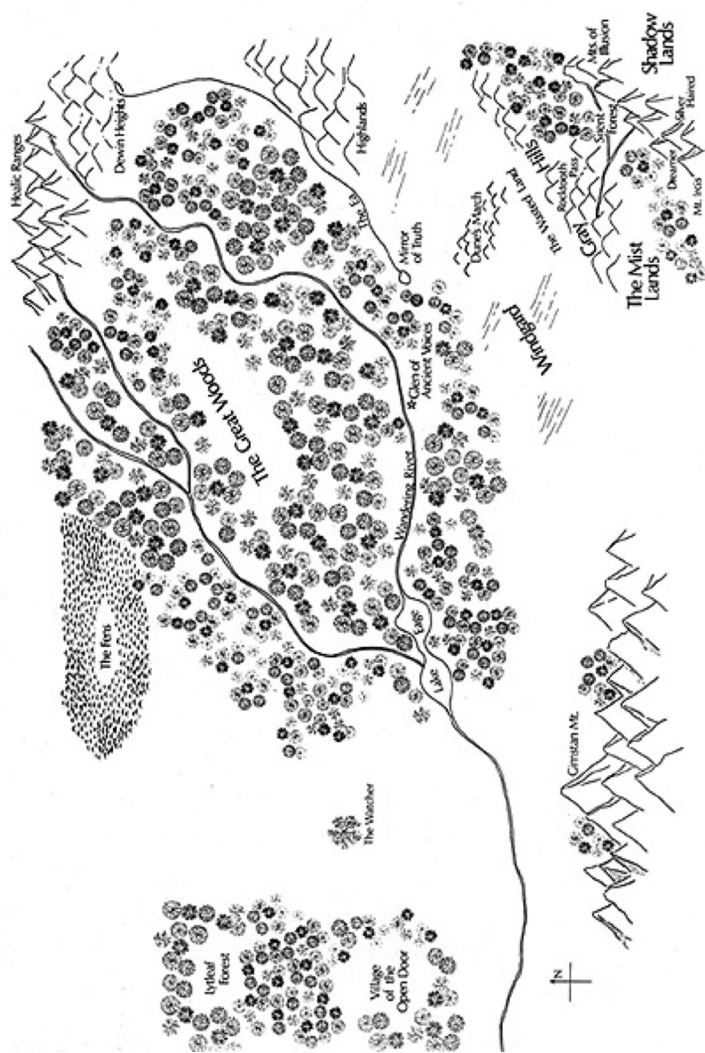
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For Joseph Terrence Sullivan

*WHO ALWAYS BELIEVED IN HIS
WRITERCHILD*



Map of The Lands

Chapter 1

THE DOOR

“DOWN, GIRL! STEADY!” JEANNE TUCKER CLUTCHED THE REINS AND tried to keep her seat as the frightened Appaloosa reared wildly. The skittish mare came down on all fours and backed up a step, her eyes showing white and rolling at the leaves swirling on a gust of wind. Jeanne clung to the horse with knees and hands, using all the tricks her brother had taught her to bring the Appaloosa under control.

The horse reared again.

“Down, Robin!” Jeanne jerked the reins and managed to turn the big head as the mare tried to bolt off the trail into the dark tangle of trees. Robin tossed her head, fighting the bit, whinnying with fear.

Finally, the mare quieted. Jeanne carefully released one hand from the reins to stroke the night-black neck.

“Easy, girl. Easy now.”

The horse stood quietly, calming under the continuous flow of talk and patting. Jeanne could feel the taut coil of fear loosen, the mare’s body slowly relaxing beneath her.

“Silly. A bunch of dried-up old leaves, and you act as if a ghost is after you. Maybe you ought to write that essay on the haunted tree for me. You certainly get scared often enough.”

Robin swung her head back, nickering softly, and Jeanne suddenly felt tears of frustration springing to her eyes.

“Oh, why can’t you behave, Robin? You know Mike’s going to sell you if you keep this up! He almost sold you last time, when I ended up in the hospital, but I promised you would behave. You’ve got to, girl!”

She wiped her eyes on the rough sleeve of her brother's red wool jacket and shook her long brown hair back over one shoulder.

"We'd better get home, girl, before anything else happens."

Despite her words, she sat still a moment longer. The wood rustled softly about them, leaves painted the color of flames by the setting sun.

Now, why did I feel that I had to come to Wilson's Forest today? she wondered. *Especially at this time of the afternoon.* She shook her head and nudged the mare into a walk. *I certainly wasn't thinking straight, or else I wouldn't have brought Robin here. Starbolt or Firebird would have ignored the shadows and leaves, but not my poor Robin.*

The Appaloosa shivered, nickering uneasily. Jeanne patted the smooth neck.

"I know, honey. It's dark and spooky out here." *That does it,* she decided. *Feelings or no feelings, I'm getting Robin home.*

She eyed the deepening shadows of the forest preserve, breathed in the dusky scent of autumn. The soft clops of Robin's hooves on the dirt trail and the creak of the saddle were loud in the stillness.

She tensed and pulled the mare to a halt, hearing voices raised in anger above the rustling of the leaves. Jeanne glanced about nervously, recognizing the thick stand of trees.

Oh, gosh, I'm practically right by the haunted tree! She shook herself. *You're more of a chicken than Robin. Ghosts out in daylight? Angry ghosts?*

Listening to the irate mutter of the voices, she dismounted and pulled Robin onto a tiny path almost hidden by thick bushes. The path was seldom used. People usually stayed away from the haunted tree.

Jeanne shivered as she came within sight of the tree. *Almost thirteen, and you still believe in Grandpa's stories?* she scolded herself. *Trees don't walk.* She shivered again.

The tree *did* look haunted. The huge trunk of the ancient oak was bent and twisted with age and the heavy snows of past winters. The branches were bare of leaves even in the summer, and the lower ones resembled twisted claws waiting to grab anyone who came too close.

She saw the Burns twins arguing in the clearing before the tree and paused a moment in surprise. Peter and Jody were new to town — their parents had moved in just before school started — but even newcomers would have been warned about the tree.

Peter reached up and pulled one of the dangling, claw-like branches down. Jeanne caught her breath and almost called out a warning, but Peter released the branch after a curious glance.

It figures, she thought. Miss Long says to write something about the haunted tree, so Peter comes and studies it as if it was a specimen in biology class. She glanced at her watch. He skipped gymnastics practice to be here at this time. Why? Wonder what Jody's doing here.

Jody appeared to be arguing with her twin. Peter ignored her, brushing his dusty hands on his jacket and jeans. The fraternal twins were so different the term “twin” didn’t seem to apply to them. Peter was a little shorter than his sister, and his hair was sandy where hers was pale blond. Their personalities differed also. Peter was more independent and often seemed older than his twelve years. Jody, on the other hand...

Jeanne cut off that line of thought. Now that she was closer, she could feel the hot flames of anger within the two. *How do I do that?* she wondered, asking the same tired question. *How is it that I always know what people are feeling?*

She turned away and began to lead Robin back to the main trail. Robin tossed her head and suddenly whinnied.

“I told you it was haunted!” Jody screamed.

“Oh, bother,” Jeanne muttered. She pulled Robin into the clearing and almost bumped into Peter. “Hi. Sorry to frighten you. You scared me, too. Didn’t expect to see anyone out here.”

Jody glared at her with unfriendly blue eyes, and Jeanne felt the dark chill of the taller girl’s hostility. Jody’s gaze flicked to Jeanne’s oversized jacket and heavy jeans, and Jeanne suddenly felt very sloppy in comparison to Jody’s fashionably bright colors and expensive jacket. *But you can't ride a horse in that,* she cheered herself.

“Hi, Jody. Do you have to write an essay on the tree, too?”

Jody sniffed.

Peter glanced over at his twin. “Jody...”

“I don’t have to speak to farmers,” Jody drawled arrogantly. “And especially to her. Amy Evans says she’s weird. Amy says that —”

“Oh, shut up, Jody,” Peter interrupted. “You sound like you’re stuck in a loop.”

Jody glared at him.

“Go ahead,” Peter said slowly, tightly controlled anger in his voice. “Go ahead, add one more of Amy’s comments. I dare you.”

Jody sniffed again. She strode haughtily past Jeanne back to the trail.

“I’m telling Dad on you!” she yelled and ran.

“I’m sorry, Jean.” Peter sighed, drawing a hand through his rumpled sandy hair. “Jody’s been hanging around that Evans crowd too long.”

Jeanne shrugged. “I’ve heard worse names from Amy.”

Peter suddenly looked past her, and his blue eyes widened.

“Hey, Jean, is that an Appaloosa?”

“The name is Jeanne,” she said, adding the long-e sound to the end. “Like the genie of the lamp.” At his blank expression, she mentally sighed and continued. “Yes, she’s an Appaloosa.” The mare nudged Jeanne, and she automatically started stroking the silky neck. “Do you ride?”

“Don’t I wish! We’ve always lived in cities or suburbs before now.”

Jeanne suddenly heard her voice saying, “I could teach you if you want.” Her hand froze on Robin’s neck. What had she said? She couldn’t teach him, couldn’t afford to be around him. What if she made some dumb slip that showed him exactly how different she was from others? No, safer not to teach him. And yet...

Peter’s smile grew even wider. “Could you? That would be — naw,” he interrupted himself. “I couldn’t pay, and it would take up your time — I know you probably have chores.”

He sounded so dejected she couldn’t let him down. *Maybe I can trust him. It would be nice to have a friend my own age, not just the stable gang. Sure, she corrected herself cynically. As long as he thinks you’re normal. But if he notices you’re a mite too perceptive, then watch him draw away, just like all the rest.*

But somehow, the words slipped out without any thought.

“I never said anything about money. What do you think I am? We’re friends, aren’t we? And one of my ‘chores’ is exercising some of my brother Mike’s horses, so you’d be helping me.”

Robin nickered uneasily, and Jeanne led the mare over to the cleared area in front of the haunted tree, away from rustling leaves. Peter followed.

“Your brother has horses?”

“My oldest brother *raises* horses. He bought Robin, here, in the spring.”

“She’s beautiful.” Peter moved towards them, and Robin tried to hide behind Jeanne. He stopped and waited for the horse to quiet. “Did I do something wrong?”

Jeanne held the bridle firmly. “No, Robin just frightens very easily. Move slowly. I won’t teach you on her. She’s bad enough for me.”

Peter patted the sleek hide. “Why do you ride her, then?”

“Mike told me that if I could cure her, she’s mine.”

“He must not have much confidence in you. Aren’t horses expensive?”

Jeanne smiled. “Oh, he does. He just thinks I’ve met my match in Robin. You see, Robin’s previous owners were very cruel to her. She still doesn’t trust people.”

Peter eyed her curiously. “You know, you’re a lot like your horse. I don’t know why Amy’s been picking on you, but with her around, I can see why you’re always on your guard.”

Jeanne felt a slight shock at the unexpected remark.

“I’m not — ”

“You are. I’ve watched you in class. You’re awfully edgy around people. You hiding some deep, dark secret? Why do you let Amy push you around?”

“I don’t.” She looked down at the ground, confused and unaccustomed to the kindness behind his remarks. “Don’t mess with Amy’s crowd, Peter. I can handle her better than you can. We’ve been enemies for a long time. You’re a newcomer. Amy could — ”

“Amy couldn’t do anything to bother me.”

“Amy’s already bothering you through Jody. And you don’t know what one rumor in this town can do.”

“Like the one she told Jody?” Peter asked. “That you have magical powers?”

Jeanne flushed in anger. That rumor was too close to the truth for comfort.

“I don’t — ”

“Of course not. There’s no such thing as magic — or haunted trees, for that matter. Hey, I was meaning to ask you. How come when Miss

Long mentioned this old tree, practically every kid in class looked scared? What's the big deal about it? It's just a tree."

Jeanne glanced nervously at it and found herself wondering if it had heard.

"Miss Long is new to town — she doesn't understand yet," she said swiftly. She turned back to Peter. "There...there are stories."

"Such as?"

"Such as people vanishing."

Peter frowned. "Oh, come on! What does that prove?"

"Not much, I guess. It did happen almost a hundred years ago. But sometimes you can hear voices here, only they don't sound human." Jeanne warmed to her subject, feeling as if she were reciting from one of the fantasies she loved to read. "And there've been lights — dancing, bobbing lights, like a will-o'-the-wisp, only there's no swamp near here. The tree has been known to walk, too."

"Walk?"

"Sure. Raccoon Creek is about a hundred feet through there," she said, pointing into the thickly tangled underbrush. "And the tree used to be on its banks."

"Huh?"

"Yep. Stood right on the bank of a creek a hundred feet from here, until the bank was undercut so badly by the water the tree was just about ready to fall in. This was back when Wilson's Forest was private property, before the Wilsons donated it to the town as a forest preserve. Anyhow, the Wilsons decided to cut the tree down." She paused for effect.

"And?"

"And when they got out to the creek, the tree was gone. They finally found it right here."

Peter silently studied the gnarled old tree. "You're kidding," he said finally. "You actually believe that stuff?"

"Some. My grandfather remembers when the tree was on Raccoon Creek. He was my age then."

"Trees don't walk," Peter said flatly. "Your grandfather was only kidding you."

"No, I can tell when someone is lying. And I also believe him because every time I come here, near the tree like this, I get the feeling there's someone watching me." She shivered. "Like right now."

“It’s probably just Jody sneaking around.” Peter glared into the shadows, looking for his twin.

“She’s just as confused and hurt as you are, Peter. Give her time.”

He glanced at her sharply, and she realized her slip.

“I..I mean,” she faltered, cursing her stupidity, “it’s always rough when my brothers and I fight. Must be worse for twins.”

Peter frowned at the surrounding trees. “Yeah, it is. She won’t even listen to me now.”

Jeanne forced herself to remain silent, although she wished she could say something to comfort him. She felt fear rising strongly in the mare’s trembling body.

“Gosh, it’s late. I’ve got to get Robin back.” She swung up into the saddle and looked down at Peter, remembering her promise. “Could you come out to the farm tomorrow? It’s Saturday – I’d have time to start you then.”

“That soon? Gee, that would be –”

The Appaloosa suddenly squealed with fear and reared. Jeanne, caught off-guard, lost her balance and tumbled off Robin’s back. Time seemed to slow as she fell. She heard Jody’s laugh, saw the swing of dark cloth.

Where’s the tree? Omigosh, I’m going to hit –

Suddenly, she felt herself caught and cradled as if in two great arms, then dumped into a pile of leaves. A bell chimed in the distance as the two huge branches moved away from her to hang from the haunted tree again. She stared at the tree now in front of her, knowing it had been *behind* her only seconds ago. *No. No, I’m dreaming. Trees don’t do this. They don’t, they don’t!*

The trunk of the tree seemed to ripple like water, and Peter fell out of the brownness, catching his balance with a gymnast’s reflexes. He turned and stared down at her, his eyes glassy, as a chime sounded in the stillness.

“P–Peter?”

“You..You fell through the tree!” he stammered. “I tried to catch you, but you hit it and fell through! Then it...the tree... grabbed me and...”

Jeanne heard her voice saying calmly, “And now we’re here.”

Peter gulped, his face regaining some of its tan. “But where’s ‘here’? Look, the forest is gone.”

Chapter 2

THE LANDS

JEANNE LOOKED ABOUT HER. PETER WAS RIGHT; THE FOREST WAS gone. They were in a great meadow, empty except for the haunted tree. She tried to orient herself, but there were no familiar landmarks. Green-and-golden hills rose in the distance where the town should be, and the stretches of farmland outside of Wilson's Forest had become a dark and forbidding woods.

"Even the town's gone," Peter said in a strange voice. "And this dead tree has green leaves now! What happened to us?" He glanced at his watch. "We haven't lost any time, but if someone knocked us out and drugged us, they'd probably reset the watches as well."

Jeanne climbed to her feet and walked over to the tree.

"We fell through here," she said slowly, remembering books she had read. "We should be able to go back." She gathered her courage and pushed against the trunk. Nothing happened. "It's solid," she sighed. "Whatever...door...let us through is closed now." She pushed her hair back out of her face and studied the tree. "Well, what do we do now?" she asked it.

"I don't know," Peter replied, studying the ground. He was growing more and more convinced he had imagined stepping through the tree. This couldn't be the same tree from the forest; the forest was gone. But how had they arrived in this meadow? "The only footprints around are ours. No tire marks...no hoof marks. Why would someone go to so much trouble to kidnap us?"

He spied a glint of metal rolling through the fallen leaves towards them. Under his gaze, the rolling metal suddenly stopped and fell over. He fished it out of the leaves and found he held a gold ring. He stood it on end on the palm of his hand and watched, startled, as it started to roll again. He caught it as it rolled off his hand and repeated the experiment. He noticed that, no matter in which direction he held his hand, the ring always rolled toward Jeanne.

“How is it doing that?” he asked softly. “That’s impossible.” The ring fell over. He stood it up again, but it didn’t move.

Jeanne walked away from the tree, studying the sky. Peter joined her, absently pocketing the ring.

“What are you looking for?” he asked.

She shrugged, her attention on something that had suddenly appeared on the horizon.

“Don’t know,” she replied. “I just suddenly got this feeling someone’s watching us.”

“I don’t see anyone.” Peter looked about the empty meadow.

The very air seemed to tremble as a shrill scream ripped through it.

“What was that?” he exclaimed.

“Peter!” Jeanne pointed.

Gliding swiftly towards them across the windless sky was something that resembled a red-violet dragon. Its cruel beak opened in a horrid grin as it shrieked again.

“Wow! Great special effects!” Peter said. “You can’t see any wires or blue matte outlines. Wonder how they’re projecting that pteranodon?”

The thing was not far from them now.

“Two legs, so that’s a drake, not a dragon,” Jeanne muttered.

“No, definitely a pteranodon,” Peter said.

Jeanne could see the huge eyes on either side of the ugly, wedge-shaped head. A chill wind suddenly rose, cutting through her jacket as the massive wings angled toward the ground. The long body swung forward, the giant talons opening.

“This is too large to be radio-controlled,” Peter observed.

Jeanne, sensing the greed and hunger in the creature’s mind, stared in amazement at Peter and suddenly realized why he was being so calm. She shoved him to the ground and followed.

Moving too fast to stop, the thing swooped through the space where they had been, talons snapping shut just over their heads. It had started to curve back into the sky when suddenly the tree rustled. Long branches whipped out like tentacles and wrapped about the creature. The thing struggled wildly, shrieking its horrible cry, but the branches relentlessly drew it against the tree trunk. As Jeanne and Peter watched in amazement, the creature suddenly vanished in a puff of green particles.

Jeanne could see Peter rubbing his eyes as the green smoke slowly drifted to the ground. The branches shook more of the dust off, then returned to their original position.

“Where are we?” she breathed.

“What are you doing here?” a strange voice suddenly demanded from above them. They looked back over their shoulders. A tall, gray-haired man frowned down at them. He was dressed in a loosely fitting shirt and trousers that had a dull metallic gleam. The folds of a cloak of the same dull silver rippled about him, then stilled, although no breeze had blown. The man’s face was smooth and unlined, despite his long gray hair, but something about him, in his bearing, in the way he stood waiting for their answer, reassured Jeanne, although she couldn’t explain why.

“Who are you?” Peter asked.

The man stared at them, and Jeanne could feel his bewilderment.

“You are not elves,” he said slowly. “You are humans!”

“Of course we’re humans,” Peter replied, equally puzzled. “There aren’t any such things as elves.”

Jeanne felt her mouth go dry. Elves? Where had they come to?

The man shook his head. “Children!” he said to something unseen. “Now you would bring children into this?”

Peter climbed to his feet and held his hand out to Jeanne.

“C’mon, we’re leaving,” he whispered. “This guy’s a nut case.”

Jeanne sat up but ignored his hand. She hugged herself, trying to shut out all the strange feelings crowding in on her.

“Where do we go, Peter?”

“Anywhere. C’mon!”

“And two of them,” the man said slowly, folding his arms. “The Watcher has never brought two through before.” He rubbed his thumb along the smooth edge of his jaw. His gray eyes studied them.

“Who are you?” Peter demanded again.

The man nodded. “The question is typically human, but the attitude is wise in the Lands today.” He bowed slightly with an elegant sweep of his cloak. “I am called Graylod.” He folded his arms again and stared at them thoughtfully. “I...cannot read you. What magicks do you two possess?”

“What?” Peter began.

“Wait, Peter.” Jeanne climbed to her feet and faced the silver-garbed man. “Let’s start at the beginning. I’m Jeanne Tucker, and he’s Peter Burns. We fell through that tree. It was all an accident, and we would be very glad to go back, if you would tell us how.” She hesitated, caught by the absent look in his eyes. “Mr. Graylod?”

Graylod blinked, and his gaze softened. “Are you the healer?”

“Am I the...?” Jeanne repeated in amazement.

“Neither of us are doctors,” Peter said. “How do we get back?” Jeanne noticed that he didn’t add “through the tree.”

Graylod was rubbing his jaw again. “But the prophecy specifically mentioned a — eh?” He turned his attention to Peter. “Back? Through the Watcher? You cannot.”

“Can’t?”

“Never?” Jeanne added faintly. Graylod was telling the truth; she could not sense the double echo of a lie. She shivered.

Elves, she thought. My biggest dream come true. Then why am I so frightened?

Graylod watched her. He said gently, “You cannot go back. The Watcher has picked you, the both of you, to save our land, and until that is done it will not allow you to leave.”

“What do you mean, ‘will not allow’?” Peter demanded. “Who is this Watcher, anyway?”

“It stands behind you,” Graylod said. They both turned.

“The tree?” Peter said scornfully.

“The Watcher is the door to all human lands and our guardian of last hope. When the Free Lands are threatened and a human can save us, it brings him here. Thus it was promised, and thus it is done. Your coming was no accident. You two can help us, though I cannot see how, and so the Watcher brought you here. Then it summoned me and protected you until I could arrive.”

“The tree?” Peter repeated.

“That’s why that thing vanished!” Jeanne exclaimed. “Magic!”

Graylod nodded.

“Don’t believe him, Jeanne,” Peter said angrily. “There’s no such thing as magic.”

Graylod drew himself up to his full height. “For one who knows so little,” he said, his voice full of authority, “you should not claim to know so much. Watch!”

He lifted his right hand. A swirl of color appeared at his fingertips, a dancing rainbow of dazzling colors. Slowly, out of the dazzling swirl, a solid object grew — first a short, slender rod of gray, then it lengthened into a long staff. Graylod hefted it, sending a wave of colors moving up and down its length.

“Magic,” Jeanne breathed. “You’re a wizard!”

Graylod nodded. “Hear me out, Peter Burns,” he ordered, as Peter was about to speak. “The Watcher has picked the both of you to help us, and by right you must know what you are to face.

“This land was once a fair land, from Beginning Time the refuge of all magic you humans denied in your world. Ages past, the Evil Ones had been defeated here and thrust out into the realm of the Shadow Land. Its borders watched against trouble, our land settled into contentment and forgot the dangers that once threatened it.

“But we forgot too soon. Witches united forces in the Shadow Land and broke through our protective safeguards. Our most powerful guardians were killed in a great battle of magic. Three witches survived. They now control our land and have placed our people under a curse until they can gather enough strength to move against your own land.”

“A curse?” Jeanne asked. “Can’t the witches be stopped?”

“The curse is one of forgetfulness,” Graylod said slowly. “Very fitting, since it is what led us to our downfall. Many of us, including myself, have forgotten our ways of magic. We remember only a little of what we once had. Important spells, cures — these are gone from our memories.

“The curse rids our land of any potential threat to the witches, for we cannot remember how to rid ourselves of them. A legend says that the witches’ power will be broken by a human Sensitive. I had hoped one of you would be that Sensitive.”

“Didn’t that, er, Watcher find anyone else to help you?” Peter asked, frowning. “Jeanne and I don’t know any magic.”

“The Watcher has found others who tried to help,” Graylod said slowly. “All of them failed, although they were skilled in magic. Perhaps the Watcher knows you possess other talents that may help.” He watched Peter’s face as he added, “I cannot send you back to your land. The Watcher has picked you, and only it controls the doors to your land.”

“Well, tell your Watcher to send us back,” Peter said angrily. “I’m not volunteering for this.”

“It is not ‘my’ Watcher,” Graylod said patiently, “but the Land’s.”

As Peter argued, Jeanne irritably rubbed at her right eye. The “anger ache” behind her eyes throbbed as if her brothers were quarreling.

What’s wrong with me? Peter’s not family. I’ve shut strangers out better than this!

The icy touch of wrongness crept once again up her spine, and she worriedly glanced at the sky.

“Watcher!” she yelled.

Shrill screams echoed from the sky. Graylod turned as two drakes raced from the horizon, heading unerringly toward them.

“The hounds!” he exclaimed. “Stand close to me!”

He swung his staff in a wide, blazing circle...and the drakes were gone. So was the haunted tree.

Peter blinked. One second they had been in an open meadow and now they stood on a flower-lined pathway of brightly shining stones deep inside a forest. The time had changed as well. There had been three hours before sunset, and now, from what he could see of the sky, they had closer to *four* hours left of daylight. They must have been transported west, but how?

“The witch hounds know you are here,” Graylod said briskly. “Soon, one of the witches will know also. You will stay here until we can organize an expedition against them.”

“Where is *here*?” Peter asked.

“A day’s travel west of the Watcher. This is an elf-village.” Graylod frowned. “Though I do not know where its people are. They should not be hiding from me.”

Peter looked at the tall trees like living walls about the path, glanced at Jeanne and shrugged. There had to be some way for them to escape from this madman.

Graylod's staff shimmered into liquid light, then solidified. "I do not sense any traps. Follow me." He strode down the path, Jeanne and Peter on his heels.

Jeanne shivered, feeling as if eyes were watching their every move. The silence was oppressing; no birds sang, no insects cricked in the shadows. She saw burn scars and axe marks on some of the trees, noticed that patches of the beautiful flowers had been uprooted and carelessly tossed aside or trampled under booted feet. She shivered at the deliberate vandalism and glanced aside at Peter. What had they gotten into?

Graylod stopped abruptly. "The Open Door has been closed!"

Jeanne heard the shock in his voice and wondered briefly at it. Before them two living trees formed a tall arch above the path. The path ran through the arch and continued on until it wound out of sight. There was no visible door anywhere.

Graylod moved his staff before the two intertwined trees. He stamped the end of it on the ground.

"*Rwit!*" he demanded.

Jeanne caught her breath as green and silver symbols appeared on the tree trunks, some shining where burn scars had been but seconds before. Green light shimmered in the archway.

"Begone, creatures of the night," a thready voice hissed at them.

Peter turned, trying to locate the speaker as the voice murmured musical syllables that yet seemed full of menace.

Graylod raised his blazing staff, and the voice stopped short. "Graylod! Forgive me! Enter the Open Door!"

Chapter 3

DECISION

“WALK THROUGH THE ARCHWAY,” GRAYLOD DIRECTED THEM.

Peter glanced from the wizard to Jeanne, shrugged, and started forward. The delicate scent of the flowers competed with the tang of wood smoke. Red, green, and blue stones glinted under their feet as they stepped under the arch...and into sudden blackness.

Peter bumped into Jeanne and dazedly realized that a solid flat floor, not the pebbled path, was under his sneakers. Graylod chuckled behind them in the darkness. There came a click from his staff striking the floor.

White fire leaped into being in a large fireplace to their left, casting soft light on a long block of cloudy crystal not far from them. Seated behind the crystal were two men and two women dressed in silvery gray, their hair ranging from pure silver to solid black, although their ages were not apparent from their faces.

Peter frowned thoughtfully. There was something strange about these people, something about their faces that didn't look normal. It wasn't, he decided, that their noses and mouths were unusually small, but that, in comparison with the enormous, faintly slanting eyes, they seemed almost tiny. He had never seen such big eyes on any human before.

“Elves,” Jeanne breathed softly in amazement. Peter looked at her and then back at the “elves.”

“Welcome, Graylod,” a voice said.

Peter blinked. He had the strange impression none of the elves' lips had moved.

Graylod rested one end of his staff on the floor and leaned on it.

"Council of Elders," he said solemnly, "why do your people hide from me? I came to ask help of you, to give sanctuary to these two humans until I can return."

The voice sighed. "We cannot, Graylod."

Graylod straightened. "Cannot? That is a harsh word, Elders."

"But truth, Graylod. The Dark One attacked us not long ago, taking with her captives to be Changed."

Jeanne shivered. That word had an ominous ring to it.

The word also affected Graylod.

"Changed? She has learned that dread art, then?"

"And learned it well. You can understand now, Graylod, why we cannot give these two sanctuary."

"Yes." Graylod mused. "But you can ready them for travel, giving them reliable guardians – the Windkin would be best – and send them on to Gimstan Mountain."

"It will be done," the voice said. "The call will go out."

"And tell them of their path, so they will be wary," Graylod added. He turned to Peter and Jeanne. "I am sorry, but I have so little time, too little to warn you of this land's ways. I will meet you at Gimstan Mountain, Green willing." He smiled sadly at them, then vanished. A soft breeze touched them; the white fire flickered, then steadied.

"Peter Burns," the voice said. Peter looked warily at the Council. "Our power of seeing the future is slight now, and we can see only patches of what is to come. For you, we see only that your journey will be hard. Do not be deceived by outward appearances.

"But you, Jeanne Tucker," the voice continued, "we see great evil in this for you, daughter. But we cannot see beyond it, for another power blocks our sight. Peter is too different from us. We cannot hide him from the witch, but we could hide you. Do you still wish to continue?"

"I . . ." Jeanne felt the faint touch of the Council's concern, and her own fear rose. What was she to say? Everything was happening so fast.

"Stay here, Jeanne," Peter whispered. "You'll be safer here."

Jeanne looked at him. "But you –"

"I'll be all right. You're a girl. This isn't for you."

Jeanne mentally sighed as she caught the same “protectiveness” radiating from Peter she had often sensed from Mike.

“Yeah, right,” she replied, remembering his reaction to the witch hound. *He’s the one who needs protecting.* She turned and faced the Council. “The Watcher picked us both. I’m going with Peter,” she said firmly.

The voice sighed. “Very well. We shall help as much as we can. You will be given clothing and weapons. We see you will meet one on the trail who will later help you in times of danger, but, as a further protection, we will give you a powerful gift. Peter, step forward.”

Peter took a deep breath and did as he was told.

“You are the skeptical one and thus will not waste this gift,” the voice said. “We will give you three spells, each of which can be used only once.” The four elves stared at him, and Peter suddenly felt dizzy. The feeling was gone as fast as it appeared, and the voice continued, “Use these spells wisely.”

“Wait a minute,” Peter said, feeling slightly dazed. “What spells? How am I supposed to cast spells?”

“You will know when the time comes.” As one, the Elders turned their attention to a section of the block before them.

“Hi, Peter! Awake again?”

Peter turned as Jeanne emerged from the shadows.

“What do you mean, ‘awake again’? What happened? And where did you get those clothes?”

Jeanne looked down at herself with a faint smile. “Not bad, huh?” She was dressed in a loose brown shirt and a gray vest and trousers. Small pouches dangled from a belt about her waist, and a bundle of gray material was draped over her arm. “Wish I was taller,” she sighed. “I’m going to be tripping over this cloak. The elves gave me these while you were out.”

“Out? Out where?”

“The Elders hypnotized you to imprint the spells so you couldn’t forget them. You’ve been standing there about an hour, I’d say.”

Peter looked at her. “Hypnotized me? Just like that? Without even a ‘pardon me’ or ‘do you mind’? There’s such a thing as asking permission,” he started, turning towards the Elders, who were still studying a section of the block of crystal. He looked closer at the block. Was

there something wrong with his eyesight, or were the cloudy swirls in the crystal moving?

“The customs here are different, Peter,” Jeanne said. “I wasn’t too happy with that, either. They wouldn’t even let me stay with you. But they didn’t mean to hurt you, just to protect us in their way.”

“Come,” a dark-haired elf said, stepping forward out of the shadows behind her. “The Fleogende will soon be arriving to take you to the mountains.”

“Who are Fleogende?” Jeanne asked as they joined the elf. “Graylod said something about Windkin, too. What are they?”

“*Windkin* is the wizard word for those we elves call Fleogende, the Fleet Ones. They are the fastest runners in the Free Lands.” She opened a side door and ushered them into a long corridor lined with doors. “We do not have much time – the witch will send out more hounds to search for you.”

“Only one witch?” Jeanne asked.

“Yeah,” Peter agreed. “Why don’t they just come all at once and overwhelm us with power?”

“The witches are very jealous of each other,” the elf explained. “The one witch whose hound was destroyed has not informed the other two as yet. They will usually not ask help of each other unless they have no other choice. It is a wonder they have ruled together this long.”

“How do you know what the witches are doing?” Peter demanded.

“Our Council members are seers. Some can see into the future, others can only see the present.”

“So, that was the purpose of the crystal,” Jeanne said thoughtfully. “But they told Graylod the Dark One had attacked here. Didn’t they foresee it?”

“Their power is greatly diminished under the curse. We had no warning.” She opened a door to a torchlit room lined with books. “In here, Peter.”

“See you outside, Peter.” Jeanne waved and continued down the corridor.

“What’s wrong with our own clothes?” Peter asked as the elf held up a warm green shirt. She glanced from it to him, as if checking the size, and replaced it atop the dark gray trousers draped over the back of a chair. Short gray boots stood before the chair.

“Your clothes will not protect you against the elements and other hazards, as these will. The witch will be expecting strange garments. You will be harder to find when dressed like our people.” She shook out the folds of a gray cloak lined with silvery fluff, glanced at him as if checking his height, then replaced it atop the nearby table and headed for the door. “When you are dressed, the door at the far end of the corridor will lead outside.”

Peter fingered the strange fabric of the shirt as the door closed behind the elf. It felt unlike anything he knew, not cotton nor synthetic nor leather.

“This isn’t a dream – it’s a nightmare!” he muttered, glancing about the small library. “What can two kids do against three witches except get themselves killed?”

He dressed hurriedly and went through the pockets of his discarded clothing, moving the bulk of the items to a pouch on his new belt. He wasn’t about to leave behind his Scout knife, and duct tape might come in handy. He had rolled the tape on a small spool to make it pocket-sized, and it slipped easily into the pouch.

He found the gold ring and was about to leave it with his clothing when he remembered he hadn’t shown it to Jeanne yet. Maybe there would be time to experiment further with it. He stuffed it into the pouch as well. Still struggling with the unfamiliar cloak, he headed towards the door at the far end of the corridor.

The door opened on a greenish shimmer. Peter took a deep breath and stepped through to find himself on the far side of the archway. He turned and looked at the intertwined trees.

“Magic,” he said in disgust.

Behind him, a snort echoed his disgust. Peter turned to find himself facing a sleek blue-black stallion, bigger and taller than Earth’s horses. It looked him over with an icy stare, then snorted again as if in contempt.

“Well, I don’t think much of you, either,” Peter told it, finally tying the cloak properly about his neck.

The horse looked startled.

“I see you two are getting along nicely,” Jeanne said from behind him. Peter turned with a sigh. Why was she constantly popping up behind him? A gray-and-white-spotted stallion followed so closely behind her his breath ruffled her hair.

“Don’t look now, but you’ve got a shadow.” Peter chuckled.

Jeanne smiled as she looked over her shoulder. Her “shadow” murmured softly and crowded up against her, nudging her with his soft muzzle.

“I’d like you to meet two of the Windkin. This is Elin,” she said, drawing out the initial E sound. “And you’ve already met Hahle.”

The black snorted a “hah” sound in reply.

The gray-and-white horse seemed to speak in a strange, slurred manner to Jeanne, then trotted amiably up to Peter. He looked Peter over with a friendly glance, blew the boy’s hair into his eyes, then moved over and seemed to talk to the black horse.

“Where’s our guide?” Peter asked, watching the horses suspiciously while he pushed his hair back out of his eyes.

Jeanne smothered a laugh. “But they’re...Oh, you mean the elf? She’s been loading supplies in the Fleet Ones’ packs. I guess she went to get something.”

“What’s so funny?” Peter asked curiously.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” Jeanne grinned. “Just something Elin said.”

Girls, Peter thought in disgust.

Chapter 4

RIDING LESSON

PETER LOOKED AT THE HORSES.

“The saddles are different here,” he commented, eyeing the light pads with stirrups and remembering what he had seen of the saddle on Jeanne’s horse. “No bridles?” he added, noticing that the reins were attached to simple halters.

The stallions both turned to face him, their ears up. Jeanne looked closely at him.

“The reins are only needed when the witch hounds are around.”

Peter hoped his face didn’t look as blank as his mind felt. He kept trying to add up his observations, but the end result was confusion. Horses that didn’t need reins unless witch hounds were around? What did the witch hounds have to do with horses? Just how intelligent were these horses?

The blue-black stallion murmured what seemed to be a question.

“Ready for Peter, Hahle?” Jeanne asked.

The horse nodded. Jeanne checked the saddle girth, then nodded at Peter.

“Okay, Peter, mount up.”

“Me? Mount him? I’d need a stepladder!” Peter protested.

“Yeah, they’re both kinda tall. But you can use the saddle to pull yourself up. Just put your left foot in the left stirrup and then swing your right foot up and over.”

Peter looked at the distance. “You’re worse than the coach.”

He stuck his left foot in the stirrup, grabbed a handful of mane and tried to pull himself up into the saddle. The horse beneath him snorted and danced forward a few steps.

“Hey!” Peter protested from the ground. “That’s not fair! He’s supposed to stand still!”

Musical laughter answered him. Peter could see the bright eyes of children watching him from among the trees across the flower-lined path. Hahle swung his big head back and met Peter’s eyes. The boy hesitated, oddly caught by that calm gaze. The horse looked amused as well.

Jeanne looked thoughtful. “That’s odd. Pulling on the mane never bothered horses back...” She shook her head. “Try grabbing hold of the saddle, Peter, not his mane.”

“Oh. Sorry, Hahle.” Peter repeated the entire performance, this time remaining in the saddle. “You know, it’s really not so bad after all.” He looked down at the distant ground. “Uh, how do you get down?”

Hahle shook his head, tossing his mane in an odd manner. Peter had the distinct impression the horse was laughing at him.

Jeanne swung up into her saddle. “I hope that elf hurries. We have to leave soon. The Elders said that hounds are patrolling the area by the Watcher. Sooner or later, one might circle this way.”

Peter turned in the saddle and looked through the supplies in the pack.

“We have food and blankets, but what’s going to stop a hound from coming after us?”

“These,” the elf said, suddenly appearing beside them. She held up two long, sheathed objects.

“Swords?” Jeanne queried.

“And daggers, too,” Peter added, spying the two additional weapons in the elf’s belt.

“Not all the dangers of this land are magical,” the elf said, answering Jeanne’s inquiring look. Indicating her own sword, she showed them how the scabbard and belt buckled about the waist and demonstrated how to draw the deadly weapons. “We have not the time to test its fit to you,” she said as she strapped one sword to the saddle of Peter’s mount, “but we could not let you go completely weaponless.” She handed him a dagger and moved to Jeanne.

Peter looked at the dagger, hefting it thoughtfully as he glanced from it to the sword. He'd had to plead for years to get his Scout knife, and now he was given both a dagger and a sword?

He didn't notice the argument beside him until he heard Jeanne say, "I'll take the dagger, then, but not that!" He looked up to see her push the sword away.

"You might need that," he commented.

She shook her head. "I can't use it," she said firmly.

"I don't know how to use a sword, either."

"I won't take that with me! I won't kill people!"

"And if they try to kill you?"

She returned his gaze. "I won't kill, Peter. I...can't!"

"I don't think I can, either, Jeanne. But if anyone tries to kill me, I'm going to fight back."

Jeanne did not answer, but her face looked stubborn. Peter sighed. His favorite television hero also refused to use weapons.

"Your choice."

The elf looked back and forth between them. "You should bring it along, even so."

"No, we won't," Jeanne insisted.

Beneath her, Elin muttered, and the elf nodded and put down the sword. The blue-black stallion pawed the ground with one hoof.

"Whose is that third horse?" Peter asked, suddenly noticing a roan with reins but no saddle watching them.

"The one you will meet on the trail will need him," the elf explained.

The roan shook his mane and nudged one of the shy elf children out of hiding while another slyly crept up and tweaked his tail.

"How do we get where we're going?" Peter asked. "Is there a map?"

"The Fleet Ones will be your guides as well as transport," the elf said.

Hahle pawed the ground again, seeming impatient.

"The horses? Guides?"

"We're not in our world, Peter," Jeanne said in an exasperated tone of voice. "Elin and Hahle are not our kind of horses, not dumb animals, but as intelligent as you and I."

"Huh?" He turned to her. "How do you know?"

She looked startled. "Can't you hear them?"

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