

The KING of the TREES
BOOK FOUR

The GREENSTONES

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For all who long for love.

“God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

1 Samuel 16:7b

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Prologue

A dozen butter rolls, you say? Coming right up. Pardon my fingers; they're a bit greasy. That'll be five gilders. Oh, please close the door, won't you? The snow blows in, and that's bad for rising bread. No, I've never seen a colder Yuletide, either.

Dall? Dall! Drat that boy; he's never around when I need him. At times, having an apprentice is more trouble than it's worth. Still, he's just a lad. I must remember to buy him a toy dragon for Yuletide. He loves dragons. The woodcarvers here in Beechtown turn out some fair imitations, but they're nothing like the real thing, believe me. Dall won't know the difference, bless him.

I was once like him—blind as a bat and bitter at the world. By all rights, I should have drowned or hanged or fallen prey to the dragon long ere now. Dall! Where are you? I'll have to knead out the bread myself. Yes, it's tiring work, but I've got good hands, smooth and strong, and they do my bidding well. Nowadays, I need several more pairs. I did once, you know—not hands, but something better. That was in my Greenie days. Still and all, my eyes—and Gaelathane—were well worth the trade.

What's that? You haven't heard about the dragon and the green men? It's quite a tale. Most folks think I made it up. The brewery boys know better. Have a mug of mulled cider while I tell you my story. You might say I owe my life to . . . *Hoppy*.



Hoppy

I am afraid your father isn't coming back." Merryn jumped up, overturning a metal pan filled with curling quince peelings. They poured out like faded yellow rose petals, the color of her mother Milly's wispy hair. A plump woman with a pinched face, Milly was cutting up the cellar's last few shriveled quinces into a pot that *plop-plopped* on the stove, steaming the windows and filling the roomy kitchen with a spicy aroma.

"Why not?" Merryn asked. "Doesn't he love us anymore?"

Tears fell from Milly's red-rimmed eyes into the pot. "No, Hoppy, it's not that. Something's happened to him. He should have returned from his river voyage weeks ago."

Merryn blinked back her own tears. It seemed ages since Beechtown's brewmaster had found her wandering wounded and witless in a hop field. *Hoppy*, he had called her until he and his wife settled on "Merryn" as more dignified, but the nickname had stuck. "Hoppy" she would always be to her family and friends, although the townsfolk preferred a crueller version.

She plopped back on the floor and began chewing a quince peeling. In March, her father Hamlin had left for the North Country with a boatload of ale. Ordinarily, the trip took about a week. He always returned from his travels with knickknacks for Merryn and her brother

Emory, such as wooden soldiers, sailboats, spin-tops and shiny porcelain dolls with eyes that blinked.

Now March had bowed to April, and no barge or boat had yet brought news of Hamlin son of Harmon from upriver. To ease the waiting, Merryn had busied herself with errands at the brewery. All the same, she often awoke mornings to a damp pillow. Each night, she saw her handsome, hazel-eyed father stepping onto the dock, his arms open to greet her. As she ran to him, though, he vanished like the Foamwater's fogs after a summer's sunrise.

Merryn's mother was stirring the bubbling quince sauce with an old wooden spoon. "There's no sense moping about the house and eating those quince peelings," she said huskily. "Here—" She fished in her apron pocket and handed Merryn a couple of shiny copper coins. "Take these and buy us some rye bread. The darker the better. I suspect Baker Wornick is lacing the white loaves with sawdust again, just to pinch a few guilders. I threw a loaf on the fire yesterday and it burned like a stick of wood."

"But Mother—" Merryn protested.

"No 'buts,'" said Milly firmly. "Just cover yourself well, and don't dilly-dally. You'll be back in less time than it takes Old Tom to drain his pint of ale." Old Tom was a one-eyed carpenter fond of spirits, pipe-smoking and darts, in that order. Rumor had it that he also supplied Baker Wornick with alder sawdust.

Sighing, Merryn took down her red long-sleeved smock and blue scarf from the clothes tree in the hallway. After arranging the smock and scarf to cover her arms, neck and face, she studied herself in the hall mirror to be sure only her eyes were showing. Then she slipped out the back door and followed the pebbled path bordering the garden, where only a few hardy kale plants had survived the winter. Merryn could hardly wait for warmer weather to arrive, when she would plunge her arms into the black earth, bringing out cabbages and cucumbers; onions and radishes; sunflowers and squash. "If Hoppy can't grow it, then it's not worth growing," Hamlin had often boasted, and it was true. Everyone knew Merryn had a green thumb. Perhaps if that was all she had, people would learn in time to accept her.

Her father's brewery stood at the back beside a stream-cut ravine, soaking up the wan April sunshine. She loved the yeasty smell

that sweated out of the rambling, slate-roofed building, although she couldn't understand why anyone would drink the bitter stuff fermenting in the wooden vats inside. Skirting the brewery, she nimbly climbed down into the ravine.

One of the last wild, wooded refuges left in bustling Beechtown, this secluded valley with its alder-lined stream was Merryn's private retreat from the world's prying eyes. Here in birdsinging, rock-rimmed solitude, she could bare her sun-starved skin to the open air without fear of ridicule.

Removing her scarf and rolling up her sleeves, she gazed into the stream, whose kindly waters washed away all her imperfections, leaving only a sweet, rippling face hung with brown curls. Then a necklace of water weeds swirled up, spoiling the fairytale reflection. Framed in green, her face still looked oddly *right*.

Beside the stream sat Merryn's saddle-topped "sitting rock." Under its base in a natural cavity lay her most precious possession. She was about to remove it when a twig snapped and the undergrowth rustled. "Is that you, Emory?" she called out.

Wearing a sheepish grin under his mop of wheat-colored hair, her younger brother emerged from the bushes. At least, she assumed he was younger. Not even Merryn knew how old she was. As nearly as anyone could guess, she was a rather tall eleven or twelve to Emory's very short nine. She felt much older.

"Thought I'd find you here," he said. "Will you buy me something sweet at the bakery?" He stared at her exposed neck and arms, and she self-consciously rearranged her scarf and smock to cover them. Even here, it seemed, she had no privacy.

"Oh, very well," she said. "Please don't tell Mum I was down here. She thinks I dawdle enough as it is. She doesn't understand what it's like being me. You understand, don't you, Emory?"

Emory gazed at her with wide, blank blue eyes. Then he ambled back the way he had come. Merryn felt a pang of compassion for him. He had endured much for her sake. None of his friends would come near his home, and the older boys often taunted him on her account. A tear coursed down her cheek.

Quietly creeping up the ravine, she reached the stream's source, a spring gurgling cheerfully out of a rockfall. Merryn clambered over

the boulders, straightened her scarf and shift and darted between two old brick houses bordering the square. Though the spring market was still weeks away, men were already at work sprucing up the place. Cutting across the square, Merryn had Baker's Street in sight when she heard shouts.

"Hey, Scabby! Wait for us! We want to talk with you!"

Merryn broke into a run, but before she could escape, her tormentors swiftly surrounded her. Their ringleader, a swaggering ne'er-do-well named Ort, stepped up to her and jabbed her stomach with a stick. She gasped in pain and doubled over.

"Just as ugly as ever," Ort sneered, his upper lip curling under a broken nose. "I'm surprised yer *keepers* let you out of the house. What happened? Did you break all yer mama's mirrors looking into them and now ye're gonna have to buy her new ones?" The other boys snickered and elbowed one other.

"Leave me alone," said Merryn sullenly. Her eyes scoured the square, but no one seemed to notice her plight.

"You're sick, Scabby," Ort said, hooding his flinty eyes. "You should lie down." He shoved Merryn backward just as another boy dropped to his hands and knees behind her.

Losing her balance, Merryn fell back and cracked her head on the cobbles. Fuzzy stars floated before her eyes. She had hardly caught her breath when the boys began kicking her in the face and ribs and beating her with sticks. She curled into a ball.

Whack! Slap! Merryn braced herself for the next blow, but it never came. She lowered her arms and opened a slitted eye. A pair of mud-splattered, green-cloaked legs stood before her. The legs squatted and a young man's pleasant face peered at her. "Those rascals are gone now. May I help you up?"

Merryn numbly nodded and took her rescuer's proffered arm. Once on her feet, she realized her scarf had been torn off in the scuffle. Never had she appeared in public without it. Burning with shame, she covered her face and neck with both hands.

"I believe this is yours," said the young man. He picked up a filthy rag that had been ground into the cobbles and handed it to her. After all that she had endured, the sight of her trampled scarf was too much to bear, and Merryn burst into tears.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here earlier,” the stranger said. “For some reason, Beechtown has more than its share of street toughs. I’ve run afoul of them myself once or twice. Are you hurt?”

Merryn wiped her eyes on her sleeve. “No, I—I’m fine,” she lied. Her body ached all over from the beating. “Thank you for helping me. What is your name, if I may ask?”

“Timothy,” replied the stranger with a smile. “My parents live south of town. Why were those boys kicking you just now?”

“They don’t like my looks,” Merryn said miserably, her eyes flooding again. “Nobody does. That’s why I cover myself.” As she tied the tattered scarf around her head, Timothy regarded her with a mixture of amusement and sympathy. Then he gently removed the scarf, rolled it up and dropped it into her hand.

“I think you look better without it,” he said.

Merryn stared at him, hardly believing what she had heard. Most people recoiled in disgust from her uncovered face. Then her gaze flitted around the square. Except for the workmen, it was vacant. “What happened to those bullies?” she asked.

Timothy drew back his cloak. A short sword in a jeweled scabbard was strapped to his hip. “They won’t come around here again for a while,” he said. “I gave them the flat of my sword.” He burst out laughing. “Let’s go visit some shops. I’m hungry!”

Ignoring the frank stares and scowls of passers-by, Merryn took Timothy to the bakery, where she bought two loaves of dark rye and some gingerbread for Emory. Timothy settled on a bag of sticky buns, which he shared with Merryn.

As the portly, flour-dusted baker bagged up their purchases, he remarked, “Have you heard the latest news on the river?”

Timothy stopped chewing on a bun. “What news?”

Wornick leaned over the counter, his sweat-limp hair plastered down. “Yesterday, a boat floated into town w’ nary a soul aboard. Some vittles was missin’—spuds, bacon and mutton—but all the clothes and valuables was left. It ain’t th’ first time, either.”

“Sounds like the crew jumped ship,” Timothy offered.

Wornick snorted. “With all their supper laid out? There was leaves everywhere, too. Nobody knows what to make of it.”

Thanking the baker, the pair returned to the square, where the

sun-warmed cobbles were steaming like stony buns straight from the oven. Then a stiff wind sprang up and the daylight dimmed as ominous gray clouds streamed down from the Tartellans.

“I suppose I should be going,” said Timothy.

“Please don’t!” Merryn begged him. She trembled. Could she trust this young man with his easy manner and ready sword? “I want to show you something,” she ended lamely.

“Really? What’s that?” Timothy asked, arching an eyebrow.

“It’s a secret. That’s why I have to show you.” Without waiting for Timothy’s answer, Merryn dragged him down into the dell to her sitting rock and reached under it. Her treasure was gone.



Spoiled Quince Sauce

You should know better than to uncover yourself in public!" Milly scolded Merryn. "What will people say? I've heard talk that you're a changeling and should be burned at the stake. Goodness gracious, child, where did you get all those bruises?"

Merryn sat in the kitchen, hugging her knees and weeping. First her father had gone missing, then the bullies had beaten her, and now this. Her most cherished keepsake had vanished, and with it, the only clue to her mysterious past. She should never have hidden it under that rock in the first place.

After searching the stream bank in vain for her treasure, she had snatched up her sack of bread and sweets and bolted for home, leaving Timothy to find his own way out of the valley. Drying her tears, she now told Milly how the young stranger had rescued her from the bullies. "He saw me uncovered, Mother, and he thought I looked better that way! Maybe I'm outgrowing it, just as you used to say. Maybe I'll be normal some day!"

Milly was briskly stirring more quince sauce. "The boy must be blind," she muttered. "It's plain to see she's not getting any better, nor ever will. What man will have her like this?"

Whatever else was ailing Merryn, her hearing was still as sharp as ever. Tears coursing down her face, she fled out the front door and

ran smack into Emory, knocking something out of his hand. He grabbed it again, but not before Merryn saw what it was.

“You! You’re the one who stole my stone! Give it back this instant or I’m telling Mother!”

A cunning look came over Emory’s face. “I’ll tell her about your secret spot! Then where will you be?”

Fury kindled in Merryn’s heart, and she flew at her brother, raking his arms with her long fingernails. “Thief! That stone belongs to me. Hand it over, or so help me—!”

“It’s mine now, Scabby!” he threw back with a mean laugh. Darting inside the door, he slammed it shut behind him. Merryn heard the ‘snick’ of the lock, and with a wrenching sob, she sank onto the unforgiving earth. *Scabby*. Never before had Emory wielded that cruel name against her unguarded soul. At home, she was supposed to be ‘Hoppy,’ an endearing name that soothed away the pain of mocking eyes and muttered curses.

A bitter wind stung her face as fat, lazy snowflakes whirled down from a slate sky, reminders that winter lingered long in the shadow of the Tartellans. Merryn wished her father were home to defend her. In Hamlin’s hearing, a drunken fisherman had once referred to her as “that scabby brat.” Those careless words had cost the man his front teeth and most of his back ones, too.

Collecting herself, Merryn pounded on the door. Let Emory betray her if he would; she was going to have her stone back!

The door opened, letting snowflakes in. “Whatever has gotten into you?” Milly demanded. “You’ll catch a cold standing out there in the snow; come in and warm yourself by the fire.”

“Emory stole something of mine!” Merryn blurted out.

Her mother glanced back at Emory, who was toasting his feet by the stove. He shot Merryn a defiant look as she entered.

“Well?” said Milly, standing with arms akimbo.

Languidly, Emory got up and approached Merryn, making as if to return the stone. Abruptly, he spun around and opened his fist over the pot of burping quince sauce. *Plop*, went the stone.

Merryn screamed. Milly grabbed Emory by the hair and yanked so hard that the boy’s feet flew out from under him. “What did you just drop into my quince sauce?” she hissed.

“Ow! Let go of me!” he yelled.

“Not until you tell me what’s going on here,” said his mother firmly. “Now—what—did—you—drop—in—my—sauce?”

Emory twisted out of his mother’s grip. “She won’t be needing it where she’s going, and I hope she never comes back!”

However, Emory was already forgotten. Greenish steam was boiling out of the pan like some vile poison. Milly backed away from the stove, her eyes bulging and lips quivering. As the green cloud rolled over Merryn, she saw herself picking up the stone from a bed of bruised grasses. She had been pursuing something that was cutting a wide swath through the bushes. Green, coiling snakes writhed around her. Dizzy, she fell to the floor.

With a shriek, Milly hurled the pot of sauce through the window. As snowflakes billowed into the kitchen, Merryn floated away into a robin’s-egg sky above many-eyed marshes.

“Merryn, wake up! *Wake up!*”

Shadowy forms hovered above Merryn like tree-reflections seen in her secret stream. Her mother’s face swam over her.

“Merryn! Say something! Are you all right?”

Bully boys were beating her, their booted feet and heavy sticks thudding against her ribs. A coppery taste tainted her mouth. “Mother—” she croaked. Then the world spun into darkness.

When Merryn awoke again, she was lying on her own bed. Moonlight frosted the room, casting black spiders into the corners. Feeling oddly light, she stood on the bed and looked out the window. Her heart caught. Snow glistened over the slumbering landscape in mounded pillows and smooth satin sheets.

She loved the snow, from the first shy, wispy flakes of autumn to the fat, floating goose feathers of blustery winter. She loved its squeaky crunch beneath her boots; the way it whispered through the trees and melted on her tongue; how it wove lace around the windowpanes and graced every eave, twig and railing with its white-gloved touch. She loved the clean-slate, unspoiled promise of a fresh morning’s snowfall, just begging to be sculpted into turreted castles and lumpy snowmen, unsigned love letters and miniature Beechtowns. She loved everything about snow.

Best of all, snow spelled *freedom*. No need to stick to roads and

lanes; snow laughed at fences and gates and stony boundaries, making of all one great untrodden highway. Bundled in hat, scarf and mittens like every other mother's snow-child, Merryn could forget who and what she was, if only for a few hours.

Then she remembered her stone. Quietly, she pulled on her boots and stole through the house. Since the back door squeaked, she took the front. Sinking deliciously into the yielding powder with every step, she slogged around the side of the house. Upriver, on the snow-stacked bridge, hundreds of stolid, petrified batwolves wore comical white caps and nose-mittens.

Below the broken kitchen window, a hump in the white blanket marked the gravesite of her mother's pan of quince sauce. Digging carefully to avoid broken glass, Merryn unearthed the pot, dented on one side from its hard landing. Upending it, she dumped out a slurry of cold cooked quinces. Nestled amongst the golden, grainy fruit lay a smooth, jade-green stone, apparently unharmed. A pretty bauble she had thought it—until now.

This time she was taking no chances. Moonlight glinted greedily off the stone as she dropped it into the buckskin bag she wore around her neck. Her gem was back where it belonged, and there it would remain. Leaving the pot, she returned to her room.

The moon had hidden behind a bank of storm clouds when Merryn pulled off her boots and slipped into bed again. Despite her cold-nipped fingers and toes, a glowing warmth flooded her limbs as she thought of her precious stone in its pouch. Lulled by the hiss of snowflakes against her window, she slept.

The next morning, Merryn awoke to a pounding sound—and an awful itch. This was not the sort of itch that goes away when you scratch it. No, this was *the* Itch that begins all over your body at once and burrows down deep until you long to throw off your skin and scratch yourself to the bone.

She broke a couple of fingernails scratching her legs and arms and torso. Then she rubbed her back against the door jamb. Finding no relief, she struggled into her damp boots and trudged outside, where she rolled over and over in the refreshing snow, which soothed her raw sores and itchy skin. *Bam! Bam!* Armed with a hammer, her mother was nailing boards over the shattered window. As Merryn came near,

Milly broke out in dimples.

“How are you feeling, dear?” she asked. “Shouldn’t you be in bed? You gave your brother and me quite a fright. Emory says it was a lump of saltpeter he dropped in my sauce. I’ve warned you before to stay away from those mines up in the hills.”

“I’m sorry, Mother,” said Merryn. “I’m much better today. What did Emory mean when he said I was going somewhere?”

Milly’s eyes turned brittle. “Let’s go inside,” she said.

Following her mother into the kitchen, Merryn ladled herself a bowl of quince sauce and settled on a stool. Her breath clouded in the chill air that poured between the hastily nailed-up boards.

“I’ve come to a decision,” said Milly absently as she lit a lamp. Her eyes focused above the top of Merryn’s head. “I am sending you away for a time. It is for your own good, mind you.”

Merryn nearly fell off her stool. “Sending me away?” she repeated. “Why? What have I done?” She couldn’t breathe.

In a rare gesture of affection, Milly touched her arm. “It’s not your fault. You can’t help being what you are—and our townsfolk can’t help being what they are, either. You’ll be better off upriver. I hear all sorts of odd lots live north of here, and they won’t bat an eye over you and your scabby skin. Besides, that’s where your father disappeared. I want you to keep your eyes and ears open for any news of him. Emory and I can manage without you for a few weeks. I’m sure it will be for the best for us all.”

The blood roared in Merryn’s ears. “Upriver?” Her voice sounded harsh and distant. “When?”

Milly blew on her cupped hands. “Your ship sails in a month.”

Merryn jumped off the stool and ran to her room, where she threw herself on her bed and let the tears flow. Leave Beechtown? By herself? To be sure, the place held few warm memories for her, but it was all she had ever known. Besides, how would she get along without her mother and brother? Despite their faults, they knew and understood her better than anyone else.

April passed all too swiftly into May. Each day found Merryn at the docks, asking among the rivermen for her father. They all knew Beechtown’s brewmaster, yet no one had seen him.

“E’s gone off, ’as he?” they would say, clucking their tongues

sympathetically. “Poor lil’ tyke, to lose yer dad so young.” She would come away with a pocketful of sweets and a heart full of stones. Why hadn’t her father come back to rescue her?

One morning when Merryn was preparing for another visit to the docks, her mother’s voice bit through the bedroom door. “He’s here, Hoppy. Come out when you’re properly covered.”

Merryn hurriedly dressed. Father was home! She wouldn’t have to leave after all! She was saved! Throwing open the door, she saw her mother smoothing down her house frock and fluffing up her hair, the way she always did when visitors came calling. Behind her stood a scruffy man wearing a jaunty red stocking cap on his grizzled head and a stained leather jerkin over his short tunic. His hairy arms were ropy with muscle.

“This is Captain Rolc,” said Milly demurely. “He’s graciously agreed to escort you to his ship.” She held up a handbag. “I’ve packed this bag with some food and a change of clothes. You’ll also find a few gilders for buying more food when this runs out.”

Numbly, Merryn took the bag, which felt much too light to sustain her on such a voyage. Rolc showed a mouthful of broken and discolored teeth to match his weathered face.

“Time to go, girlie,” he sneered, reaching for her.

Bile rose in Merryn’s throat as she stepped back, clutching the handbag to her chest. “I’m not leaving,” she said stoutly. Why of all people had Milly chosen this ill-favored, ill-mannered man?

“Too late fer that now,” growled the captain, and he grabbed her wrist. Merryn bit and kicked him, but he tossed her over his shoulder like a sack of fish and carried her out the door. Looking back, Merryn saw her mother waving good-bye, and the truth struck her: As Emory had hinted, she was not coming back.