

# TALKING to TREES

SAMPLE

KATHRYN SULLIVAN

## *Jody screamed.*

Bushes rustled violently behind her, and Jody sprang off the log. She ran past Twylgalit, then stopped and screamed again as a tall figure emerged from the shadows before her. She turned to run in the other direction, but two girls had appeared — one atop the log, the other next to Twylgalit. They froze, their dark eyes and mouths open in round Os as they stared at her. Both girls had green hair similar to Twylgalit's, but both were *totally* green!

"You — you have green skin!" Jody faltered.

The girls looked at each other, then back at Jody.

"Of course," said one. "Why don't you?"

"Look what she wears," said the other. She jumped off the log and straightened, eyeing Jody. "How...odd."

Jody's mouth opened in astonishment. The two girls wore loose green smocks similar in cut to Twylgalit's brown one. The closer girl had a yellow-orange belt with small bags dangling from it. Their hair was darker than Twyl's but still a light-green in shade. Both girls had a tiny little baglike pendant around their necks.

Jody blinked. She had the strangest impression there was something different about their eyes — they seemed almost completely black — and that neither girl had eyebrows. But of course that couldn't be so.

## Also by Kathryn Sullivan

*Agents, Adepts, and Apprentices*

*The Crystal Throne*

# TALKING TO TREES

(A Book of The Lands)



KATHRYN SULLIVAN

ZUMAYA THRESHOLDS

2022

AUSTIN TX

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.

## TALKING TO TREES

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# Map of The Lands

Created by Rose Marie Sullivan Shusis



## To my sisters: Karen, Nancy, and Rose

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# Prologue

## TWYLGALIT

SHE LOOKED OVER THE DEVASTATED LAND, AT THE GROVES OF TREES buried by landslide, and leaned again into the embrace of her grandmother.

“They can’t all be gone!” she sobbed.

“We are the only two remaining. The next strike will be soon.”

There came the rattle of small stones down the side of the hill, almost unnoticed in the pouring rain. Thunder growled like an angry voice.

Her grandmother lightly touched her hair.

“You must go.”

Tears mixed with the raindrops streaming down her face.

“I can’t leave you!”

“You cannot stay. You must find help for us.”

Twylgalit stepped back, looking wildly across the wasteland outside their sanctuary.

“How? Where?”

“Only a human can help us. I have spoken to the Watcher of Gates. He knows of our plight. He will ensure you will be sent to one who can help. Now, come, give me a hug, dear twiglet, and I will send you on your way.”

Twylgalit fiercely hugged her grandmother. She felt the rough bark against her face for a moment, and then, suddenly, she was elsewhere.



# Chapter 1

## JODY

JODY BURNS SAW THE GREEN-HAIRED GIRL STEP OUT OF MIDAIR.

At first, she didn't realize she'd seen anything unusual — this *was* the mall on a Saturday, after all — but then it struck her that this couldn't possibly be some advertising trick. The girl hadn't been there a second ago. The air had suddenly *rippled*, and she had stumbled through.

She was dripping wet, her hair and clothing clinging to her. She looked as if she had been crying, and Jody could hear a half-sniff/half-sob as she glanced around at the crowded mall.

The girl shook her head, and Jody expected to see droplets of water fly everywhere. Instead, she only heard a faint rustle, and the short hair suddenly looked dry, lightening to a sea-green color. The water beading the girl's light-brown skin and soaking her shirt vanished as if absorbed.

The girl hugged her bare arms below the short sleeves and looked around as if she was searching for someone.

Jody quickly looked back at the window display before her. Summer pastels were such a relief after the gray winter drabs. She said as much to Amy Evans, but Amy was looking elsewhere.

"Well, check out the new style."

"Eww, seaweed," Brittany commented.

Jody turned with the rest of the group. The green-haired girl was heading directly for them. She wore a loose, almost knee-length, brownish smock and dark-brown leggings. The smock had a pattern that reminded Jody of the paneling in the family room — light and dark

woodgrain swirls, and the neck and sleeve trim even resembled bark. Close up, her brown skin seemed to have greenish undertones.

*Wonder if she's ill...* A small thought began before Jody crushed it.

The girl stopped before them. Small beaded cords that held short tufts of hair at each temple clattered softly as she bobbed her head.

"Excuse, please. Do you know where dwells a hero?"

"Hero?" Amy echoed.

"Or a wizard. A demon slayer would be best."

Jody wondered why the girl was looking at *her*. Maybe it was because she was the tallest of the group of twelve- and thirteen-year-olds. She knew she was dressed more in fashion than the others, but then, the city stores she used to shop at were much better than those in smalltown malls.

*She seems about our age. Too old to be playing little-kid games.*

"You mean... *The Slayer*?" Brittany asked, emphasizing the name. "Someone obviously watches too much television," she added to the group.

"Weird," Sadie commented. She made a circling gesture by her temple, and the others giggled.

The girl looked from one to the other and finally returned her attention to Jody.

"Please. I need help."

"Definitely," Amy agreed. "For one, that hair color is so *out*."

"Out where?" She seemed puzzled when several of the girls laughed.

Jody actually thought the girl's hair color was interesting — sea-foam, she thought the shade might have been called. She tried to remember if she had seen any outfits in that color; it would definitely suit her blond looks.

Unnervingly, the girl focused on her again.

"Please. We've held back the evil as long as we can. We need help."

Why was she asking *her*?

"Uh..." Jody looked around. Weren't there any security guards in this mall? She'd settle for an older teen or an adult, if she could get anyone's attention. But everyone seemed to be in a hurry, walking past or around the group of girls.

"And that outfit." Amy tsked. "Long baggy T-shirts are so *yesterday*."

The girl tilted her head as she looked at them.

"I don't understand your words. The Watcher of Gates said the first person who saw me would be the one to help." She looked again at Jody, who tried not to squirm. "Will you help?"

"Yes, Jody," Amy said with an unfriendly smile and a glance aside at the other girls. "Will you help?"

Jody could feel the others watching her as they waited. Somehow, it felt as if *everyone* in the mall was watching her. This girl might be serious about asking for help, but what could *she* do? Better to make a big joke of it, as the rest were, and go back to window-shopping.

Jody opened her mouth to speak — and suddenly felt overwhelmingly bored. *So bored. I want to walk away.*

"I'm bored," said Amy. She turned and walked away. The rest of the girls followed. Jody started to turn as well, but a brown hand closed about her wrist.

The green-haired girl looked closely at her. "Will you help?" she repeated.

Jody looked down at the hand around her wrist just above the silver bracelet. She was so *bored*. She should leave now...and yet, there was something odd about that grip around her wrist. She felt as if there were two voices in her head, one demanding *go*, and the other *stay*.

"Hey, Jody."

Jody looked up to see Jeanne Tucker, her brother's friend, coming toward them. She really should leave; Amy and the other girls were already several stores away. Jeanne Tucker was not one of the popular crowd and never followed the trends. For example, as usual, the dark-haired girl was wearing jeans and a plain sweatshirt more suited to a barn than the mall. Fashion disaster.

Amy always said Jeanne Tucker was odd, that she had *powers*. Jody vaguely remembered something strange about Jeanne last October, something about her spotted horse and a tree...

But there was someone holding her wrist.

Jeanne Tucker looked at Jody, at her wrist being held by the green-haired girl, then finally at the green-haired girl.

"Yes," she said softly, "I thought I sensed..." She looked closer at the green-haired girl and smiled. The strange girl smiled hesitantly in return. "But you're not a dryad, are you?" Jeanne continued.

"No," the girl said slowly. "My ancestor was human."

Jody's boredom vanished as if it had been switched off. *What* had she said?

"That explains it," Jeanne said, although Jody didn't think it did. "I'm Jeanne, that's Jody, and you are...?"

"Twylgalit."

"Twyl-gaa-lit," Jeanne repeated slowly. "Is that right?" The girl nodded, and Jeanne smiled again. "Twylgalit, why don't you let Jody go, and you and I can talk."

The green-haired girl shook her head, the cords in her hair clacking. "No, the Watcher of Gates said that the first to see me would be the one to help us."

"I...see," Jeanne said slowly. Then she nodded. "Sorry, Jody, looks like you stay here for the moment."

"What?" Jody's temper flared. *Don't I have a say? And why am I still standing here? This girl is smaller than me; I could shake off her grip and go join...*

But before she could complete the thought, it was gone.

Jeanne acted as if Jody had not spoken.

"How did you get here?" she asked the strange girl. Jody tried to remember her name. Twillow — something.

"Grandmother sent me to where I could find help."

Jeanne tilted her head. "Grandmother?"

"I call her Grandmother. She's actually..." The girl spread the fingers of her free hand. "...great-great-great —"

"We get the idea," Jody muttered. Jeanne glanced at her, and Jody had the urge to stay quiet.

"She's very ill. I think...I think she's dying." Twillow-something wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Being closer to the magic, she has the power. She 'spoke' to the Watcher of Gates and sent me through..." The girl waved her free hand. "...to this place. To where the person who could help us would be. I found her."

Her grip tightened around Jody's wrist.

"She does have the choice, though," Jeanne said thoughtfully. "You can't force her to help against her will."

Jody wanted to say something, to tell them to stop talking about her as if she wasn't there, but Jeanne eyed her and she couldn't. The dark-haired girl glanced again at Jody's wrist.

“And, actually, you might have the wrong one. Jody, is Peter here?”

Suddenly, she could talk again. “How should I know? We don’t actually hang out with the same crowd.” Jody tossed her hair back, remembering the last time her twin had commented about her friends.

“Yeah, I know. He needs to hear this, though.” Jeanne closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “So much fear,” she said softly. “And something follows. I can feel it. It’s...” Her eyes snapped open. “No wonder you’re scared.”

Jody took one step back from Jeanne even as her captor moved closer. “Yes! You understand! It hates life. It will destroy all the lands if it gets free — ”

“Hey, Jody!” a familiar call came. Jody relaxed for a second — Peter would know what to do — and then immediately scowled. Know-it-all Peter.

“Jody, Mom’s waiting by — Get away from my sister!”

Jody turned to see Peter suddenly break into a run toward them. He was staring at the green-haired girl with a furious expression. Just as he reached them, though, Jeanne stepped in front of him.

“She needs our help, Peter. Her grandmother is very ill, and there’s something after her. Twylgalit, this is Peter, Jody’s brother. Peter, Twylgalit.”

Twylgalit had released Jody’s wrist at Peter’s shout. She rubbed her hand and bowed slightly.

“What’s a dryad doing here?” Peter growled, still glaring fixedly at Twylgalit.

“Not dryad,” Jeanne corrected. “Human.”

“That hair isn’t — Jeanne, I see a tree.”

“You see a human,” Jeanne said firmly.

Peter attempted to pass Jeanne, but the dark-haired girl blocked him again. He frowned at her and gestured at Twylgalit.

“But it — ” Jeanne shook her head, and he corrected himself. “She... Human? How?”

Jody looked from one to the other. Why was Peter talking about a tree? He was glaring at Twylgally-something again. She looked at the green-haired girl as well, and saw nothing strange about the girl other than her hair color. The greenish undertone to her skin was more pronounced than before. Maybe Peter’s comments were making her

sicker. *Hope she doesn't throw up on me.* She backed a step away from her.

Twylgally-something glanced at Jody, then back at Peter. "My ancestor had magic."

"Obviously." Peter crossed his arms. "So, what's the story? Why are you here?"

Jody looked from one to the other. Jeanne and Peter acted as if the strange girl was making sense.

She suddenly realized that Amy and her friends were no longer in sight. Maybe she could find them.

"I'll just go —"

"No, you won't," Peter disagreed. "Mom's waiting for us outside. I want to hear this first." He nodded at Twylgally. "Go ahead."

"My ancestor's ancestor imprisoned a powerful being." Twylgally glanced at Jody again, faltered, then continued. "His magic was not enough to defeat the evil, but he had knowledge enough to know how to keep it confined until it could be defeated. He created us for that." She looked pleadingly at them. "We have waited so long for help to come. And now we can no longer wait. There is only my grandmother and myself. And I don't have the wisdom. Once Grandmother is...gone, it will be free to turn all of the Lands into a wasteland like the one it now rules."

Peter raised his hands. "And you come to *us*? What's wrong with the wizards?"

Jody stared in amazement. Peter was not only buying the weird story, but he was adding to it! Wizards? But Peter didn't believe in magic — or at least the Peter she used to know hadn't.

"We had no way to reach them." Twylgally frowned. "They aren't... nearby."

"And we are?"

"Peter," Jeanne said softly, glancing aside at the crowded mall, "she's telling the truth. Her grandmother sent her here for help. She found Jody."

Peter lowered his voice. "Jody? Why Jody? No offense, twin, but you aren't someone I'd ask for help."

"What?" Jody scowled at him.

"Um, *you* might be the one they were looking for." Jeanne, Jody was irritated to see, seemed amused. "Take a look at what's on her wrist."

Peter took one look and exploded. "My wristguard! What were you doing in my room? How dare you take my stuff!"

Jody shrugged. He didn't frighten her; she was still taller than he was. And it wasn't like him to make a fuss over jewelry.

"You weren't wearing it. Besides, it looks good with my outfits." She'd had the argument about his fancy bracelet ready for months, and it still sounded strong. He hadn't missed it in all that time. Mom would see her side.

Peter didn't. "Hand it over. You don't know what you're messing with."

Jody shrugged again and obeyed. She'd wait for him to forget it again and get it back.

Twylgally looked from Jody to Peter as the bracelet was passed. Peter flushed and ran a hand through his sandy hair.

"Sorry I was angry," he said to the floor. He looked up at the green-haired girl. "Your grandmother sent you to the wrong twin. Not her fault. Jody was wearing something that belongs to me. This..." He held up the silvery wristband. "...came from —" He said something in a language Jody didn't understand. Twylgally looked impressed.

Jody wasn't. "Oh, yeah, like it's my fault you leave it lying around."

Peter scowled at her and put the silvery band around his right wrist.

"Where's Amy and the rest of her shadows?"

"Oh, they had a sudden attack of boredom," Jeanne said. Peter eyed her, and Jody recognized the you're-not-telling-me-everything look even when it wasn't directed at her. Jeanne grinned and shrugged with open hands. "They were hassling Twylgalit."

"Good thing for Twyl you were nearby, then." Peter glanced at his watch. "Mom's waiting for us. Jody and I have to go."

"Meet later by the Watcher?" Jeanne suggested.

Peter nodded. "We'll need to get some supplies. Where is your grandmother?" he asked Twylgalit.

"In the wasteland."

"Where's that in location to? Wait, my map's at home. Right, we have to go home, get the map, get supplies..." He shook his head. "Why didn't the wizards spot this thing sooner?"

"The Flood may have awakened it," Twylgalit said helpfully. "There was the Great Forgetting, and it seemed to sleep — at least, we have not been troubled by it for some time."

"And it woke up when the curse was broken?" Peter asked.

"If that stopped the Forgetting, then, yes."

Peter glanced at Jeanne. "You're right; it's our responsibility, then."

"I do not understand," Twylgalit said. Jody mentally agreed.

"We broke the curse that caused the Forgetting," Jeanne said softly.

"Oh." Twylgalit looked from Jeanne to Peter, and Jody felt very jealous at the awe in the girl's eyes. "You must be most powerful, then."

"Lucky is more like it," Peter disagreed. "You mentioned a flood. Did this thing cause it?"

"No. It is trapped on the wasteland. But from the top of Grandmother I can see water where a desert used to be during the Great Forgetting. Before that, she told me, it was a wondrous grassland."

Jeanne nodded. "Near Windgard, then. The wizards were going to cause a flood to restore the plains."

"That's a long way from the Watcher. It'll be a walk then."

Jody couldn't believe this conversation. What Peter was so casually talking about sounded as if it would take days. What about school? How was he going to convince their parents? And he was bossing everyone around, as usual. At least she wasn't going to have to worry because *she* wasn't going along.

As if he caught the thought, Peter turned to her. "Coming, Jody?"

Jody opened her mouth to reply, but he wasn't looking at her. He had turned back to Jeanne and said something in that weird language. Then he looked at Twylgalit.

"Twyl, you coming with us, or going with Jeanne? We'll all be meeting later to get back to your world."

Twylgalit edged closer to Jody. "Please, let me go with Jody."

Jody sighed and hoped no one she knew would see her with the green-haired girl.



Mrs. Burns was used to sudden additions of passengers.

"Coming with us?" she greeted the new arrival. "My, what a lovely shade of green, dear."



Jody rolled her eyes. Was she the only one who found this situation strange?

Peter frowned at his sister. "We need to go to the woods later today, Mom. Got a project...for science. I'll be meeting my study partner there. This is Twyl, Jody's study partner."

Jody stared at Peter in shock. Peter never lied, yet here he was telling their mother these big fibs without a qualm! And he was scowling at her as if ordering her not to say anything about what was really happening.

As if she knew.

She made sure to grab the front seat beside Mom. Not that Peter noticed. The entire ride home he kept whispering to Twyl, occasionally drawing on a notepad and showing it to the green-haired girl. Their voices weren't loud enough to overhear, but Jody was sure she heard that strange language again.

She looked out the window, not really seeing the passing scenery. She and Peter had been so close once. They were twins; they used to do everything together, even finish each other's sentences. They used to have their own language, too – "twin speak", as Dad called it.

All that had changed in the past year. Suddenly boy stuff and girl stuff were more important than twin stuff. Had it started when she began getting taller? She knew from health class that girls matured earlier than boys, but it didn't seem to be that. Peter had no time for her anymore, and no interest in what she and her friends thought important. If he wasn't at gymnastics practice, then he was at the stable helping Jeanne exercise her brother's horses. The horsy smell clung to his clothes after every riding session. Jody thought it was a disgusting smell.

When they got home, she followed her brother into his room and, despite her worries about smells, shut the door.

"Peter Robert Burns! You lied to her!"

"Well, what am I supposed to say? 'Hey, Mom, we're off to defeat an evil creature in another world, and if we're successful we should be back by dinner?' You think Mom would say, 'Yes, dear, go ahead' to that?"

"Well, no, but..."

Peter was opening drawers in his desk, not even looking at her.

“Mitch could probably get away with it, but he’s a role-player. Think she’d buy that from me? This way, she knows where we’re going, and we have a reason to bring a backpack. Now, stop complaining and go pack.”

Jody felt stunned. “Pack?”

“Yeah. It’ll be a hike, so we’ll need food and water.”

Jody mentally sighed. Her brother and food. He was always hungry lately. For a moment she had thought he was serious about packing.

“Oh, and map!” Peter pulled a large folded piece of paper out of a drawer and spread it open on his bed. Jody recognized the project their father had helped Peter with during the winter.

“You told Dad that map was for a friend.”

Peter was intent on the map. “Yes. Jeanne.”

Jody tried to be reasonable. “Jeanne’s not a role-player.”

“Neither am I.”

She looked at the map, remembering how he and their father had worked on the computer, and the long discussions they’d had on the placements of mountains and woods and rivers. Surely, Peter would drop this...joke soon.

She recognized names on the map from earlier comments as Peter traced a route with his finger — the Watcher, Windgard...

“That place is real?”

“Ask your friend. That’s where she came from.” Peter looked around the room. “Where is she?”

There came a knock at the door, and their mother’s voice outside it.

“Jody, dear, your friend is going to get muddy wandering around the garden like that.”

Jody found Twyl outside in the remains of the vegetable garden. When they had moved into the house last August, her father had been delighted to find a vegetable-and-flower garden in the side yard. He planned to continue it this year, and had begun preparing the ground for planting. Jody had been drafted to help rake away the previous year’s debris. She was determined to miss any further planting or weeding chores, even if she had to join an afterschool club. Maybe she could join the cheerleaders, since there wasn’t a girls’ soccer team.

Yellow and white daffodils and crocuses bloomed already in the flower side of the garden, and fat buds of tulips promised to open soon. Twyl stood with feet buried in the mud and smiled happily at Jody. She flung out mudstreaked arms.

"The soil here is so...rich!"

Jody eyed her warily. "Uh-huh. You're going to track mud into the house."

Twyl's shoulders slumped. "Must I enter? It seems like the dwelling in which I found you. There was so much deadness all around. Even the light was dead. How could the small trees of that place endure it?"

Jody tried to figure out what she was describing. "You mean the mall?" How could anyone not like the mall? "But it's wonderful there! Well, not as wonderful as the malls in the city, but the stores are much better than downtown."

"If you say so." Twyl slowly began to pull her feet out of the mud.

"Hey, Twyl. Ready to go back?" Peter set his backpack on the walk and checked his pockets, tucking his Scout knife into one.

Jody glanced at him and sighed. He was wearing what Jody called his "nerd jeans". They were covered with pockets and zippered flaps and loops for tools as if he were some carpenter. He even had a roll of duct tape hanging from one loop. Plus he was tugging an over-sized gray sweatshirt on over his T-shirt.

"You're not going out like that, are you? You look ridiculous."

Peter pulled down his sweatshirt and shrugged. "This is comfortable. Not that it'll matter. The last time the elves insisted we wear their clothing. I like pockets better." He pointed at her shoes. "You're not going like that, are you?"

Jody looked down. What was wrong with her sneaker clogs? They were perfect for the mall.

His words suddenly sank in, and Jody looked up.

"I'm not going."

"Suit yourself." Peter picked up his backpack. "Twyl, we're going to have to walk, so..."

Twyl anxiously grasped Jody's wrist. "But you *must* come! The Watcher of Gates said that you would help!"

Jody carefully pulled her sleeve out of the girl's muddy grip. Twyl's belief in her was rather touching, but scary. On the other hand, Peter didn't seem to want her along.

She eyed him in sudden suspicion. His whole ridiculous story about elves and wizards could be just that — a story to make sure she didn't come with them.

She started for the house. "I'll just be a moment."

## Chapter 2

### PETER

PETER WISHED JODY WOULD STAY HOME. FIRST SHE COULDN'T decide what to wear. Then she didn't see why they had to bring food with them. He had juice, crackers, cheese, and small bags of his father's favorite mix of pumpkin seeds and sunflower seeds in his backpack, but he wondered what Jody had in the small totebag she carried. *Probably not food.*

Then she didn't want to walk.

"Can't we take our bikes?" she complained. "Or maybe Jeanne could bring one of her horses."

Peter shook his head. "Her brother's horses. They stay here." He glanced at Twyl. It had been hard enough talking the girl into getting into their car. Somehow, he didn't think she would handle riding on the handlebars of a bike very well. The forest wasn't that far to walk. "You can load up your bike if you want. I'm taking only what I can carry. Less chance of losing it." *Especially since I can't see the Watcher letting us bring bikes into the Lands.*

The Free Lands. He couldn't believe he was actually going back there. After what happened last October, when he and Jeanne had been kidnapped by the Watcher to break the curse on the Land, he had avoided going anywhere near Wilson's Forest and the haunted tree. Just in case the tree-being had other plans for them. *And I was right.*

Twyl seemed happier as they left the sidewalks of the subdivision behind and walked along the bike trail through the park. Or

maybe it was because the trees were bigger. *It's almost like walking a dog*, Peter thought with a slight smile. *She has to visit every tree.*

He studied the green-haired girl as she darted away to pat the trunk of a large black walnut, wondering why Jody and his mom hadn't noticed anything different about her. *Maybe they only see what they expect to?*

Ever since Jeanne had told him he was looking at a human, Twyl had changed somewhat from his first impression of her. Now he had to look closely to see that her hair wasn't quite hair, and that her skin had greenish undertones. But how could even Jody miss seeing that she had no eyebrows, and that her clothing seemed to be made from bark?

As they approached the town-side entrance to Wilson's Forest, he was glad to see Jeanne seated on a boulder beside the open gate, waiting for them. He had been worried she would have taken one of the bridle trails and gotten to the haunted tree before them.

Jody had seen her as well. "I don't see why *she* has to come along," she muttered with a toss of her pale-blond hair.

"She'll be more use than you," he retorted. "Jeanne's a Sensitive."

"A what?" Jody snapped back.

"A healer," Twyl said in wonder, rejoining them. "She can help Grandmother?"

"A healer," Jody mimicked. "Riiiiight."

"Right," Peter agreed. "Didn't you wonder why fewer people at school got sick since we got back?"

"No, I didn't..." Jody frowned. "Got back? Got back from where?"

Peter sighed. He had forgotten that the Watcher had erased Jody's memory of their disappearance and reappearance.

"Remember last fall when we had to write a report about the haunted tree? When you frightened Jeanne's horse?" He looked closely at her, willing her to remember, just in case he could affect the Watcher's spell here.

"I..." Jody started, then stopped, her mouth still open. "She fell..." She looked toward Jeanne in amazement and fear. "The...The tree..."

Peter grimaced. In all those months, Jody had never asked him about what had happened. Probably never even thought about what she did.

"Yes, she did fall through the tree. The haunted tree is actually the Watcher. It pulled me in as well. It's a...door...to another world. That's where Twyl comes from."

Jody still seemed stunned. "But...she just appeared. In the mall."

"The Watcher of Gates sent me to where I would find help," Twyl reminded her, as if that explained everything. Peter could see from Jody's face that it didn't.

"But...the mall. She appeared in the mall. Why did we come to the woods?"

"Because this is where the Watcher is." Peter saw disbelief crossing Jody's face, and added, "Make up your mind, Jody. Either you saw her appear out of thin air, or you didn't."

Jody's mouth snapped shut, and she glared at him.

Jeanne slid off the boulder as they neared the entrance to Wilson's Forest.

"It was hard for us to accept, too, Peter, when it happened to us." She picked up her backpack. "I brought extra water. Anyone need some?"

Peter nodded. "I'll take one. Thanks."

"I'm not thirsty," Jody said, in the tone of voice that implied Jeanne had brought the wrong brand.

Peter mentally sighed. "You will be later. Why don't you put one in your bag anyhow?"

He expected her to argue, and she glared at him as if she would, but she also took the water Jeanne held out and put it into her bag. He glanced closer at Jeanne. His friend gave him the innocent "who, me?" shrug, and he suspected she had mentally nudged Jody, just as she had done to Amy and her clique at the mall. He grinned back and whispered in the Common Tongue of the Lands, "Can't you make her go home or something?"

Jeanne shook her head and replied in the same language, "It's your own fault she's here. She's tagging along because she knows you don't want her along."

Peter knew she was right. Jeanne was not only a healer, but an empath who could sense the emotions of others. Once he would have known his twin's feelings himself.

"Besides," Jeanne continued, "the Watcher did send Twylgalit to her. And I think I sensed a compulsion spell on Jody earlier."

"Compulsion?" Peter turned on Twyl. "You have magic, don't you. Did you try to force her to come?"

Twyl shook her head, her eyes wide. "No. No, Grandmother has the power, not I."

"Hel-loo," Jody interrupted in disgust. "Mind letting me in on the conversation?"

Switching back to English, Peter kept his attention on Twyl as he answered. "Jeanne sensed someone using a spell on you earlier, one that would have forced you to come with her."

"Oh, puh-lease," Jody groaned. "More magic? So, why are you two here? Did someone put a spell on *you*?"

"We've been there before," Peter replied. "We can actually do something to help."

Jody scowled at him. "Fine. Whatever. You two go ahead, then. I'll just go home." She looked from one to the other. "After I see this haunted tree...Watcher...whatever...for myself. Then I'll go home." She brushed past Jeanne into the forest. Twyl hurried after.

Peter glanced at Jeanne. The dark-haired girl shook her head.

"That was Jody speaking. No compulsion."

Peter sighed as Jeanne pulled her backpack on. "I don't know how much help she's going to be."

Jeanne shrugged. "I probably won't be much help, either. Remember, I don't have the Ring of Calada anymore. Just this one." She raised her hand, and a ring of the same silvery material as his wristguard caught the light. Gifts from the High Council of the Lands, the objects would allow them to re-enter the Lands. Peter didn't expect they would have to use that magic to do so, though, since the Watcher controlled the Gates; and it had sent Twyl to them for help.

Jeanne nodded at Twyl, ahead of them. "If the Watcher sent her here, then it's probably for your abilities. Disbelief and belief. Did Twylgalit tell you anything more about what this 'thing' is?"

"It's big, it wears armor..." He shook his head. "She was so scared of the car I wasn't sure if she was talking about the car or whatever it is she's running from. I've got a vague idea where her grandmother is. I'll point it out to you on the map later. Did you bring your copy?"

Jeanne raised her eyebrows. "You didn't give me a small one, remember? Mine's still on the wall of my room."





Peter was glad of his sweatshirt as they walked deeper into the forest. Outside, the lawns were turning green with new grass, but in the shadows under the trees it was still early spring, with the chill of the few remaining patches of snow. Here and there he could see a crocus or a snowdrop amid the dead leaves and mud.

He glanced ahead on the path. Jody's pale-blond hair and blue denim jacket were easy to spot against the trees, but Twyl seemed to all but vanish whenever the path curved.

Before too long they reached the bushes that in summer would mask a faint side path. Jody waited impatiently by the path that led to the haunted tree. Peter looked for Twyl, and finally saw her patting a nearby maple.

Jody uncrossed her arms and tossed her hair back. "This forest is creepy. I'm cold, and my shoes are getting all muddy. Can we go back home now?"

Peter shrugged. "You can if you want to. Jeanne and I are going to help Twyl." He waved at Twyl to follow them down the path. Soon, he had entered the small clearing before the haunted tree.

"It's waiting for us," Jeanne said softly beside him.

Peter scowled at the gnarled old oak, willing to see behind its disguise of a spooky tree with dangling clawlike branches. Nothing changed, but he had the impression it was watching him.

"What has happened to the Watcher of Gates?" Twyl ran up and leaned against the large trunk. "Why do you wear this shape? Please, how is Grandmother?"

"That's it?" Jody said scornfully.

"That's it," Peter agreed. He adjusted his pack and patted his pockets to make sure everything was secure. He glanced at Jeanne and saw she was doing the same with her belongings. She finished and nodded. "Go ahead," he told Jody. "Touch it."

"You want me to touch that nasty old tree?"

Peter mentally sighed. Had she already forgotten everything they had talked about? Maybe he should just push her —

Jody screamed.

Across the clearing, the trunk of the Watcher shimmered. Twyl was already halfway into the brownness.

Jody started back a step, and two branches whipped forward to encircle and push her, still screaming, into the trunk.

Silence fell in the small clearing as Jody vanished.

"Guess it did want her there," Peter said, surprised. He had been so sure that Twyl had the wrong twin. *What can Jody do there?*

"You want to go next and calm her down?" Jeanne asked.

Peter shook his head. "No. You go."

She chuckled. "Coward. She's your sister."

"That's why you go next. She'll just keep screaming until I 'save' her."

"See you on the other side." Jeanne stepped through the brown shimmer. The swirling slowed.

Peter reached forward, expecting his hand to go through the Watcher.

His palm met solid wood. The door was closed.

## Chapter 3

### TWYLGALIT

TWYLGALIT LOOKED ABOUT THE WIDE MEADOW, WONDERING AT THE huge expanse of greenness. This was all so beautiful, and so rich with life. On the other side there was life, but it was only beginning to awaken from the slumber of the cold season. Here it was long awake, and singing with the joy of growing.

Off in the distance, she could see green hillsides, their forests beckoning to her. She flung out her arms and spun, giddy with the growing song. She stopped, facing the Watcher of Gates, here once more fully arrayed with leaves as it had been when they met.

“I was so worried,” she said, starting forward.

A leafy branch swung down to gently bar her from the shimmering trunk.

“What — ” she started, when she suddenly heard a high-pitched sound coming closer. She covered her ears, trying to shut out the piercing cry. Was it a hawk? She saw nothing in the sky, no shape diving from the clouds. Whence came that sound?

The yellow-haired human girl fell through the Watcher and pitched face-forward into the soft grassy ground. The sound stopped.

The branch moved away, and Twylgalit approached cautiously. Jody had been the source of that cry?

The girl raised herself up. “Euuuww,” she complained.

“Are you all right?” Twylgalit asked.

“Of course I’m not all right. There’s grass stains and dirt all...” She suddenly rolled over, looked at the Watcher behind her, and emitted the piercing cry.

Twylgalit clapped her hands over her ears again. "What is wrong?" Jody pointed a shaking finger at the Watcher. "That — that *thing* swallowed you! And me! Where are we? Where's the forest?"

Twylgalit was puzzled. "Back in your world. We have stepped through the Gate into the Lands."

But Jody wasn't listening. She climbed to her feet. "Peter and Jeanne were behind me. I'll bet *she* pushed me. Where are they?"

"They should be arriving now." Twylgalit looked toward the Watcher, expecting to see the other two humans emerge. However, the shimmering Gate was gone. In its place was solid bark.

"No!" Jody ran up to the tree and began pounding on the trunk. "Let him out! You let my brother go! Peter!"

Twylgalit listened as the Watcher of Gates spoke, but Jody did not appear to hear. "He says that you do not need him now. We are to gather more help."

"No!" Jody hit her fist against the trunk. "I want to go home! You hear me? Send me back!"

In answer, a branch swung out, pointing stiffly across the meadow.

"We are to go in that direction," Twylgalit translated helpfully.

"No way." Jody crossed her arms. "You might as well send me home. I'm going nowhere until you release Peter."

Another branch swung out to join the first.

"You will not help?" Twylgalit felt a rush of sadness. "You must. You are the only one who can save us."

"Me? Yeah, right."

Twylgalit nodded eagerly. "Yes, right. You are the one the Watcher sent me to find. Please come. The Lands need your help."

Jody looked from the trunk to Twylgalit and back again as if expecting the Watcher's Gateway to reappear. It did not. She sighed loudly.

"Oh, allright. After all, it can't be too hard if Peter expected *her* to help."

Twylgalit was awestruck. Peter had said that Jeanne was a Sensitive, and Jeanne had said that she and Peter had broken the curse of the Great Forgetting. If Jody felt those meant little, then she was powerful, indeed. The Watcher of Gates was right. This human — not the others — was the one to stand against the Evil One.

The Watcher rustled its leaves. Yet another branch swung out to join the other two, pointing toward the forest-covered hills.

"Allright, allright, I'm going," Jody muttered. She stamped off in the direction the branches indicated.

Twylgalit delayed only long enough to bow to the Watcher of Gates and give thanks for its help. Then, she hurried after the human girl.



They walked in silence for a while.

Twylgalit was still amazed at how the grasses and the flowers and other plants covered the ground as far as she could see. Her home had only a few patches of grass and one small pocket of flowers that had continued to survive the influence of their neighbor. And she knew not to *walk* on them!

But here, as in the land beyond the Gate, there was no way to avoid stepping on green life of some sort. At first it was hard to do so, but the protests and complaints from underfoot were grudging and resigned, and soon she no longer winced at the small voices.

Jody did not appear to hear the tiny protests beneath her feet. Or, if she did, she didn't comment on them.

"This had better not take long," she muttered suddenly. "I'm supposed to meet Amy Evans and our friends on the bus tomorrow. I should have been there, at the mall, in case anyone bought anything. They want my opinion, you see."

Twylgalit did not see. "Your opinion?"

"On clothes. On *style*. You know, fashion?" She glanced at Twylgalit, then shrugged. "Amy Evans says I have excellent taste. I found the perfect blouse for her this morning. She said so. And I saw this darling skirt that would go so well with several tops I have, but I don't have a jacket to go with it. I was hoping to find one when you arrived." She waited.

"I am sorry," Twylgalit said, sensing some apology was necessary. She tried to puzzle out this "fashion" idea. "Do you mean you all choose to look alike?"

"Of course not. Who'd want to do that?"

"But —" Twylgalit started.

"Now, take your own outfit. Where *did* you buy it?"

Twylgalit looked down at her kirtle. She smoothed the front self-consciously. "My mothers made it for me."

"Oh, you poor thing. Handmade clothes are so old-fashioned. No one sews anymore. But I suppose if you're from a broken home, you can't afford good clothes, can you?"

Twylgalit looked again at her kirtle. How else was clothing made, but with care and love? She remembered the amusement of Little Mother explaining how Gruff Mother placed spells in every seam, and of watching Graceful Mother intent on matching every swirl in the pattern. She hugged the memory of them close, of their gentle smiles and the caress of their leaves in her hair. She felt tears welling. Her mothers were gone now.

"There, there," Jody said. "I don't mind what you're wearing."

Twylgalit did not have an answer for that. She walked on in silence, struggling not to cry. She missed her mothers. She also missed her fathers and aunts and uncles, but she had always been *aware* of her mothers. The empty space inside her, where the awareness had been, now held only a faint and distant echo. Grandmother! She increased her stride. Grandmother was depending on her.

"Hey, wait up!" Jody called from behind her.

Twylgalit did not stop, but she did slow her steps. The human girl soon caught up. Twylgalit kept her gaze on the forest ahead, willing it closer.

Jody sighed loudly. "This is boring. Why do we have to walk? If it's so important that we get to...wherever it is that we're going, why do we have to walk?"

Recalling the metal beast that had brought them from the mall place, Twylgalit shivered.

"I'm hungry," Jody said. "And I'm thirsty, and I'm tired." She stopped.

Twylgalit continued walking. Soon, she heard footsteps behind her once again.

"Didn't you hear me?" Jody asked.

"I heard." Twylgalit walked on. "Don't you still have the water that Jeanne gave you?"

"No, she didn't."

Twylgalit was puzzled. Perhaps the girl had forgotten. "You put the water in your bag."

"No, I didn't." Jody opened her bag. "Hey! Who put that in there? I didn't want her old water."

"Does it matter when you are thirsty?"

"Yes, it matters! This isn't flavored — I don't even recognize this brand." Jody scowled and pushed the bottle back into her bag. "Are we going to stop soon?"

Twylgalit pointed to the forest. "The Watcher of Gates said we would be safe within there."



By the time they reached the forest's edge, Twylgalit felt overwhelmed with information. She knew so much now about Amy Evans and clothes and what various other girls at someplace called school had done recently. But she was afraid she would not be able to remember it all.

A nearby beech commented that birds drove away their rivals with their songs. Perhaps all this talking was the girl's manner of defense — to drive away enemies with sound. The idea suddenly explained much that had puzzled Twylgalit. It was true she had heard small creatures departing when they came within hearing range of herself and Jody. Perhaps Jody would not require her to remember everything about Amy Evans and school.

Twylgalit felt relieved at that. She thought this "defense" also explained Jody's piercing cry when she had arrived in the Lands. Twylgalit touched the beech's leaves lightly in thanks as she passed.

"Finally!" Jody said loudly. "We've reached the woods. Can we rest now?"

Twylgalit stopped and looked back at her. The girl had barely entered the shade of the beech. "Just a bit farther?" she asked.

Jody scowled. She opened her mouth, but whatever she started to say was drowned in a high-pitched roar from overhead. Her mouth stayed open as she stared with wide eyes into the sky.

Twylgalit dashed out from under the sheltering tree and scanned the sky. The sound had been a mixture of a screech and a roar. Whatever it was, it was angry. She spotted the golden-furred gryphon as it circled and flew back in their direction. It roared again.

Jody pointed and screamed her own piercing cry.

Twylgalit darted behind Jody and pushed her toward the beech. "The trees will protect us!"

Jody at first seemed to want to scream back at the gryphon. Then she suddenly began to run. She passed the beech and continued running. Twylgalit glanced back only long enough to be sure the gryphon was not following them. Then she hurried after.

Twylgalit kept Jody's long yellow hair in view as she followed cautiously — in the shadow of the trees it would be easy to overlook exposed roots or loose stones until you tripped over them. The shadows could also hold other surprises for unwary passersby. Perhaps the gryphon wasn't following because it had a partner waiting in ambush.

Jody ran as if she feared no such dangers. She ran so fast Twylgalit began to worry she would lose sight of the human girl.

Suddenly, Jody stopped. She screamed.

Twylgalit caught up with the human. Covering her ears in an attempt to protect them from Jody's piercing cries, she looked for the cause. She saw only trees and brush.

"What is wrong?" Twylgalit shouted.

Still screaming, Jody pointed at a nearby cluster of young trees.

Twylgalit cautiously edged up to the concealing cluster. She braced herself in case anything attacked, then looked around the saplings. There was nothing behind them. She straightened and looked back at Jody.

Jody stopped screaming. She looked all around, then hurried to join Twylgalit.

"There was something there! The bush moved!"

"You must have frightened whatever it was away," Twylgalit agreed, happy her previous idea had been confirmed. She looked closer at the ground. There were impressions in the loose soil, a jumble of prints as if more than one being had stood there.

"I don't like it here," Jody said, looking from one tall tree to another. "And I'm not waiting for whatever it was to come back." She glanced in the direction they had come, shivered, and began walking in a different direction.

Twylgalit looked after the human girl, then down at the ground again. The faint line of footprints went in the same direction the girl had chosen. As Jody had said, she wasn't going to wait for their owners to return. She was going after them instead. Twylgalit smiled as she started after her. She had definitely found the right hero.