

The KING of the TREES
BOOK TWO

TORSILS IN TIME

WILLIAM D. BURT

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“For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.”

—HEBREWS 4: 12–13 (NASB)

In loving memory of Erica Lahr-Auvil

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PROLOGUE: OF CROWNS & QUILL PENS

K*raawwk! Kraawwk!* Timothy son of Garth looked up to see an ill-favored, pink-headed bird perched in the tree above him. Eating his lunch of rye bread and cheese, he sat alone in the whispering wood, having no sisters, brothers or other playmates.

As usual, his father was somewhere between Beechtown and the Green Sea, poling his raft up the River Foamwater. A flaxen-haired boy of ten, Timothy wished Garth could spend more time with him, especially during the summer—a raftsman's busiest season. Timothy's mother Nora took in laundry, scrubbing the soiled tunics of the rollicking bargemen and raftsmen who stopped in Beechtown to test their landlegs.

Timothy whiled away many an idle June afternoon in the forests above Beechtown hunting squirrels and pheasants or spying on stoats and badgers, salamanders and snakes. Still hungry after his meager meal, he picked a few wild strawberries, popping the sweet, fragrant fruits into his mouth.

As the ruff-necked bird raucously croaked again, Timothy saw it was a vulture. The carrion eater was tugging and pecking at something, no doubt a poor dead thing stuck in the tree. Then Timothy's keen eye caught a metallic luster—perhaps the point of a

hunter's arrow lodged in a limb. He had often seen crows carry off coins and other shiny objects with which to brighten their drab, untidy nests—but never vultures. Failing to pilfer the pretty, the bird squawked and flew away.

Timothy smiled. Such a lot of fuss over a snippet of steel! Just then, a wind gust waded through the foliage, caressing the polished leaves into rustling curls and setting the “arrowhead” to twirling and flashing. Timothy wished he could view the mysterious object through a starglass, such as riverboat captains often used. He sighed and made a face. Owning a starglass was out of the question; one of those long tubes with their glass lenses would cost his father a month's wages. If he wanted to see what had so attracted the vulture, he'd have to climb the tree.

Ten minutes later, moss-grimed and well winded, Timothy had reached a gnarled limb halfway up the tortoiseshell trunk. Crawling out on the branch, he found a black satchel, its strap caught on a couple of crooked twigs. Sunlight glinted off a metal clasp securing a wide flap to the case's front.

Timothy gave a low whistle. Some wily highwayman—maybe Bartholomew the Bold himself—must have flung the satchel into this tree while fleeing a sheriff's posse, intending to retrieve his loot later. “Catcher, keeper, thief's a weeper,” Timothy chortled. Whatever was inside, it now belonged to him.

Freeing the tangled strap, he hefted the grimy satchel, which looked as though it had hung in the tree for quite a spell. Though heavy, the case didn't rattle or clink the way a pouch of gold and jewels would. When the rusted catch refused to open, he looped the strap around his neck, wriggled back down the tree and set off for home, clutching the case to his chest.

After crossing the Beechtown bridge, he ducked into an alley to avoid notice—but not quickly enough. Someone had been waiting for him. “Hey! It's Garth the River-Rover's brat!” growled Baglot son of Baldwyn, the brash town bully. “I thought I told you never to show your ugly mug around here again!”

As Timothy broke into a run, Baglot and his gang gave chase, cat-calling, “Tim-my boy, the tin-ker's son, watch him run, O what fun!

Tim-my boy, the tin-ker's son, go hide in your hole by the waa-ter!" *Whizzz!* A stone sailed over Timothy's head. Another struck him in the thigh. He vaulted a fence and hopped into a drainage ditch, where he crouched among some cattails.

When the hoots and cries had died away, Timothy crept out of the ditch and limped along the riverbank to his parents' thatched hut. Beside it sat his father's ramshackle shed. Inside the shed, broken furniture, warped wagon wheels and pitted pieces of iron littered the floor. In his spare time, Garth repaired and sold cast-off odds and ends to help his family eke out a living.

After rubbing away his tears and catching his breath, Timothy set the satchel on Garth's workbench, noting a peculiar emblem embossed on the side. Arranged in a crowned "W," a gold circlet and four quill pens rested on an open-book design, like this:



Convinced the symbol must be the mark of royalty or nobility, Timothy pried open the latch with a chisel. As he raised the flap, a musty, furry smell escaped. “Papers?” he groaned. “All that work for a bunch of moldy papers!” Stomping out the door with the case, he was about to fling the whole lot into the river when he realized that the owner might pay a handsome price for the satchel’s return. Besides, its contents might make interesting reading. Thanks to his grandmother’s training, Timothy had already devoured all the books he could lay hands on, and his parents could ill afford to satisfy his demand for more.

After settling down on the riverbank, he removed all the stacks of parchments from the satchel. Then he upended and shook it. Only a frayed quill pen fell out, its hollow tip heavily scored as if by a knife or file. Squinting at the spidery script squiggling across the stiff, yellowed papers, Timothy read, “Be it hereby enacted by the power vested in me . . .”

Grappling with more flowery terms, he came upon the names, “King Rolin” and “Queen Marlis” penned in bold letters. His first hunch hadn’t been far from the mark; it seemed he had discovered the records of a royal court. More references to the king and queen were sprinkled throughout the following pages.

Then he came to a thick sheaf of parchments bound with green and purple cords. Across the front, someone had scrawled the words, “Torsils in Time.” Torsils? Timothy pictured pea-green lizards with powerful tails and long, forked, flickering tongues. Chewing on a river grass stem, he read further.

TORSILS IN TIME

PART 1





THE BLACK PEARLS

Rolin, King of Lucambra whistled cheerily as he hurried down the familiar cobbled path along the bluffs above the Sea of El-marin. Just before entering a thick pine wood, he paused, thinking he'd heard footsteps. Putting a long wooden tube to his eye, he perused the empty trail behind him. Then he focused on a balcony high on the Tower of the Tree, where a bright-faced woman was waving a white kerchief.

“Goodbye, my queen,” murmured Rolin, waving back. “I shan’t be long!” Pocketing the starglass, he strode into the forest.

On this fine autumn morning, the sunlight was slanting through the treetops to caress red-capped *pogankas* sprouting on the forest floor. Ordinarily, Rolin would have tarried to admire the striking colors of those deadly mushrooms. However, he was anxious to take in the last day of Beechtown’s annual fall market, where he hoped to meet his father, Gannon son of Hemmett.

Once among the poorest of Beechtown’s hill folk, Gannon no longer made his living as a vendor at the spring and fall markets. Thanks to the rubies and emeralds his son had pocketed from the sorcerer Felgor’s hoard, Gannon still lived very simply but much more comfortably. Peddling his prize honey and potatoes was now only a pleasant pastime.

Today, Rolin had shed his royal robes for the homespun jerkin and leggings of a Thalmosian hill dweller, the better to blend into the crowds of marketgoers. A floppy, broad-brimmed hat topped off the disguise, hiding his auburn hair.

At length Rolin came to a mossy-barked tree whose branches spread like many-jointed arms. “Is anybody home?” he called, tapping on the trunk. He heard only a rumbling rattle in reply. How trees snored—being noseless and all—was a mystery to Rolin. *Rat-tat-a-tat-tat*, he rapped again on the whorled bark.

“Umph, who’s there?” croaked a creaky voice. Owing to the scent of amenthil blossoms, Lucambrians could converse with trees and other forest dwellers, a secret they jealously guarded from their Thalmosian neighbors.

“It’s me, Rolin. Wake up!” Lately, Lightleaf had been dozing most of the day. After all, he was over four hundred years old.

“Forgive me, my lord,” yawned the tree. “I was just enjoying the most marvelous dream: It was autumn, the poppies were blooming, and—”

“It *is* autumn, you silly torsil!” Rolin laughed. “You shouldn’t be sleeping away such fine fall weather.”

“Why can’t a tree take a nap without all the neighbors complaining? Humph. I suppose you want passage.”

“I do—if you don’t mind, that is.”

Lightleaf sighed. “I suppose not, but only if you promise not to disturb me again until my dream is finished.”

“That could take months!” Rolin retorted. “I’ll be gone all day, so you can dream away until I return.” Climbing the tree, Rolin took care not to scuff off any bark. At the top, he looked back at the tower, its colorful flags and banners waving. Still higher, a griffin lazily circled in the sky. Any enemy with designs on Queen Marlis or the Hollowfast would first have to reckon with Ironwing.

Before climbing down, Rolin lightly rubbed his finger under one of the torsil’s shiny leaves. The tree shivered, making a sound not unlike a sneeze.

“Whuff!” wheezed Lightleaf. “You know how I hate being tickled. Stop it at once, or I won’t let you back into Lucambra!”

Rolin chuckled, knowing the tree was only bluffing. Like most torsils, Lightleaf could be touchy—even cantankerous. However, the tree had never refused him passage. It helped that Rolin always avoided breaking any of his friend’s branches.

“Touch the top, then drop,” he told himself, repeating the rhyme all Lucambrian children learned when they were old enough to climb trees. Though Thalmosian by birth, Rolin was half Lucambrian and had learned the first rule of torsil travel: If you didn’t climb all the way to the top of a tree of passage before starting down again, you wouldn’t go anywhere at all. You might as well have climbed a cherry or an alder for all your trouble.

After a moment’s dizziness and tingling—the only side effects of making passage—Rolin alit on Thalmosian soil. Though he’d often traveled between the two worlds, the abrupt change of scenery was still unsettling. Gone were the bright-needled pines and high sandstone cliffs overlooking the Sea of El-marin. In their place stood a stolid fir forest marching down from the Tartellans’ craggy, snow-clad peaks, now flushed pink with the dawn.

Rolin bade Lightleaf farewell and made off down the mountain-side. Following paths known only to him and a few trusted Lucambrian scouts, he came at last to the River Foamwater.

Melting into the crowd crossing the new Beechtown bridge, Rolin fell in behind a boy and girl accompanying a lanky “Greencloak,” as Lucambrians were called in Thalmos. He couldn’t help overhearing their conversation.

“Thank you, Father, for letting me join you and Sylvie today,” the boy bubbled, his mop of hazel hair bouncing with each step.

“I did promise you a visit to the market before your thirteenth birthday,” sighed the long-legged man, whom Rolin recognized as a Lucambrian woodcarver named Gaflin son of Hargyll. Rolin guessed the lumpy bag he carried contained wooden bowls, cups, spoons and trinkets for sale. “Since it’s the final day of the market, you might find some rare bargains, if you’re lucky.”

“Oh, I hope so,” beamed the boy. “Say, what are all these yeg statues on the bridge? They’re awfully ugly.”

His sister rolled her eyes. “Oh, Arvin. Don’t you know *anything*?”

King Rolin petrified those batwolves in the Battle of Beechtown. So many fell into the Foamwater that they dammed up the river and made this bridge.”

“Lifelike, aren’t they?” remarked Gaflin, running his fingers over a stone yeg’s razor-edge teeth. “I’m glad we cleaned these cursed creatures out of Lucambra.”

Arvin pointed out some snarling statues standing by a shop entrance. “Then why do people keep them by their doors?”

Gaflin snorted. “They’re supposed to scare other yegs away. They don’t, of course. Even the birds pay them no mind. See? There’s a nest on that one.”

Arvin gestured at two more statues flanking another doorway. “What about those? They don’t look like the others.”

“That’s because they’re man-made,” his father replied. “When the Thalmosians ran out of whole petrified batwolves to guard their homes, they started carving their own. If you ask me, they’re even uglier than the real thing.”

Rolin grimaced. *Gargoyles*, the townspeople called their grotesque sculptures, evidently a corruption of the Lucambrian word, “yeggoroth.”

“I only hope your starglass peddler won’t drive you too hard a bargain,” Gaflin was saying to Arvin. “Most of his kind are cheats and ne’er-do-wells. Have you enough gilders for the thing?”

The boy held up a leather sack. “I don’t need any money to buy my starglass. I’ll just trade for it.”

“I’m sure any peddler would love to have one of your *frogs*,” sneered Sylvie. “Or did you steal Mother’s rings to barter with?”

“They’re not frogs or rings, and I didn’t steal them; I found—” Arvin began. He broke off, the back of his neck flushing pink.

His fair-haired sister pawed at the pouch with greedy fingers. “So there is something valuable in this bag of yours! Come on, open it; I want to see what’s inside.”

Arvin pressed the sack to his chest. “Stay away from me!”

“I don’t care what you’ve got in there,” Gaflin said. “Just be sure to find me once you have your starglass. Remember: Not a word about the torsils! These potato eaters are a crafty lot.”

Rolin chuckled. Since becoming king, he had encouraged his people to trade freely with the “potato eaters,” who differed from Lucambrians mainly in their broader stature, more boisterous ways and eye color. (Lucambrians’ eyes were a deep green.) Lucambrians also lived much longer than their neighbors.

Visiting Beechtown was not without its risks. Some nosy potato eater might trail a Greencloak back to a torsil, and that would be the end of tranquil Lucambra. A flood of Thalmosians would surely follow, unless the Lucambrians cut down all the torsils leading to their sister world—an unthinkable act.

“There he is!” cried Arvin, darting away. Curious to see how the boy would fare with the starglass peddler, Rolin followed. Like as not, a sadder and wiser Arvin would come away from the market empty-handed.

The wizened starglass peddler and his stall had been fixtures at the spring and fall markets longer than Rolin could remember. Nobody knew where the old codger lived, but everyone knew what he did: He sold the magical tubes, and nothing else. Not horses or hogs, baskets or beads, hammers or harnesses—just starglasses, and everybody wanted one.

As Rolin pushed his way through the milling marketgoers, he noticed a squat bulldog of a man talking to Arvin. “Whatcha got in yer pouch, boy?” The stranger reached for the sack.

Arvin recoiled from the man’s hairy paw. “Nothing!”

Rolin wedged his body between Arvin and the pickpocket. “Be-gone, ruffian, or I’ll have you thrown in irons!” he roared.

The thug brandished a long knife. “If it’s trouble ye’re wantin’, I’ll give ye plenty!” he snarled, showing a mouthful of broken, dis-coloured teeth.

Crack! Rolin’s starglass struck the thief’s hand, knocking the knife away. Muttering a stream of oaths, the man slunk off.

“Fawnk you, fine fur!” mumbled Arvin, whose bobbing head reminded Rolin of a spring-necked doll’s. His bulging cheeks wobbled like a fat dowager’s.

“What did you say?” Rolin asked.

The left bulge disappeared, only to bolster the right one. “I said,

‘Thank you, kind sir!’”

Rolin burst into laughter at the sight of Arvin’s lopsided face. “Whatever have you got in your mouth?”

“My pearl,” he replied with a guilty look. “I almost fwallowed vem!” Rolin grinned in sudden understanding. Arvin had scooped the pouch’s contents into his mouth, the better to hide them from the bulldog. Now where had the son of a Lucambrian woodcarver gotten a mouthful of pearls?

“Might ye be lookin’ for one o’ *these*?” quavered a dry, cobbly voice. There stood a shriveled prune of a man dressed in a baggy black jerkin and breeches, his beak-nosed, weathered face wreathed in a toothless grin. Loose pink skin ringed his scrawny neck in wrinkled folds. In his clawlike hands, he held a wooden starglass elaborately inlaid with silver stars and a gold moon.

“Yeth. Pleeth,” Arvin lisped through his pearls.

Rolin frowned. The peddler looked different. For one thing, the starglass hawker he remembered had brown eyes, not these light-licking, coal-deep pits in a fawning, pockmarked face.

The old man must have noticed his gaze, for he winked and cackled, “I look just like the man in the moon, don’t ye think? Ye can see for yerself through my starglasses. They’re fifteen gilders this year.” He nodded at the wheeled stall behind him, where rows of glittering starglasses stood at attention along worn wooden shelves. Seeing Arvin’s despairing look, he hastened to add, “But for a young feller like you, I’ll make ’er ten.”

“Oi dot haf amy momey,” Arvin mumbled, evidently trying to dislodge a pearl from under his tongue.

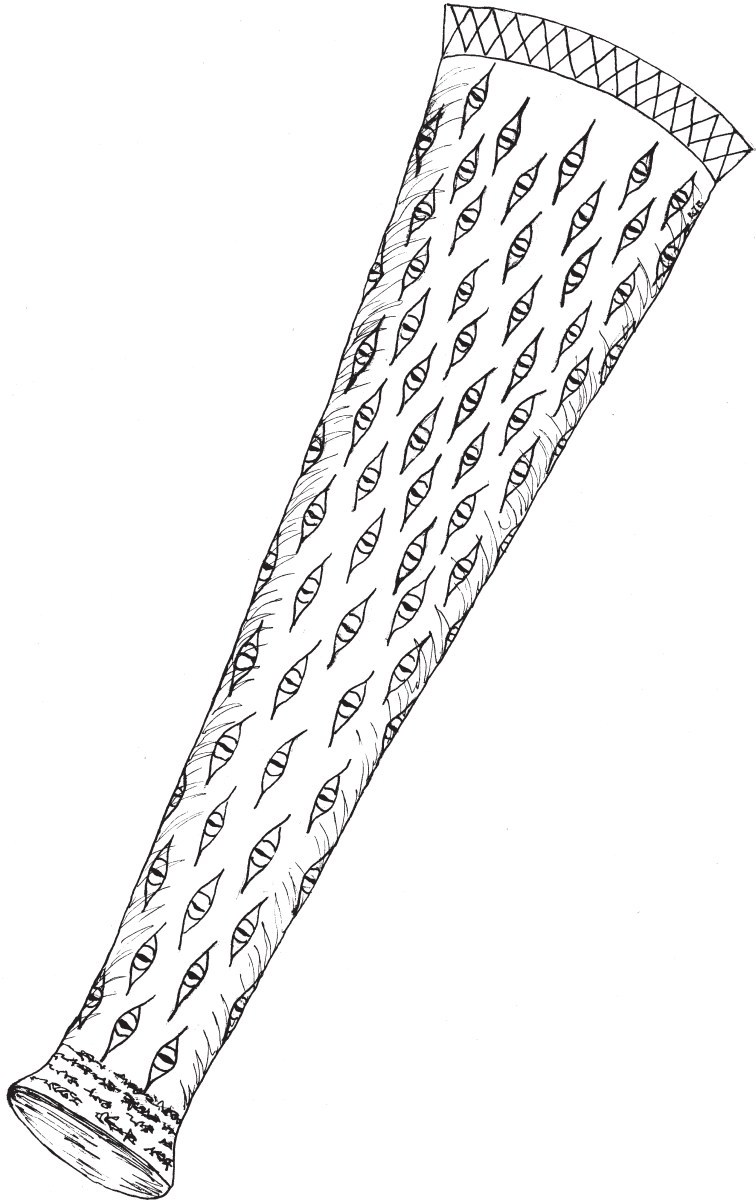
The peddler clenched his fists. “Er ye playin’ games wi’ me, boy? If ye er, I’ll—” He broke off as Rolin shot him a stern glance.

Arvin shook his head until the pearls in his mouth rattled.

“Then give me yer money, an’ stop makin’ a dumb show!”

Grimacing, Arvin spat out five jet-black pearls into his cupped hands. At the sight of the marble-sized spheres, the peddler’s eyes bulged. Then he gripped Arvin’s arm with bony fingers.

“Come back here with me, boy,” he hissed, drawing Arvin behind the display table. “Even if ye haven’t the usual *fee*, those five will buy



ye the best I got—this 'un here.” Unlocking an oaken cupboard, the hawker drew out the most exquisite starglass Rolin had ever seen. Fully a foot longer than its fellows, it was encased in gleaming silver and embellished with intricate eye designs.

The peddler held up a leather canister with a sturdy strap. “Comes wi’ its own case, too. Does it please yer fancy, young sir?” The old man licked his lips, his greedy gaze wavering between Arvin and Rolin.

“Yes, very much,” Arvin said, putting the starglass to his eye.

The peddler thrust his hand in front of the eyepiece. “No! Ye mustn’t look through it yet.”

Scowling, Arvin lowered the tube. “Why not?”

“Ah, the *light* down here is poor so early in th’ morning. Ye should wait awhile—say, an hour or so, until ye get home. The light’ll be better then.”

Arvin nodded and grudgingly slipped the starglass into its case. After dropping his payment into the peddler’s outstretched palm, he left Rolin to puzzle over the five black pearls.

The rarest of all gems, black pearls were found only in the Elmarin’s southern waters. Even one was worth a king’s ransom—and Rolin had never seen such perfect specimens. They reminded him of the peddler’s fathomless, ebony eyes.

Convinced the boy had gotten the worst of the bargain, Rolin feigned an interest in some wicker baskets while watching the starglass peddler out of the corner of his eye. Though curious shoppers were still crowding around, the old man swept up his wares and climbed into the cramped confines of the rambling, rickety stall. As soon as the hinged doors had scraped shut, Rolin ambled over to press his ear against the caravan’s side.

The peddler’s raspy voice carried through the thin wooden wall. “I’d nearly given up hope, my pretty pets! But we knew he’d come along one day, didn’t we? Now we’ll be free of this stinking town. No more selling starglasses to grubby, half-witted street urchins and bumbling country bumpkins! Since we’ve done *his* bidding, we’ll be rid of him and his confounded riddle, too!

Of all the fish that are in the sea,

You must hook the one without the fee;
For in its mouth, it carries the prize
To purchase the power to mesmerize.

“I’d say we’ve found our ‘fish,’” the starglass vendor chortled. “It won’t be long before he takes the bait—and he’ll be only the first of many. Let’s hope he crosses over before using it.”

Rolin heard a ‘bang,’ and a hatch flew open in the top of the stall. “Fly, fly, to the five corners of the sky!” the peddler cried. With strangled croaks and a flurry of wings, five coal-black ravens flew out to scatter over Beechtown.