

The KING of the TREES
BOOK SEVEN

THE BIRTHING TREE

WILLIAM D. BURT



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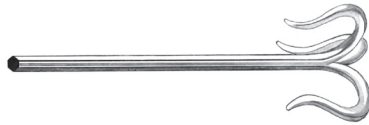
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In memory of Gordon Patterson, husband, father and educator;
servant of God, and friend to all. Earth has lost a worthy soul,
and Heaven is the richer.

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear,
because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears
is not perfected in love.

(I John 4:18, NASB)



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PROLOGUE

Never should I have challenged these mountains alone. I have come to loathe the barren rocks and shrill winds of this place I call, “the Mountains of the Moon.” Only the moon’s light tempers its rugged desolation.

Ifor’s trail has since grown cold. I fear I shall never catch him now, for he must have turned aside long before crossing the plains. He may do us much harm with the book he stole from Winona. My only hope is to find a way through these mountains to a land where neither sorcerer nor turncloak can easily reach us. Perhaps then my people can live their lives without the threat of slavery.

When the moon looms behind these jagged peaks like a grinning gork’s face, the cursed yeggoroth come out to hunt. Their horrible screeches and howls echo madly from cold stone. So far, those bloodthirsty creatures have not heard or smelled me, but the higher I climb, the more exposed I am to the sky.

Two nights ago, I was certain the yegs had found my hiding place beneath an overhanging rock, such was the racket they raised. Instead, I witnessed a fierce aerial battle between a pack of batwolves and some winged beasts more wondrous than any animals I have yet encountered in these unexplored regions.

Silhouetted against the moon's pocked face, these creatures of the griffin kind resemble lions with owls' heads and wings. The ferocious beasts tore through the yowling yegs as easily as my sword cuts through the crusted snow that slows my steps.

Foolishly, I left my refuge for a better vantage point from which to observe the fray. Swooping down, a yeg struck me from behind, and I hit my head on a stone. When I awoke, I found an invisible, trebly hooked crook rolled up in my cloak beside me.

The events following my brush with the yeg are so fantastic I have never related them to another living soul. Perhaps my knock on the head inspired this tale, which I have written down on strips of papery birch bark. When I doubt my sanity, I reread those sheets of bark and touch the three-pronged staff, which led me to a king mightier and nobler than I. As the sorc Swiftwing instructed me, I am burying this wondrous crook to prevent the king's enemies from stealing it. When the time is right, I will unearth the hooked staff and follow it to the king's hidden treasure.

In the event, however, that I fall in battle or for some other reason am unable to restore the king's prized possession to him, I charge you who are reading these words to take up the three-pronged crook and carry on in my place. If you fail, Lucambra may be lost beyond all hope of recovery. May Gaelathane bless your labors and speed your way to the Mountains of the Moon.

*In the Tree's service,
Elgathel, King of Lucambra*



THE HALLOWFAST BESIEGED

Clang! Clang! Someone was ringing the Hallowfast's new doorbell! Elwyn son of Rolin leapt out of bed and threw on his tunic and trousers against the early spring chill. Grabbing his lightstaff, he rushed out the door and down the winding staircase, joining several half-dressed Greencloaks.

"Make way for the rest of us, Opio!" shouted Emmer.

The stout Lucambrian obligingly flattened his bulk against the wall, allowing Elwyn and the other Greencloaks to squeeze by him. Breathing heavily, Opio followed them to the landing at the bottom of the stairs. The bell's jangling grew even louder, as if some mischievous Lucambrian child were playing a prank.

"Who could be out and about at such an early hour?" Elwyn wondered aloud as he helped Gemmio unbar the massive door.

As soon as they opened it, a grim-faced Rolin pushed his way inside, followed by Windsong the griffin. The king's long green cloak was smoking, and Windsong's wing feathers were darkened with soot. A foul, acrid odor clung to the shivering pair.

Elwyn cautiously poked his head outside. He heard a *thump*, as of a heavy object falling to earth. For a second, the grass blades in front of the door blurred. Then they came back into focus.

Whipping out his lightstaff, Elwyn pointed it at the patch of grass. Yellow tongues of fire leapt forth to meet the staff's light-beam. Even as the flames died, a petrified dragon appeared on the grass. Stinking smoke still curled from its gray, gaping jaws.

"Will we never be rid of these camouflaged creatures?" Elwyn muttered as he slammed and barred the door. "I can't help wondering how they avoid crashing into one other." Turning to his father, he said, "I petrified a cam-draig on the front step."

"Good! You probably dispatched the same beast that was chasing Windsong and me," Rolin remarked. "At this rate, we'll be buried under dragon statuary." Removing his singed cloak, he poked his finger through a ragged hole in the burnt fabric. "Drat that cam-draig," he growled. "He spoiled my best cloak and nearly made breakfast of me and my mount in the bargain."

"Why didn't you use your lightstaff on him?" Elwyn asked.

"He was a smart one," the king replied, rolling his cloak into a bundle. "He flew right above us, so close I could hear him breathing. If I had petrified him, he would have landed on us."

"That draig must have been toying with you," said Emmer. "If he had been hungry, he would have plucked you right out of the sky. A pox on that turncloak Larkin for opening Gundul! If it weren't for him, those dragons never would have escaped in the first place. Now we can't even go outside to fetch water."

"I, for one, dislike being cooped up inside this stuffy old tower instead of hunting conies and squirrels," Windsong said.

"I don't blame you," said Opio. "We are all growing restless. I don't think I can face another dish of moldy vegetables. If only that cam-draig hadn't spoiled the queen's birthday banquet!"

"It's a blessing nobody was inside the dining hall when the dragon stuck his snout through the window," Gemmio said.

"Yes, but think of all the food he charred with his hot breath," said Opio wistfully. "What a waste of good vittles."

The pesky cam-draigs had held the royal family hostage in the Hollowfast all winter, and its occupants had "tower fever." No one had yet devised a plan for outsmarting the wily dragons. Two weeks earlier, one of them had attached itself upside down to the

Hallowfast's outer wall with its head hanging just over the door. The creature's chameleon-like skin mimicked the tower's stonework so perfectly that nobody realized the dragon was there.

In the end, the cam-draig gave itself away with a fiery sneeze, and Sigarth handily dispatched it with his lightstaff. Even so, the petrified beast just missed him as it fell away from the tower.

Other draigs had taken to circling the Hallowfast on leathery wings, in hopes of nabbing an unwary two-legs hanging laundry out a window to dry. Marlis had nearly met her end that way.

"What were you two doing outside so early in the morning?" demanded the queen, who had just clattered down the stairs.

Rolin sighed. "I had hoped to catch the dragons sleeping. Instead, one nearly caught us unawares. It was all we could do to escape. We couldn't get back into the tower through the sorcathel, because more draigs were guarding it. That left the door. Windsong and I had our hearts set on some nice, fat trout, too."

"Bother the trout!" Marlis declared. "I'm just glad you and Windsong have arrived home safely, thanks be to Gaelathane. It's a good thing we installed that alarm bell by the door, too."

Throwing her arms around her husband, the queen made a wry face. "Phew!" she said. "You stink of dragon's breath. Since we are short on bath water, I'm afraid you'll have to scrub yourself with some mint leaves. Now, let's all go upstairs and enjoy a leisurely breakfast. Our resourceful cook tells me that he has prepared something extra-specially tasty for us this morning."

"More Turnip Surprise," grumbled Opio. "I can hardly wait."

However cleverly Cook prepared them, turnips were difficult to disguise. Elwyn couldn't stomach another bite of those mushy, pasty-white tubers. Aptly named, the lowly roots seemed to "turn up" at every meal—even in the breakfast porridge.

Since the dining hall still reeked of dragon, the Lucambrians took their morning meal in a cozy room adjoining the kitchen. After the banquet disaster, this breakfast nook's outer window—like all the others in the Hallowfast—had been walled up with stone and mortar, courtesy of Toefoot and his friends. Afterwards, the gnomes had gone off to delve tunnels in the mountains.

Elwyn glumly reflected that he and his family were leading a gnome's sunless existence inside their gloomy, torch-lit tower. Outside, the sun could be shining in a clear sky for all anybody knew. The prince yearned for just one breath of fresh salt air.

He and his companions entered the room to find Bembor, Meghan, Mycena, Gwynneth, Timothy, Medwyn and Scanlon already seated at the table. Hunger had carved hollows in every face, yet the Tree's light still shone in the Greencloaks' eyes.

Elwyn was surprised and pleased to learn the breakfast menu did not feature turnips in any form—baked, boiled, fried or stewed. Instead, Cook had sweetened the drab oatmeal mush with the last of the honey in the musty pantry. There was even a pitcher of thin chestnut “milk” to pour over the porridge.

Balancing bowls, spoons and saucers in his arms, Cook flounced into the room. A cheery cherry-clanner, he maintained a reliably rotund figure, whether he ate turnips or cake. “Has anyone seen the key to the scullery?” he asked sheepishly as he set the table for thirteen. “I seem to have misplaced it again.”

No one had seen the key. As if the dragons weren't bad enough, small items around the Hallowfast were vanishing with alarming regularity—especially keys. The king set clever traps to catch the culprits, but they had outfoxed him at every turn.

“We can't blame Larkin this time,” Scanlon remarked.

“Despite what he did to us and to Lucambra, may Gaelathane have mercy on that wretch's soul,” said Mycena fervently.

“Could the glynnies be at fault?” Timothy suggested.

Gwynneth shook her head. “I have never known them to steal,” she said. “Besides, they have become our dearest friends.”

After Bembor had asked Gaelathane's blessing on the meal, everyone dug into the pot of mush. Elwyn kept a watchful eye on his two sisters, certain that at least one of them was plotting to launch an oatmeal war. If so, he wasn't about to be the first casualty. His mop of red hair made an easy and tempting target.

When stomachs were pleasantly full, the conversation turned to the unpleasant topic of dragons. Everybody agreed that light-staffs were useless against a foe that could so cunningly blend in

with his surroundings. The draigs were most dangerously invisible on moonless nights, when their skin turned a coal black.

“They breed faster than we can petrify them,” Emmer lamented, waving his spoon. “They’re devouring all the game, too.”

“Then why do they kill animals such as squirrels and leave their carcasses uneaten?” said Elwyn. On one of his rare excursions outside the tower, he had come across a family of squirrels lying under a fir tree as if sleeping. However, they were quite dead. Except for a few tiny punctures, their bodies were unmarred.

“It’s us I’m worried about, not a bunch of squirrels,” Opio growled. “We’ve nearly run out of water, not to mention rations. Someone needs to replenish our provisions, and quickly, too.”

“Are you volunteering, Brother?” Gemmio dryly asked him.

“I would if I could,” said Opio with wounded indignation. “Unfortunately, I am hobbled with a severely sprained ankle.”

Rolin said, “You saw what happened to Windsong and me this morning on our fishing trip. We nearly became dragon bait. If we can’t forage in Lucambra, we should try a different world. So far, I haven’t seen any cam-draigs in our Thalmos spasels.”

“I’ll go!” Elwyn cried. He jumped at any opportunity to escape the Hollowfast, even if it meant doing battle with dragons. Besides, he had personal reasons for wishing to visit Thalmos.

His mother frowned. “I’m not sure it’s such a good idea to send the heir to Lucambra’s throne into certain peril,” she said.

“If *someone* doesn’t go soon, we’ll starve,” Elwyn argued, his face flaming to match his hair. “We can’t send the king, since he’s needed here. Besides, I’m the swiftest runner in our family.”

“I used to claim that distinction,” said Gwynneth ruefully.

“Please, Father?” Elwyn pleaded. “At my best speed, I can reach Broadleaf the Thalmos-torsil in two minutes. I’ll shine my lightstaff into his branches to petrify any cam-draigs hiding there.” Rather than flying after their prey, the slothful dragons preferred to perch in a tree and wait for supper to come to them.

“Very well,” said King Rolin with a sigh. “Perhaps while you make for Broadleaf, we can arrange a little diversion on the sor-cathel to draw away any dragons lurking around the tower.”

“I suppose that would be a good plan,” Marlis conceded. “Just don’t dilly-dally, dear boy. And while you’re in Beechtown, don’t look down your nose at any eligible Lucambrian maidens that may cross your path. Many of our people have been staying in Thalmos until it’s safe to return to the Land of Light.”

Elwyn groaned. His mother sounded just like Aunt Glenna. “What if I decide to marry a Thalmosian girl?” he said archly.

Marlis scooped up a spoonful of oatmeal and pretended to flip it at him. “You may marry a naiad, for all I care. Just make sure she loves Gaelathane and doesn’t track water on my floors. As the heir apparent, you have the responsibility of preserving the royal line. Thus far, I haven’t seen you taking that obligation very seriously—unless you have been courting someone behind my back.” Her eyebrows raised in an unspoken question.

The eyes of everyone at the table fastened on Elwyn. His face warmed, and he squirmed in his seat. “I’d rather hunt and fish and pick mushrooms,” he confessed. “Most girls are boring.”

His father firmly reminded him, “Nonetheless, you still must find a proper wife. You cannot allow the pursuit of personal pleasures to interfere with your princely duties. Please keep your mother and me informed of any likely prospects. And don’t forget to ask Gaelathane for His guidance in this crucial matter.”

“Yes, Father,” Elwyn meekly replied. “I can’t think of anyone suitable at the moment.” Inside, he was seething. He didn’t want to marry just any girl who batted her eyelashes at him. The life of a prince, he reflected, was not all pomp and tournaments.

“What about Kyleah?” Meghan innocently piped up.

Elwyn flinched. How had his sneaky sister known about the sugarmaster’s daughter? Had Meghan been spying on him?

Bembor winked at him, and Elwyn’s parents exchanged hopeful glances. “Kyleah?” they chorused. “Do you mean Kyleah of Mapleton, daughter of Larissa, Queen of all the Wood Folk?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Elwyn growled in as deep a voice as he could muster. He glared at Meghan. “Kyleah must be ten years younger than I. She’s just a child. Now, please stop playing match-maker. I can find a girl my own age without any help.”

“I’d say you already found one,” Gwynneth said. “Otherwise, why have you been climbing so many Thalmos-torsils?”

Elwyn’s oatmeal spoon clattered into his bowl. Gwynneth’s guess was perilously close to the mark. Why couldn’t he have been blessed with like-minded brothers instead of nosy sisters?

“I’ve been hunting sponge mushrooms there,” Elwyn lamely answered. “Lucambra’s weather has been too dry for mushrooms to grow. Now stop pestering me with your silly questions!”

In truth, Lucambra had long been withering in the grip of a severe drought. Even summer thunderstorms were growing rare. When the sky flashed at night, it meant the cam-draigs were on the prowl, looking for prey. The dragons were always hungry.

Though he would rather die than admit it, Elwyn *had* been secretly keeping an eye on Kyleah. For the past three or four springs, he was always the first in his family to make passage—to the wooded hills above Mapleton. He was also the last to leave Thalmos during leaf-fall, at the risk of stranding himself there. Winter’s bitterest weather could not drive Kyleah from his mind.

Perched in a maple up the hill from Kyleah’s rebuilt cottage, Elwyn could watch her comings and goings at leisure. It would never do for him to drop by her house unannounced without some sort of plausible excuse—and he couldn’t think of one.

He also took care to return home with mushrooms.

Gwynneth saw right through him. “*Sponge mushrooms* grow under *cottonwoods* along the *Foamwater*,” she reminded him. “The *velvet-stem mushrooms* you’ve been bringing home grow on *maple trees* in the *Tartellans*.” She smiled sweetly in triumph.

Elwyn immediately saw the wisdom in changing the subject. “It’s a good thing we broke into Larkin’s home-tree last fall,” he said loudly. “Otherwise, we never would have recovered our stolen lightstaves and Winona’s parchments. Have you learned anything new from those parchments, Great-Grandfather Bembor?”

Bembor chuckled. “Not as yet. Aside from trying out a few of the queen’s tasty mushroom recipes, I haven’t had time to examine her jottings further. Besides, these old eyes of mine don’t work so well under torch light. I need real sunlight to read by.”

“I’m sure the dragons would love to find you reading by a window,” Medwyn quipped, and everyone laughed. The breakfast party’s mood sobered as Lucambra’s high chancellor offered a prayer on Elwyn’s behalf for safe passage to Thalmos and back.

Afterwards, Marlis gave her son several of Gannon’s empty honey sacks, along with a shopping list and a fistful of gilders. “Now off you go!” she told him, playfully shoving him out the door. As he turned back to wish her and the other Lucambrians farewell, a spoonful of oatmeal caught him full in the face.

“A perfect shot, that was,” crowed Gwynneth, grinning at him. Then she retreated into the kitchen and slammed the door.

Offering his boyhood friend a helpless shrug, Timothy said, “Your sister does as she pleases, and it pleases her to plaster you with mush. I’ll see you to the door and bar it after you. I’d love to come along, but I’m supposed to help stage the diversion.”

After cleaning the oatmeal off his face, the prince took Timothy down the stairs to his room in order to retrieve his lightstaff. Next, they descended the stairway to the landing, where Timothy paused to remove a slender chain from around his neck.

“I want you to have my griffin-whistle on your trip,” he told the prince, and he handed Elwyn the silver whistle on its chain.

“Thank you!” said Elwyn, looping it over his neck.

Timothy unbarred the door, and Elwyn cracked it open. Smelling no sulfurous dragon’s breath, he slipped outside. The door boomed shut behind him, and its heavy bar thudded home.