

Grayling's Song

an excerpt from the uncorrected advance proof
by Karen Cushman

In the morning, mist again sheltered the valley. Grayling sat cross legged on the edge of the pond, humming as she scoured the kettle. She thought about dinner--they still had parsnips and carrots in the ground and perhaps there were even enough apples left for an apple tart. With cream, if they only had cream. She licked her lips.

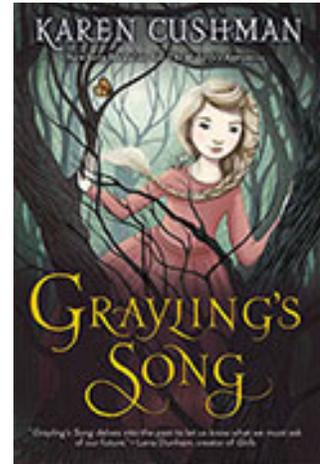
"Grayling, come. Attend me now!" It was her mother's voice. The calling mingled with the croaking of frogs in the pond and the *ting-tang* of dew drops, and it sounded to Grayling like music.

"Grayling, come at once or I shall turn you into a toad," her mother shouted again, much louder. *Belike she would if she could*, Grayling thought. *But, by borage and bryony, I can do but one thing at a time. Why can she not do whatever it is herself and leave me be?* Grayling could think such things, hidden as she was in the mist in the herb garden, even though she could not imagine saying them.

She clambered to her feet, left the kettle to soak in the pond, and filled a basket with the remaining watercress and mint that grew at the water's edge. Finally, swinging her basket at her side, she turned for the cottage and her mother.

The mist was clearing elsewhere, but the cottage was still obscured. Grayling drew closer. Everything was the same yet somehow different. There was the same steeply-roofed cottage of wattle and yellow-tinted daub. Brass bells still hung from the eaves, and a swag of hazel rods and garlic yet festooned the little window. Smoke poured from the smoke hole in the roof and...That was it. Not mist but smoke shrouded the cottage! Smoke! Too much smoke! Suddenly the roof thatch exploded into flames.

What had happened? Where was her mother? "Mother!" Grayling screamed. The flames chewed at the little house. She darted forward. The terrible roaring of the fire



hurt her ears, and the heat forced her back. "Madam, my mother!" she screamed again. "Where be you? Answer me!"

"Cease your clamoring, Grayling," Hannah Strong said. "I am right here." The voice was low and hoarse, belike from the shouting and the smoke, Grayling thought, but still she knew it. She turned. Her mother stood at the edge of the clearing.

Grayling stumbled over and grabbed her hand. "What has happened? Come, run, before the fire finds the trees and we are lost!" She tugged at her mother's hand. The woman swayed like a sapling in a strong wind, but she neither followed Grayling nor toppled over. She stood straight and strong and still.

Still? Grayling's mother was never still. She was all color, bustle, and fuss, wrapped in crimsons and blues and the gold of the mustard paste served with sausages at The Unicorn's Horn. There came a quivering in Grayling's chest as if a flock of the Grayling butterflies for which she was named were imprisoned there, and her face grew cold with fear. "Why do you stand here?" she asked, her voice atremble. "Why don't you move? Come away with me, do!"

"Grayling, child, open your eyes and look," her mother said, pulling her hand away and gesturing toward her feet. They were rooted into the earth and what had been toes were now spreading roots, and what had been soft skin was as rough and brown as a tree trunk.