

The KING of the TREES  
BOOK THREE

# The GOLDEN WOOD

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For my beloved wife, Johnnie Calista,  
who made room in her life for Lucambra.

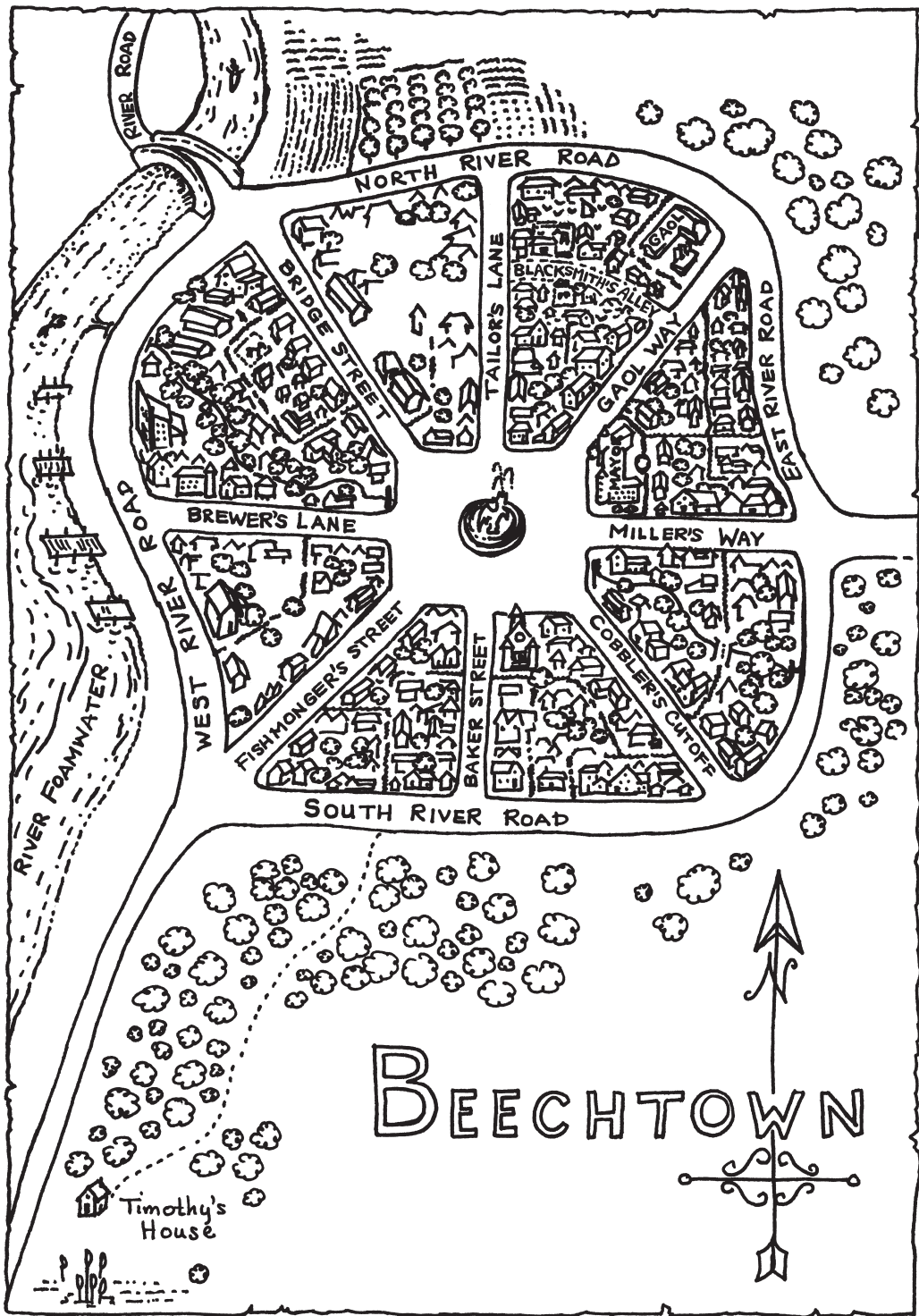
“. . . and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived.”

**Numbers 21:9**

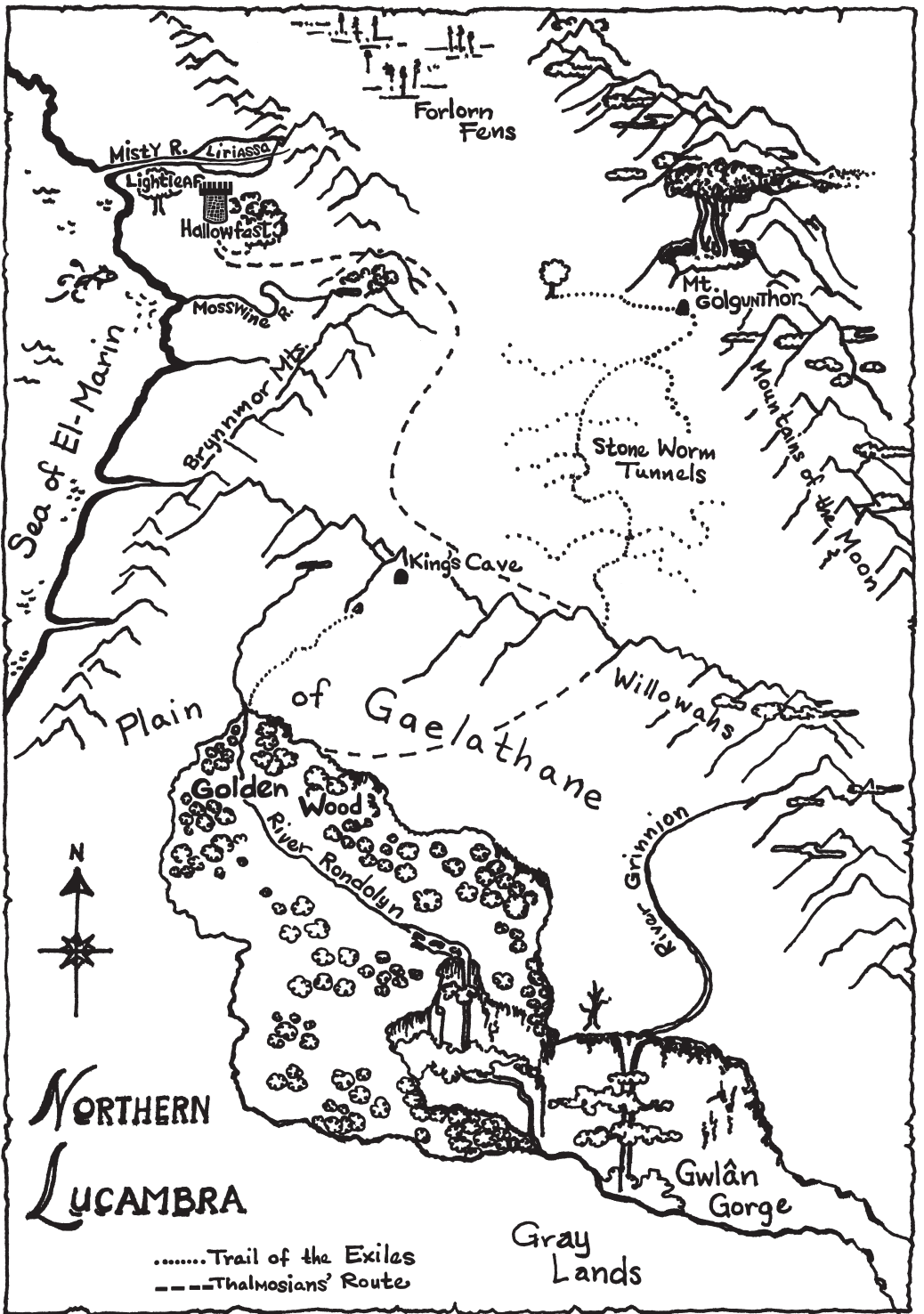
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## PROLOGUE

**B**athed in sweat, Rolin son of Gannon jerked awake. Was it a dream, or had the King of the Trees just left him a message? Shakily, he slipped out of bed and went to the table by the window. Sure enough, sixteen lines of spidery script gleamed on the polished tabletop, as if engraved by moonbeams. As the flowing words slowly faded, Rolin copied them onto a sheet of parchment. Then he spread his hands over the table, hoping to preserve the writing until Queen Marlis could see it.

At his touch, the letters blazed up, searing themselves into his mind. Rolin staggered backward as a long, shuddering *BOOM* shook his soul and splintered his senses. The disquieting sound disturbed his dreams for nights afterwards.



# PART I: FARMER GANNSON





## THE SHATTERED SPASEL

Papa, I'm bored," fussed Meghan, playing with the buttons on her father's green tunic. "It's raining and the griffins are too sick to fly." Her gaze wandered around the Hallowfast's throne room before coming to rest on a bank of tall cupboards. Eyes brightening, she asked, "May we look at some spasels?" She dimpled at Rolin and batted her eyelids.

Seated on his throne, the king laughed. His youngest daughter's pixie moods never failed to pluck his heartstrings. "Of course, *cariad*," he replied. After Meghan hopped off his lap, he unlocked one of the cupboards and searched among its crate-crammed shelves until he found a box labeled *THALMOS*.

"Here we are," he said, setting the box on the floor. "Since the torsils are leafing out, maybe we'll see something of Beechtown in one of these." He smiled at Meghan. "Go ahead, open it."

Meghan lifted the lid off the box. Inside, twelve glassy balls of assorted shades and sizes nestled in separate niches like so many dragon's eggs. Meghan's mouth made a breathless "O" as she leaned over the box, her flaxen hair spilling into it. Removing the darkest of the polished balls, she held it up in a sunbeam, where it glowed like liquid amber. She selected another of the misshapen spheres and frowned at its flattened bottom.

"Why isn't this one round, Papa?" she asked plaintively, her sea-

green eyes pouting.

King Rolin chuckled. "I haven't turned these spasels for several months and they've 'melted' a little."

"Melted?"

"Why, yes. They may feel as solid as glass, but the torsil sap they're made of still flows slowly, even in this cool room."

"Like that candle I left on my shelf?"

"Just like the candle," Rolin agreed. A few months earlier, Meghan had molded a crude candle out of beeswax. Now it was already drooping like a snow-burdened fir.

A shadow passed across Meghan's face. "How can we unmelt them? I want to see what Grandfather Gannon is doing on the other side. Maybe he's lonely and missing me."

Her father tossed a lopsided sap ball into the air and deftly caught it. "Where is it written in all the lore of Lucambra that spasels must be round?" he said archly. "They're only more compact that way and the images are truer. I think it's high time I taught you the finer points of spasel care." Holding the ball so that its underside faced Meghan, he pointed to the flat place.

"If your great-grandfather Bembor and I didn't turn these spasels every so often, they'd all eventually 'puddle out.' After that, it's well nigh impossible to restore them to their original shapes. That's why we give each one a quarter turn when it's starting to settle, like this." Rolin returned the ball to its compartment, flat side facing left. "Now you try it."

After gamely turning several spasels in their cubbyholes, Meghan pounced on a caramel-colored, potato-sized specimen. "Which one is this?" she asked.

"If I'm not mistaken, that is one of Lightleaf's," said Rolin. "It should give us a good view of the valley." He felt a twinge of homesickness as he recalled his many happy hours spent combing Beechtown's hills and vales for herbs and mushrooms.

Meghan put the ball to her eye. "I don't see anything."

Her father smiled. "Of course not. You have to warm it first."

With puffed cheeks, Meghan lustily blew on the spasel. Gradually, a creamy fog curdled in its center, giving way to bright, swirling colors like windspun showers of autumn leaves.

Anxious to see what new scenes the spring's first spasel-warming

might reveal, Rolin peered over his daughter's shoulder. "What do you see?" he asked her.

Meghan's nose wrinkled. "Just a big, shiny snake. I don't like snakes, Papa, 'specially big ones."

"Neither do I," said Rolin, staring into the spasel. Sure enough, a silvery serpent was winding through it, flanked by familiar landmarks. The "snake" was at least a mile long.

Lucambra's king rubbed his eyes and looked again. Recoiling in shock, he accidentally knocked the spasel out of Meghan's grasp, sending it crashing to the floor in a hail of shards.

"Oh, no!" Meghan wailed. "It's broken!" Her face shrank into a tearful mask of misery.

"I'm sorry," said her father as he swept up the fragments and dropped them into the box. "Don't worry, my sweet. We have lots more Thalmos spasels. Now run along and play with your brother and sister." He pulled on a long, gold cord dangling beside his throne. Somewhere in the bowels of the Hallowfast, a deep-voiced gong sounded and footsteps clattered up the tower stairs. Then two green-cloaked men burst through the door.

"Hail, Gemmio and Opio," Rolin greeted the brothers, who were among his most trusted advisors. "Is all well in my kingdom?"

"All is well, sire," said Gemmio, the taller of the two.

"I hope you've summoned us here on urgent business," grumbled Opio, panting heavily. "It's a long climb up those stairs, and you interrupted a fine game of chess."

"One that you were winning," Gemmio dryly reminded him.

"The exercise will strengthen your lungs for flute-playing, Opio," Rolin retorted. "Now then, I'd like you both to pack up and go to Beechtown at once."

"The torsils are scarcely in leaf yet, and the spring market is still weeks away!" Opio protested.

"I realize that," Rolin growled. "I'm not sending you to Thalmos for sewing needles or cooking pots! Meghan and I just had a look-see into one of Lightleaf's spasels. There's trouble brewing in Beechtown." Then he described the sap ball's images.

The brothers blanched. "What would you have us do?"

"I need your eyes and ears over there. After you find out who is stirring things up, bring me back a report. In the meantime, do try to

stay out of mischief. I've bailed you out of enough scrapes already!" The brothers nodded, their floppy hoods flouncing like jack-in-the-pulpit blossoms.

"Very good," said Rolin. "By the way, if you see my father, give him my love and tell him to stay out of Beechtown until all this has blown over. He'll be safe with his bees up in the hills."

Once Opio and Gemmio had departed, Rolin returned to the box of spasels. With shaking hands, he lifted out another sap ball and gently warmed it with his breath.