

The KING of the TREES
BOOK FIVE

THE DOWNS

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WILLIAM D. BURT

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“He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth.”

(Isaiah 53:7, NASB)

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PROLOGUE

How I screamed and thrashed when the bloody knife clipped my ears! Father held me down until it was all over. “I am sorry,” he said, though his eyes betrayed as much fear as sorrow. “When we found you, the Gray Death had stolen your memory. You mustn’t go out until your ears and head wound have healed. If anyone should ask, you are an orphaned *flatlander*.”

Acceptance came hard in Swyndon for a flatlander with scarred ears. Whispers followed me everywhere, even onto the Downs, where I pastured Father’s sheep. He and Mother never had any children, so when a young fugitive from the Gray Death wandered bleeding into town, they were happy to take me into their home and love me as their own. Love me they did, though I didn’t belong.

The life of a shepherdess is a lonely one, but I was content. My sheep accepted me, scarred ears and all. The Gadabout accepted me, too. He didn’t visit often, but his presence was always a comfort, both to my sheep and to me. And then there was the Boar.

To me, he will always be “the Boy.” He had a name, but everyone in the village called him “the Boar.” He earned the nickname. We were pasturing our flocks one morning when the biggest hog I’d ever seen came rampaging through the sheep, slashing left and right

with his wicked tusks. As our animals scattered, the beast came for me and tore my shepherd's crook out of my shaking hand.

Then the Boy appeared at my side. With his spear in one hand and his staff in the other, he brought that boar to its knees, but not before it had gashed his legs. Ignoring his bloody wounds, the Boy drove his spear through the hog's back and into its heart.

After that, the Boy fussed over me as if I were one of his own sheep. He didn't mind my scars, either, though I always wore my hair long to cover my ears. Still, one look at my face, and anyone could see I was an outsider. The Boy didn't care what I was.

At the first hint of the Gray Death, he always sent me with my flocks back to the upland pastures. He often followed us to be sure we didn't stray or lose our way. The afternoon sun casts a deceptive light on the Downs that can easily confuse the unwary.

"Off you go!" he would say, twirling his shepherd's crook over his head ever so playfully. "You can't stay here, else the Gray Death will catch you. You're much too young for a sheepshun."

Nobody, I have since learned, is too young for a sheepshun. I am so thankful no more sheep must needlessly die for the lost.

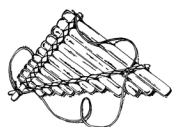
In my dreams, the Gray Death would call to me from across the Downs with the mournful hissing of wind-rippling grasses. Some days, I would stand alone at the breathing boundary between fog and sun, longing to fling myself into that cool, gray sea my friends so feared. I feared it, too, for it awakened in me dim memories of life before the Clipping, when I knew only the Cold.

"The Cold?" you ask. "Do you mean the cold of a winter's day when the bleak hills huddle against wind-whipped hail and sleet? Or do you mean the cold of a stone floor on bare flesh when the fire has gone as dead as old bones buried under the bitter sod?"

"No," I answer. "I mean the Cold that pierces soul and spirit like a thrice-frozen spear of sea ice. I mean the Cold that can sap the life-heat and living breath out of a body in seconds and leave her a solid lump of frozen flesh, senseless as a stone. *The Cold.*"

Still, as a shepherd snatches a lamb's leg from the mouth of a ravening wolf, I salvaged one memory from the Cold: *Melina.*

My name is Melina.



FAERY RINGS

CRASH! A heavy crock filled with bread dough toppled off the kitchen counter and shattered on the floor. Gwynneth had barely brushed the bowl with her elbow. Letting out a forlorn sigh, she gathered her work shift about her knees, knelt on the cold tiles and began picking up the pieces.

“Princess Gwynneth!” her mother Marlis scolded her. “What in the name of Elgathel has gotten into you? You’ve had your head in the trees all month. That’s the third bowl you’ve broken this week, and now you have ruined the dough, too. I asked you to help me with the baking, but you’re only making matters worse. Whatever will I do with you, child? You really must pull yourself together by tomorrow, or you’ll be in no shape for the wedding.”

Marlis and Gwynneth were filling in for Cook, who was making a few last-minute purchases at the Beechtown spring market. The other royal servants had also been busy day and night cleaning, preparing meals, sewing wedding garments and writing formal invitations. Gwynneth had done her best to stay out of the way.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” she said, and tears tickled her cheeks. Ordinarily, she was as nimble and quick-witted as her brother Elwyn and sister Meghan, but lately, she had been leaving a broad swath of

destruction in her wake. And she was moody. One minute she was in tears; the next, in laughter. Even Timothy was finding excuses to avoid his betrothed. That didn't improve her temper. If only their wedding plans hadn't gone so disastrously awry!

First, Grandfather Gannon and his sister Glenna had insisted on attending, even if they had to climb gnarly old Lightleaf and ride a peevish griffin. That meant the wedding would have to wait until spring had stirred the torsil trees into leaf. (Timothy's parents knew nothing of Lucambra or of torsil travel. For their sake, a second ceremony would be held in the Beechtown chapel.)

The annual All-comers Griffin Race had further delayed the wedding. Setting out from the Hallowfast, griffin riders from all over Lucambra flew thirty miles down the rugged seacoast to Spider Snag, a dead spruce whose snaggly crown resembled a spider. After rounding the snag, the contestants flew back to the Tower of the Tree, circling it three times before crossing the finish line.

Gwynneth had handily won the race riding Windsong, her father's mount. Timothy and Smallpaw had come in a close second. Unfortunately, in whipping around the Hallowfast on his final turn, Windsong had sucked Gwynneth's wedding gown right out of her bedroom window. Catching on Smallpaw's claws, the dress was torn to tatters and dragged through the mud before Gwynneth could rescue it. Her mother spent an entire month sewing another.

Then there were the rings. Redwing son of Whitewing, king of the sorca, had promised to forge the wedding bands from griffin-delved gold. However, Timothy and Gwynneth had forgotten to send along their ring sizes, so the bands had come back too large. Resizing them had held up the wedding another precious month.

Marlis's green eyes twinkled as she wiped the tears from her daughter's face. "Now don't fret," she said. "Let's not spoil this special day over broken pottery and spilt dough. We still have plenty of flour and yeast, so I can whip up a new batch of bread in a blink. Now be a dear and finish helping me clean up this mess. Then you can fetch me another crock from the pantry outside."

While Marlis scraped dough off the floor, Gwynneth swept up the remaining shards of crockery. Hurrying out the door, she

promptly collided with her father, who was carrying an armload of firewood into the kitchen. Rolin and the firewood went flying.

“Father! Are you all right?” Gwynneth anxiously asked as she helped him to his feet. Wearing a homespun tunic, Lucambra’s king appeared shaken but unhurt. His mane of chestnut hair was festooned with lichen, moss and mistletoe from the firewood.

“I’m fine,” he grunted, brushing himself off. Under his breath he added, “I knew I should have gone deer hunting with Timothy in the Brynnmors this morning. Some days it just doesn’t pay to get out of bed, and this is shaping up to be one of those days.”

Marlis rushed out of the kitchen to help Gwynneth collect the scattered sticks of wood. The queen caught Gwynneth’s eye and when the king’s back was turned, she pointed out the green sprigs hitchhiking in his hair. Mother and daughter snickered.

Rolin’s head swiveled and he planted his fists on his hips. “How dare you make sport of me?” he demanded in a mock display of regal spleen. “I could have you locked up in the dungeon, or tossed into a dragon’s den, or turned into toads, or—or—”

“We don’t have a dungeon, and the dragon is dead, Father,” Gwynneth reminded him. How she loved fencing with the king!

Folding her arms, the queen leveled a cool look at Rolin from under hooded eyes. “Toads can’t prepare your supper, either! If you were forced to fend for yourself, you wouldn’t last a week. As I recall, burnt porridge with curdled sour milk is your specialty.”

The king feigned a wounded air. “You always like my oatcakes! Besides, you must know that when mistletoe catches in the king’s hair, any maiden who comes into his presence must kiss him.”

Marlis and Gwynneth dutifully pecked him on the cheek. Grinning, Rolin said, “That’s more like it!” He waved a finger underneath Gwynneth’s nose. “Speaking of porridge, the next time we have oatmeal for breakfast, you had better watch your back!”

The three broke into laughter. A week earlier, Gwynneth had used a serving spoon to catapult a steaming glob of sticky oatmeal smack into the back of her father’s head. This opening shot led to a flurry of others as Bembor, Marlis, Elwyn and Meghan joined in the oatmeal war. Cook later remarked on seeing the empty kettle,

“You all must have been hungry this morning.” In truth, most of his mush had decorated the dining room walls and floor. Gwynneth was still combing oatmeal out of her hair. Her great-grandfather Bembor had to go a step further and cut off part of his white beard.

Once the firewood was neatly stacked in the kitchen, Rolin went off to split more. Meanwhile, Gwynneth was helping her mother mix and knead out another batch of bread dough. It was hot working next to the roaring, wood-fired stove; Gwynneth was constantly mopping the sweat from her forehead with her apron.

“Why don’t you cool off outside while the dough rises?” Marlis suggested. “The fresh spring air will do you good. When you’re feeling better, you can come back and help me shape the loaves. Oh, and watch for mushrooms growing in the grass, won’t you? After all the rain we’ve had, they’ll be popping up everywhere.”

“Thank you, Mum!” Gwynneth said. She fled out the door.

Clattering down the Hallowfast’s winding stone stairs, she threw open the door and ran outside. “I’m going to be married tomorrow!” she cried to the cloud-strewn sky. She spun on the grass, arms outstretched and blond hair flying. Rings, dress, food, guests—at last everything was prepared. Still, a nagging doubt niggled at the back of her mind. The doubt erupted into full-blown panic. She and Timothy had yet to choose their troth-tree!

Not many years earlier, Lucambrians had taken their life-trees from ordinary forest saplings as substitutes for the Tree of trees that once grew on the Isle of Luralin. Now that the Tree had come to abide with them, Lucambrians planted its seedlings as sythan-ars. Gwynneth had her own life-tree. So did her brother and sister. As a Thalmosian, Timothy didn’t need one. Still, he had planted a river birch beside his parents’ humble home near Beechtown.

The troth-tree, on the other hand, was a symbolic sythan-ar. Uprooting a wild tree sapling, a betrothed couple would replant it beside the Hallowfast to signify their new life together. The bread dough would simply have to wait until a troth-tree was found.

Reeling with dizziness, Gwynneth collapsed into the grass and rolled onto her back. She was gazing up at the sky’s spinning blue-white bowl when a feathered head and neck swam into view.

“Hmph!” growled Ironwing. “You will never get off the ground by twirling around with your arms stuck out like tree limbs. Try running forward and flapping your arms. Since you haven’t got any feathers, I suppose you won’t ever fly the way we griffins do.”

“You’re such a silly old sorc!” said Gwynneth cheerfully as she jumped up. Then she lightly scratched Ironwing’s head and neck feathers. Purring with pleasure, he nuzzled against her cheek.

“Would you mind doing an errand for me?” she asked him.

Ironwing groaned, and his neck and tail sagged. “I should have known. Whenever you scratch my head, you want some favor or another in return. What is it this time? Do you wish me to fly to the Willowah Mountains and bring you back a glory stone for your wedding ring, or slay you a dragon, or fetch you some fresh venison? The local deer are filling out quite nicely this spring.”

“No, thank you,” Gwynneth replied. “I want your help in finding Timothy. He went away early this morning, and I haven’t seen his shadow since. I think he went hunting in the mountains.”

“Oh,” said the sorc. “That’s all? Why didn’t you say so in the first place?” Ironwing spread his magnificent eagle’s wings and leapt into the air. Climbing in lazy spirals over the Hallowfast, he shrank to a dark speck floating over the Lucambrian landscape.

The griffin returned minutes later with Timothy on his back. Carrying a bow and quiver of arrows, the Thalmosian hopped off and embraced Gwynneth. “What was so important that you had to send Lucambra’s grumpiest griffin after me?” he teasingly asked her. “I was stalking a fat buck when Ironwing showed up.”

“Just like a man—hunting on the day before his wedding!” she retorted. While she explained to Timothy the urgent necessity of finding a troth-tree, Ironwing lashed his tail in exasperation.

“I’ll never understand these quaint two-legged courtship rituals,” he said. “This pressing of lips together, wrapping of arms, planting of trees, exchanging of rings—what is it all for? Why not just bite each other as we sorcs do and be done with it? It’s a wonder your earthbound race has survived for as long as it has.”

Gwynneth tried to keep a straight face. “We have survived, my dear griffin, for the very reason that we *don’t* bite each other!”

With a chuckle, Timothy asked her, “Where shall we begin our troth-tree search—in Lucambra or in some other torsil world?”

Climbing onto Ironwing’s back, Gwynneth said, “Hop on! I think I know just where we might find plenty of tree seedlings.”

Several hours later, Ironwing was flying the betrothed couple back from Thalmos—and Gwynneth had her troth-tree. As she had suspected, the amenthil Rosewand had spawned a small forest of offspring beside Cottonwood Creek. After some debate, Gwynneth and Timothy had settled on a sapling called Sweetspeech. She was so named for the sweet blossom scent of her kind that opens mortal ears to comprehend the speech of all living creatures.

As the Hallowfast came into sight, Gwynneth noticed hundreds of dark-green halos pockmarking the meadows below. The bands of lush grass ranged from a foot to many yards in width. Marlis had been right. Recent spring rains had brought out the mushrooms!

Gwynneth smiled to herself. She had yet to introduce Timothy to the joys of picking and preparing wild mushrooms. Whenever those delicacies sprouted in field or forest, Lucambrians would drop whatever else they were doing and harvest the bounty.

Spiraling to earth, Ironwing landed near one of the rings. After thanking the sorc and sending him on his way, Gwynneth dragged a puzzled Timothy to the grassy circle’s rich green margin.

“People often pass by these rings without noticing them,” she explained. Parting some tufts of grass, she uncovered a cluster of wiry-stemmed, thimble-capped tan mushrooms. With a squeal of delight, she plucked and smelled them, relishing their tangy odor. They would go well in some scrambled Thalmosian chicken eggs. Early on, her father had taught her how to mingle the savory flavors of mushrooms and eggs in a variety of scrumptious dishes.

She presented the dainty fungi to Timothy, who sniffed them suspiciously before holding them at arm’s length. “Toadstools!” he pronounced. “Will your people bring bunches of these things instead of flowers to our wedding? They smell absolutely horrid.”

“No, they won’t,” Gwynneth told him. “And no, they don’t. You’re just not used to mushroomy odors. This fungus is one of my favorites. We call it the ‘faery-ring mushroom,’ or ‘bay-bonnet.’”

“What do faeries have to do with fungi?” Timothy asked her.

“Legend has it that when the faeries dance, they leave behind these grassy circles. Supposedly, if mortals like us step into such a ring, they may be captured and whisked away to the faeries’ kingdom. It’s all poppycock, of course.” Gwynneth ambled inside the ring and out again several times without apparent ill effect.

“There, you see?” she said, waving her hand. “Those old tales are nothing but nonsense. Elwyn doesn’t believe in faeries, either. Bembor does, but he says it’s the mushrooms that make these rings, not the ‘tylwyth teg.’ All sorts of mushrooms—even some poisonous kinds—grow in circles, but bay-bonnets are the most common.”

“Tylwyth teg?” asked Timothy.

“That means ‘the fair folk’ in the Lucambrian tongue.”

With a disgusted grimace, Timothy handed the bay-bonnets back to Gwynneth. “How do you know these aren’t toadstools?”

Gwynneth grinned at him. She would make a true Lucambrian out of him yet! “For one thing, they’re too small for toads to sit on,” she quipped. “For another, we just *know*, the way you know the difference between a fir and a pine. Besides, I have been eating bay-bonnets since I was a little girl. I’d recognize them anywhere.”

Timothy was aghast. “You’re actually going to *eat* them?”

Laughing, Gwynneth said, “Of course I am going to eat them—and you are going to help me! If you want to marry a Lucambrian, you must learn to like mushrooms. I hope to gather enough to make a nice bay-bonnet omelet, so be a prince and start picking.”

“No thanks,” said Timothy, his lip curling. “I’m not touching those things. Toadstools can give you warts. Besides, someone needs to plant our troth-tree before its roots dry out.” Kissing Gwynneth, he picked up Sweetspeech and headed toward the Hollowfast.

“Superstitious Thalmosian!” Gwynneth playfully called after him. For the next hour, she hopscotched from ring to ring, filling the pockets of her shift to overflowing with the fragrant bay-bonnets. Weary but elated, she made her way back to the tower.

After making sure Timothy had properly planted Sweetspeech, she tramped up the stairs to the kitchen. Having just finished the baking, a disheveled Marlis greeted her with a stormy glare.

Gwynneth apologized and told her mother about Sweetspeech. Then she emptied her pockets, piling the mushrooms on a table.

Marlis's frown softened. "Bay-bonnets! I'll fry them up in some eggs for our breakfast. And I'm glad you and Timothy finally found a troth-tree. My tree, Spirelight, will be glad of the company. Now run upstairs and try on your wedding gown one more time, to make sure it fits. I don't want to be making alterations at the last minute! On your way up, please stop off at the dining hall and tell Wendell the steward we will need more wine for our guests."

Protesting that she had tried on the dress five times already, Gwynneth headed up the stairs, naming the rooms on either side as she went. "Bedroom, storeroom, armory, scullery, *dining hall*."

After visiting with the talkative steward, who predicted warm weather for the wedding, Gwynneth trudged up the remaining steps to her room. She resented the long climb to her cramped quarters, when her brother and sister enjoyed more spacious lodgings many floors below. At least the endless stairs and great height discouraged annoying suitors and other unwelcome visitors.

At last she opened a door engraved with trees and griffins. The designs were copied from Rolin's old wooden box, which had met a splintery end between a hungry yeg's jaws. The batwolf's petrified body now graced one of the Hallowfast's many garden paths.

Stepping inside, Gwynneth decided her bedroom was more cozy than cramped. Besides, her window offered a magnificent view of the Brynnmor Mountains. On clear days, Mt. Golgunthor's smoking cone was plainly visible through the Gap of Gwynnos.

In one corner of the room stood her bow and arrows; in another, her lightstaff; in a third, a blowpipe and darts, and in the fourth, a digging stick for prying mushrooms out of the sod. Her bed occupied the center of the floor, and on the bed lay her wedding gown, a vision of white satin trimmed with green and gold lace.

After shrugging on the dress, Gwynneth appraised herself in a mirror hanging on the wall opposite the bed. At almost eighteen, she was already taller than her mother, with Marlis's luxuriant blond hair, pert nose and winsome smile. However, her high, clear forehead, narrow jaw and long fingers were all Rolin's.



Gwynneth removed the gown and laid it back on the bed. Then from a shelf she took down a few keepsakes: Winona's gold ring and dog-eared diary; three of the Tree's charred cones Rolin had brought back from Luralin; some dried starflowers from the Golden Wood; one of Whitewing's neck feathers; and a marsh dragon's eggshell. After the honeymoon, she would finish packing her few belongings to take to the valley of Liriassa, where she and Prince Timothy would be making their home as newlyweds.

Prince Timothy. What a grand title for a grand bridegroom! With that thought, Gwynneth lay back on her bed and fell asleep.

When she awoke, darkness had crept into the room, though her staff still shone bravely in its corner. Yawning like a sleepy griffin, she went to her window and looked out on the world.

Working by torchlight, hundreds of Lucambrians were toiling like ants to prepare the grounds for the outdoor ceremony. Gwynneth was turning away from the window when a gleam caught her eye. Beyond the glow of flaring torches, where the meadows lay steeped in shadow, a circle of stars bobbed above the grass. Gwynneth's heart skipped a beat. Had the tylwyth teg come out to dance? That night, she dreamt wicked faeries had kidnapped Timothy.

At dawn, she bounded out of bed. Trumpets were ringing, the birds were singing, and she was to be wed! She spent the morning surrounded by a bevy of seamstresses, perfumers and beauticians. When her mother brought in a looking glass, Gwynneth hardly recognized herself. A poised and elegant queen gazed back at her from the mirror. Like her great-grandmother Winona, she wore a circlet of purest white hemmonsil flowers in her hair.

She had asked her father to perform the ceremony. Rolin had reminded her that since Gaelathane enjoyed weddings, He might show up to bless hers. That suited Gwynneth to a stitch. Whenever Gaelathane appeared, His loving presence left a glow of great gladness on everyone's face. Rolin frequently described how the King of the Trees had taken part in his coronation ceremony.

Gwynneth prayed with her parents in the throne room. Then they went downstairs and opened the door. A sea of faces gawked back at them. Gwynneth gasped. She had no idea so many guests

had been invited. In truth, most had invited themselves. No true Lucambrian likes to miss a wedding, especially a royal wedding!

Gwynneth ducked back inside while Timothy accompanied her parents to the front of the gathering. Next, a flurry of flutes and harps, trumpets and tambourines struck up the rousing Lucambrian wedding march. Smoothing down her gown and taking up her bouquet of starflowers, Gwynneth propelled herself through the door. Elwyn stood by to escort her to the wedding platform.

After they had mounted the dais stairs, Elwyn handed Gwynneth to Timothy and took his place as best man beside the groom. Looking every inch a Lucambrian scout and staff-bearer, Timothy wore a splendid green outfit under his full-length cloak.

Tears came to Gwynneth's eyes as she recalled first meeting the son of Garth. The Thalmosians were invading Lucambra, and Timothy had just borne the brunt of the Lucambrian council's fury. Hounded over plain and under hill by General Gorn's army, Timothy and Gwynneth had shared their first kiss in Gwilym's Gorge.

As maid of honor, Gwynneth's sister held the bouquet for her. Now grown tall and fair, Meghan wore violets in her flaxen hair.

Resplendent in his royal crown and robes, King Rolin beamed at the nervous couple. Under his guidance, vows and rings were exchanged. Next came the Cloaking Oath, an ancient Lucambrian wedding ritual revived by Rolin himself. Embracing Gwynneth, Timothy drew his cloak closely about her trembling shoulders.

"Within this cloak of mine, I thee wed," he said, his eyes holding hers with love's intensity. "It shall warm thee against life's deadly chills; it shall shield thee when dangers assail; it shall comfort thee in the midst of sorrow and loneliness. My cloak is now thy cloak, and in it shall our two hearts become entwined as one."

King Rolin then blessed the couple in Gaelathane's name. Still wrapped in Timothy's cloak, the two kissed. Finally, they faced their family and friends. Through tears of joy, Gwynneth saw her mother waving. Beside Marlis stood her brother Scanlon and his wife, Medwyn, recently arrived from the Golden Wood with a party of other worldwalkers. Bembor and his brother Marlon were tossing oak leaves into the air, another Lucambrian wedding custom.

Grandfather Emmer was grinning, while Aunt Mycena stepped out a lively jig. The brothers Opio and Gemmio raised their hands in salute. Sigarth and Skoglund, the royal huntsmen, were scanning the sky and the crowd for signs of trouble. Larkin scowled.

Grandfather Gannon was supporting his red-haired sister, who had apparently fainted (again) at the sight of a sorc. Gannon had blindfolded her before their flight to the tower on Windsong's back, but she had insisted on removing the cloth before the wedding.

Griffins were everywhere. Some prowled among the onlookers or lay on the grass preening themselves. Others wheeled high overhead, clicking and clacking their congratulations. Windsong and Ironwing lounged near the platform, waiting to take the newlyweds to the Willowah Mountains for a sunny honeymoon.

Laughing and crying, Gwynneth and Timothy descended the platform stairs and swept through the cheering throng. Near the back, Gwynneth caught sight of an old man clad in sheepskins.

What is he doing here? she thought. *Lucambrians don't keep sheep.* She was dismissing those fleeting thoughts when the shepherd's penetrating gaze fell upon her from beneath bushy brows, reminding Gwynneth of the autumn sun setting through clouds.

At the tower, she and Timothy tied a ribbon around their troth-tree's trunk to commemorate the occasion. Next, the two rushed upstairs to change into their traveling clothes. Then they went outside to greet their guests. Gwynneth was chatting with Bembor when she recalled the odd lights she had seen the night before.

Excusing herself, she tracked back and forth across the meadow until she found a faery ring within the line of sight from her bedroom window. The grass blades in the dark green circle looked undisturbed. If the fabled tylwyth teg had danced there from dusk until dawn, they were light-footed creatures indeed!

Gwynneth laughed at herself. She must have seen some children playing with torches. Stepping into the ring, she glanced around to be certain no one was watching. Timothy caught her eye and waved. She waved back. Then she strolled out of the faery ring.

Fear gripped Gwynneth's heart with frigid fingers. Her parents, Timothy and all the wedding guests had vanished in a gray mist.