

The KING of the TREES
BOOK SIX

KYLEAH'S MIRRORS

WILLIAM D. BURT



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“For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known.”

(1 Corinthians 13:12, NASB)

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PROLOGUE

ACHOO!” Having blown the dust off the dented metal box, the Finder sneezed. Didn’t these brutish Thalmosians ever tidy up their cellars? This one was crammed with all sorts of useless articles, from broken beehives to chunks of rotten wood. The musty space smelled of beeswax, wilted carrots and sprouting potatoes. A pile of those revolting, pasty tubers lay on the table where he had found the box. He shook it. Inside, a few paltry coins clinked. How anyone could have wallowed in such squalor and still sit upon Lucambra’s throne was an absolute outrage.

Licking his lips, the Finder leered to himself. While the half-breed and his witless wife were searching for their fickle eldest daughter in some backwoods torsil world, it was time to clean house in the Hallowfast. Climbing a rickety set of shelves, the Finder found some dusty parchments at the top. Replacing them with a suitable souvenir, he clumsily clambered down with the brittle sheets, his heart thundering in the cellar’s confines.

For years, he had been poking through the Hallowfast’s dark corners, looking for some long-lost weapon or talisman that would tip the balance of power in his favor. Ironically, the key to victory had finally turned up in despised Thalmos, not in Lucambra.

≠ *Kyleah's Mirrors*

In his oft-repeated tale of finding the seventh soros, Gannon's son had let drop that he had found something more than his grandmother's box lying on the cellar shelves. Armed with that clue, the Finder had returned to Beechtown, where he discovered the priceless relics just where the half-breed had left them. The fool! Those yellowed parchments would yet prove his undoing.

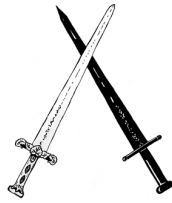
Now the Finder lacked only Elgathel's reforged sword. That revered symbol of royalty was missing from its hook on the back of Lucambra's throne. No king could rightfully rule Lucambra without Elgathel's legendary blade. Realizing the pretender must have taken the weapon with him, the Finder had flown into a destructive frenzy. After his wrath was spent, he vowed he would one day hang his cloak in the throne room, sword or no sword. Only Emmer and his mooning granddaughter stood in his way.

Clutching his trophies, the Finder climbed out of the cellar and dropped the trapdoor back into place. The cabin was silent. Gannon was conveniently visiting his busybody sister down in Beechtown. The Finder detested busybodies. When he became king, he would exile Lucambra's gossips to some bleak world and let them bore one another to death. To prevent his own exile, he had taken the precaution of copying Rolin's torsil maps, which marked the location of nearly every torsil in Western Lucambra.

The cabin's door creaked as he cautiously opened and closed it. No two-legs, tree, bird or beast raised the alarm. Whistling tunelessly, he set off to climb the nearest Lucambra-torsil.

That night, the Finder sat perched on a stool in the cramped hollow of his oak tree. Looking forward to roomier quarters, he peered at the chart etched on the wall opposite him. At the top, the name "Elgathel" was carved in bold letters. At the bottom, his own name appeared. Let others clutter their homes with faded murals of the One Tree. *His* family tree held far greater promise.

By candlelight, he examined the parchments, and the blood roared in his ears. Though some of the staves were smudged or faded, he was sure the riddle spoke of him. Very soon, he would seize the crown, sword and throne of Lucambra, Land of Light.



KYLEAH'S TEARS

Useless! That's all you are and that's all you ever will be!" Kyleah's face burned as she picked herself off the slick sugarhouse floor and hobbled out the beckoning door.

"And take this with you!" Kyleah instinctively ducked as a sap-bucket sailed over her head. Moments earlier, her makeshift wooden crutch had slipped on a film of water and had overturned the pail, spilling fresh, sticky maple sap across the floor. Unable to catch herself in time, she had landed heavily on cold stones.

Outside, Kyleah wept, her tears dimpling the new-fallen snow. No matter how hard she tried, she always seemed to get in the way. This March morning, her stepsister Gyrta was already in a foul temper since Barlomey, Kyleah's brother, had used Gyrta's best comb to smooth the tangles out of the horse's tail. Knocking over the sap-bucket was all the excuse Gyrta needed to vent her wrath on Kyleah. The sugarhouse would be off limits the rest of the day, unless Kyleah wished to be thrashed with her crutch.

She trudged up the snowy slope toward her home. Behind her, fragrant steam billowed through the door and roof vents of the sugarhouse, as if the building were ablaze. Kyleah loved working inside the rambling old shed at this time of year, when gallons

≠ *Kyleah's Mirrors*

of maple sap frothed in the big copper cauldrons suspended over roaring fires. It was hard, hot work feeding the hungry flames, but Kyleah always looked forward to her favorite treat: a bowlful of fresh snow drenched with maple syrup straight out of the spigot.

“Maple snow” had been their father’s invention. As the sugarmaster, Branagan son of Carrigan was responsible for boiling down the maple sap to just the right consistency. If overcooked, the precious sap would crystallize, caramelize or even burn and have to be scraped out of the cauldrons; if undercooked, the syrup tasted bland and watery. Branagan’s batches always turned out just right. By all accounts, he was the finest sugarmaster Mapleton had ever seen, and Kyleah was proud to be his only daughter.

She wished he hadn’t saddled her with such a shrew of a stepmother. Dolora spent more time primping than disciplining her unruly daughters. At seventeen and fifteen, Gyrta and Garta took after their mean-spirited mother. They were taller and stronger than Kyleah, who was twelve. The two delighted in tormenting her behind Branagan’s back. Once, she had caught them smearing grease on her crutch. Telling on them only invited swift revenge.

Kyleah dashed away her tears with cold-stiffened fingers. If only her mother Larissa were still alive, life would be different! Maybe the accident might never have happened, and Einwen . . .

Whump! Something cold and crunchy struck Kyleah’s right ear, and she went deaf. “Barlomey!” she yelled, knocking the snow out of her ear. “You know you’re not supposed to throw—” She ducked as another icy snowball whizzed past the other ear.

Stooping, she scooped up a handful of snow and molded it into a ball. She would teach that boy a lesson! He was just nipping back through the sugarhouse door. Aiming at him, Kyleah let fly.

Unfortunately, Gyrta was right behind Barlomey. *Smack!* The snowball hit her full in the face. She shrieked and staggered back inside the sugarhouse. Losing her balance, Kyleah toppled into a snowdrift. Now she was in for it! Gyrta would never believe the snowball was meant for Barlomey, and she would not rest until Kyleah was black and blue. Kyleah wanted to sink into the drift and never come out again until the last snowflake had melted.

Sitting up, she spotted Gyrta emerging from the sugarhouse brandishing a long-handled stirring paddle. Murder and mayhem were written all over the blond girl's proud, sharp-featured face, leaving no doubt as to what she intended to do with the paddle.

Sugarmen stirred their evaporating maple sap with wooden paddles to keep it from burning on the kettle bottoms. Applied to other bottoms, those paddles left spectacular bruises. Kyleah grabbed her crutch and struggled to free herself from the snowdrift's clinging embrace. Then footsteps munched through the snow, and Barlomey's mop of curly black hair swam into view.

"What are you doing down there?" he said, his brown eyes laughing. "Hurry up; you don't want Gyrta to catch you!" He pulled his sister out of the snow and shoved the crutch under her arm. Then he brushed her off. At nine years, "Barley," as he was known, enjoyed picking on his sisters, especially Kyleah. Still, she loved the rascally boy. He was her flesh and blood, after all.

"I'll never outrun Gyrta!" she cried. "Can't you toss some snowballs at her to slow her up? I promise I won't tell Father about the maple-sugar bears you stole and hid under your bed."

Barley's eyes narrowed. "What were you doing in my—?" Then he saw Gyrta plowing toward them through the snow. "Come on!" he yelled, and he began dragging Kyleah along, protesting.

Swish. As swiftly and smoothly as swans gliding on a lake, a sledge slid up with the jangle of harness bells. Perched on the driver's seat, Branagan pulled back on the reins. "Whoa, Sally!" he called to the mare. Dark-haired and clean-shaven, the sugarmaster was a solid man with boulders for shoulders and forearms as thick as knotted barge-cables. Kyleah shrank back. Muffled in a thick ermine coat, Garta glared down at her from beside Branagan.

"How nice of you, dear little sister, to take my place collecting sap-buckets in the sugar bush," Garta sneered. She stepped off the sleigh just in time to catch the fat snowball meant for Kyleah.

"Oooh!" Garta screamed at Gyrta. "You horrid little minx, I'll get you for that!" Surging through the snow, she knocked down her sister. Blonde hair and white snow mingled as the two girls tumbled down the hill, kicking, punching and biting each other.

≠ *Kyleah's Mirrors*

Barley's freckled face broke into a self-satisfied smirk, as if he had orchestrated the brawl all by himself. Branagan clucked his tongue in mock outrage. "Tsk! Tsk! Such a fuss over a snowball!" he said, helping Kyleah into the sledge. She huddled on the seat beside her father, her teeth chattering. Usually, she wore light clothing when working in the hot, steamy sugarhouse. Now she was thankful for the woolen trousers and fur-lined boots she had pulled on that morning to ward off the lingering winter's chill.

In truth, she didn't mind the cold, so long as she could spend time with her father. Beneath his crusty gruffness shone a love as bright and genuine as a newly polished copper syrup cauldron.

"Shouldn't you go down there and separate Gyrtá and Garta before they hurt one another?" she asked him. "I'm afraid they're going to blame their fight on Barley and me. It's just not fair."

He winked at her. "I'd rather separate a couple of quarreling polecats. I've learnt to let those two settle their differences by themselves. Remember, I have to live with their mother."

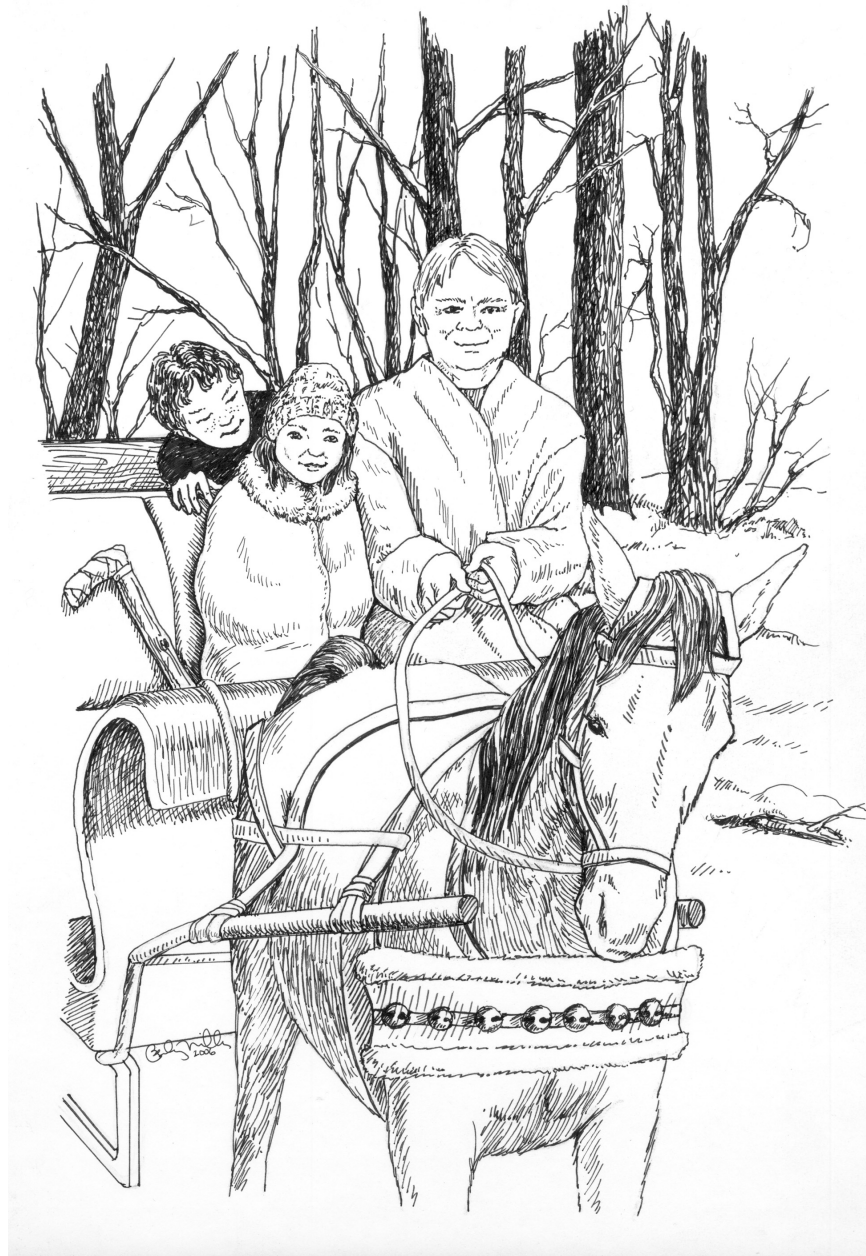
Barley climbed up behind Kyleah and clung to the seat. Then Branagan flicked the reins. The empty buckets in back rattled as the sledge leapt forward, heading higher into the Tartellan hills.

"These will warm you up," Branagan told Kyleah. He wrapped a fur-tipped cape around her shoulders and pulled a wool cap over her head. She thanked him as her shivering gradually subsided.

"Gyrtá and Garta are always picking on me," she confessed. "I wish I were strong and sure-footed enough to stand up to them."

Branagan sighed. "Maybe one day you will be."

A few snowflakes drifted down from a slate sky, but spring was already shrugging off its winter's coat. The streams were thawing and running high with snowmelt. Warm breezes were wandering up from the valley of the Foamwater like flocks of wayward geese. Kyleah loved the promise of spring, when all nature awoke from its hibernation and stretched itself, bearlike. First, the fuzzy pussy willows burst like caterpillars from their brownish bud-cocoons. Then the daffodils nodded farewell to winter and turned their golden faces toward spring. The poplars were next, opening their sticky buds to perfume the air with their spicy-sweet balm.



≠ *Kyleah's Mirrors*

She also loved sledging through the woods with her father. The evergreen air tasted brisk and clean, free of the chimney haze that hung over Mapleton. “Through the snow, higher we go!” rang the sleigh bells. “Through the snow, higher we go!” sang the sleigh’s runners as they hissed over the fresh powder. Presently, Branagan stopped the sledge beside a snowy clearing, where the eternal white blanket muffled all sound but the mournful tinkling of hundreds of tiny bells, each one lamenting a lost soul.

Winter was the safest season of the year, when the Prowlers slept in the forests above Mapleton. No one had ever seen a Prowler and lived to tell the tale, but many townsfolk had glimpsed dark shapes hulking through the woods on moonlit nights. As soon as the trees leafed out, prudent people stayed indoors after dusk.

Whoever or whatever the Prowlers were, they could snatch their prey—usually a girl—through a second-story window as neatly as neat, leaving only a few scratchy tracks behind, if any. And they always seemed to know right where their victims slept.

So many boys and girls had gone missing over the years that parents took to hanging small brass bells around their young ones’ necks to foil would-be kidnappers. Since each bell’s tone was unique, a sharp ear could track down any particular child by the sound of his bell. “Belltown,” the village came to be known. Each spring, the hills resounded with the ringing of the children’s chimes. By autumn, some of those bells had already fallen silent.

Now they rang again, but not because carefree children were playing tag, throwing snowballs at one another or making snowmen. These bells rang in the fitful wind that prowled the Grieving Ground, as it was called. Branagan often visited this spot before sledging on to the sugar bush. Like so many boat oars standing in river sand, neat rows of stirring paddles lined this patch of snowy earth. Each stirrer represented one of Mapleton’s boys or girls, men or women who had vanished. Jingling and jangling, brass bells on leather cords hung from most of the paddle blades.

“Soon, we’ll be staying inside after dusk,” Branagan said as he helped Kyleah down from the sleigh. “Then you’ll have to wear your bell. I wish your mother had been wearing one that night.”

Kyleah made a sour face. "I hate wearing that thing! Bells are for sheep, not for people. Besides, the cord rubs my neck raw."

Branagan turned a stern gaze on his daughter. "Either thou shalt bear the bell, or the paddlewood shall wear it," he told her, quoting a time-worn proverb familiar to all Mapleton's residents.

He was right, of course. Anybody spending time out-of-doors without a bell was "asking for a paddle," as the villagers put it.

Kyleah braved the gauntlet of faceless paddles with her father and brother. She and Barley read out the names engraved on the weathered blades. Linnae . . . Timmon . . . Daniella . . . Larissa.

Stopping before the Larissa-paddle, the three bowed their heads in silent grief. "Why did you leave us, Mother?" Kyleah murmured. Tears blurred her vision as she recalled happier days.

One April evening when Kyleah had just turned eight, Larissa had stepped outside to pick a few lilacs for the table. When she failed to return, Branagan went looking for her. He found only some scattered, smudged tracks leading toward the dark forest.

Ding! Kyleah tapped the paddle's bell. Some people believed that ringing those bells would bring back the lost. Though many of the Grieving Ground's wind-wakened bells had rung out the months and years till their paddles rotted, not one of the missing had ever returned. Kyleah's eyes burned as she knelt before her mother's paddle and read the messages scratched into the wooden handle. *Please come back! Where are you? We will always love you.*

Branagan gently scraped the snow away from Larissa's paddle and straightened it. Then he moved on, tears streaking his face.

Kyleah wistfully rang the bell again before she went in search of another snow-bound paddle. This one bore the name, "Anna."

After her sister Einwen's death, Kyleah had found another dear friend in Anna daughter of Dyllis. Full of girlish secrets, spirited Anna had helped ease Kyleah's loneliness. Then one hot summer's eve, Anna had left her bedroom window open. The next morning, her bed was as cold and bare as an empty sap-bucket in January.

Kyleah rejoined Barley and Branagan, and the three sledged onward. A sharp wind knocked snow from the fir boughs, stinging Kyleah's cheek where the cruel carriage wheel had struck her.

≠ Kyleah's Mirrors

The fall following her mother's death, a horse-drawn, runaway carriage had mown down Kyleah and her twin sister, Einwen. The wagon's onslaught had scarred Kyleah's cheek and crippled her right leg, leaving Einwen limp and lifeless in the merciless road.

After a mile or so, the stolid firs gave way to pure stands of sugar maples. Branagan drew the sledge up beside one of the trees, which was decorated with a splash of red. Each sugarman in the village marked his trees with a distinctive color of paint. This tree also sported a sap-bucket, which hung from a wooden tube or *spile* protruding from the maple's trunk. A slab of slate lay across the bucket's top to keep rain and debris from falling into the sap.

Barley tromped through the snow to the tree. After taking off the cover, he carried the brimming bucket back to the sledge, where Kyleah exchanged the full pail for an empty one. Seeing her marred face mirrored in the clear liquid, she quickly turned away, reminded of the accident. In her hazel eyes and reddish-brown hair, she also saw her beloved Einwen's reflection.

She dipped a finger into the pail and tasted the sweet sap. The sugaring season's first sap always tasted the best, like fresh dew sipped from a budding rose. Even so, it still took forty gallons to make a gallon of finished maple syrup. Much more sap went into the making of the shaped maple-sugar candies Barley so coveted.

Barley hung the fresh bucket over the spile and replaced the slate cover. He and Kyleah repeated this routine with one maple tree after another. The sledge was jingling to the next tree when Branagan suddenly hauled back on the reins and jumped out. Kyleah clumsily followed. She found her father standing beside a maple, scratching his head. At the tree's base sat a sap-bucket; the spile had been pulled out of the trunk and lay beside the bucket.

"Who would do such a thing?" Branagan grunted in disgust. "No sugarman I know would steal his neighbor's sap. But why would any thief take out the tap, too?" Bending down, he retrieved the hollow spile and empty pail from the trampled snow. With a wooden mallet, he drove the spile back into its taphole. Then he rehung the bucket on the spout. A few drops of sap dribbled out of the tap and plunked satisfyingly into the pail. *Plock! Plock!*

Branagan found several more maple trees missing their spiles. Muttering under his breath, he and Kyleah replaced the spouts and rehung the pails. Then they returned to the sledge and Barley, who was sampling some of the sap. Moving deeper into the sugar bush, they resumed replacing full sap-buckets with empty ones.

The back of the sleigh was nearly full of sloshing buckets when Branagan pulled two burlap sacks from under his seat and motioned to Kyleah and Barley. "Time to set more spiles!" he said. "Bring along a few buckets, and we'll tap some new trees."

Barley grabbed two empty pails, while Kyleah took one of the bags from her father. Her crutch crunched through the snow as she followed Branagan and Barley on foot into leafless groves of untapped maples. Here the trees grew so thickly there was no room for a sledge. Kyleah's foggy breath hung lazily in the biting air, like steam billowing through the sugarhouse doors and roof.

Branagan set his sack down next to a maple. "This one looks old enough," he said. Kyleah knew that tapping a tree younger than about forty years could weaken it. Her father always took care of his trees. From the sack, the sugarmaster removed a short bow, a six-inch iron drill bit and a flat stone. He wrapped the taut bowstring around the drill. Then he fitted the bit's blunt end into a shallow hole in the stone. Pressing the sharp end against the tree trunk with the rock, he began to saw the bow back and forth, twirling the drill first this way, then that. Kyleah had often seen a similar arrangement used for starting fires under the cauldrons in the sugarhouse, using a wooden rod instead of a metal one.

Soon, cream-colored wood shavings were curling out of the taphole Branagan was making in the trunk. After he had bored a couple of inches or so into the tree, he pulled out the drill bit.

"Hand me a spile, will you?" he asked Barley.

The boy dutifully opened Kyleah's sack and handed his father one of the taps. Branagan thoughtfully weighed the spout in his palm before handing it back to Barley. "I'll let you drive this one in," he told the boy. Barley's face split in a toothy grin. Hefting the wooden mallet, he smartly pounded the tap into the tree.

"That's deep enough," Branagan said, taking back the mallet.

≠ *Kyleah's Mirrors*

He examined his son's handiwork. "You've done a fine job, too," he allowed with a slow smile. "Now hang the bucket." Sap was trickling into the swinging pail when Branagan reached into Kyleah's burlap bag and presented her with a second bow-drill.

"While Barley helps me," he told her, "you go up higher and set some spiles yourself. It's about time you learnt to tap the sap."

Kyleah nearly dropped the bow-drill. Mapleton's women could work in the sugarhouse, but they weren't permitted to set spiles in the sugar bush. Why was Branagan violating this unwritten rule?

Scarcely believing her good fortune, Kyleah limped away with her bag and some buckets before her father could change his mind. Farther up, she came upon a grove of untapped maples. Beneath their outstretched limbs, shadows sullenly defied the bright sun.

Laying the bag and buckets next to a promising tree, she set to work boring a taphole in the trunk. However, she could not work the bow-drill properly. Every time she twisted it, the bit came loose and flew into the snow. After a half-hour, she hadn't made a dent in the maple's tough bark. Exasperated, she plopped down on the snow and wept bitterly. How could she return to her father with the news that she had failed to tap even a single maple tree?

Filled with a sudden fury, she grabbed a spile and shoved it into the scored spot she had left on the trunk. The tap slipped into the tree as smoothly as a knife slicing through soft cheese.

Befuddled, she stared at the spile. With trembling fingers, she pulled on it, and it slid out as readily as it had gone in. The short wooden tube appeared undamaged. Kyleah pushed the tap against the trunk in a different place, and it slipped in again. Around the tree she went, thrusting the tap into the trunk in high spots and low spots, where the bark was thin and where it was thick. When she pulled out the spile, it left no trace of a hole behind.

She took another tap from the bag and pressed it against the trunk. This spout popped into the tree as readily as the first. In a frenzy, Kyleah dumped all the taps out of the sack and tried each in turn. The maple obligingly let them all in with equal ease.

The spiles were magical. They had to be. Kyleah had hit upon a secret worth more than all the gold in Beechtown's treasury!