

From *Tales of Gorm* in the

LEGENDS OF ULM

BOOK III

THE
CRYSTAL STAIR

BY

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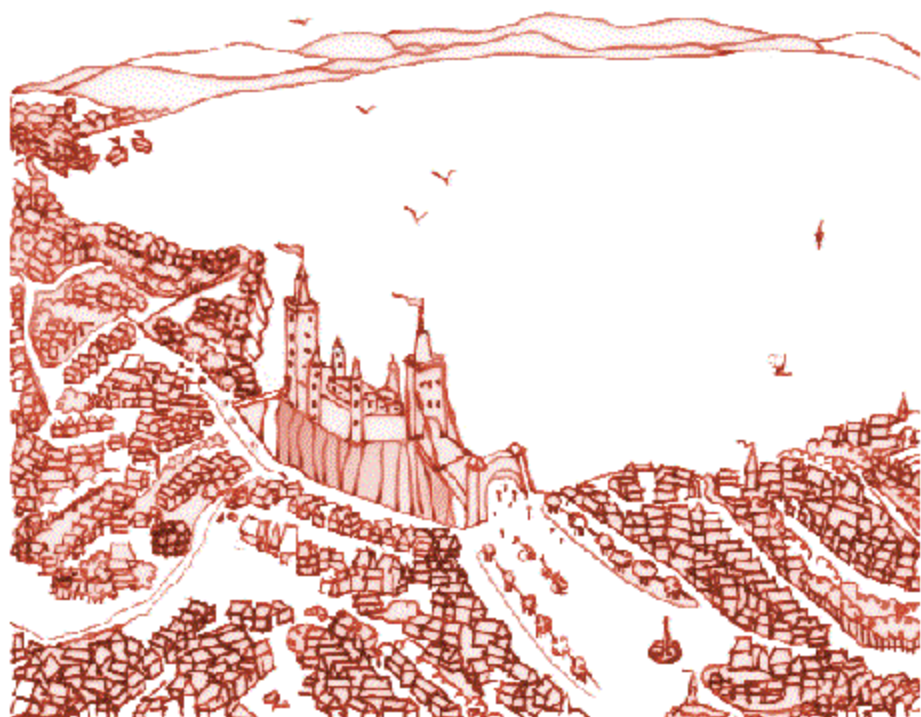
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*For Dorothy Crossley
Teacher and friend
With love*

“Do not be so anxious, Gom. Go back to Harga, take your leave—and do not make it hard on her. You cannot know how deeply she loves you, or how proud she is of you, how much faith she has in you. Listen to her: she’ll find you a mentor. Take him, study well, and remember that your world, my world, nay all the Seven Realms may one day depend on the part that we each play.”

—Jastra of Bayon





View of Conlunyoth from the Dene Road showing Sundibar and the Fishing Quarter

CHAPTER ONE



HEY CLIMBED THE NARROW WINDING path single file: Harga first, then Gom, striking his staff into the ground to propel himself up. Stormfleet followed, the irregular clop of the colt's hooves muffled by thick deadfall on the forest floor. Mossy trunks, like pillars of some primeval fortress, tilted toward a canopy of distant branches that swayed and creaked like old bones.

Gom heaved a satisfied sigh: all those years of wishing for his mother, and here she was.

Harga paused, looking back, patiently waiting for him and Stormfleet to catch up. She was, he noticed as he reached her, not even out of breath.

Gom was tired already, though it was but mid-morning. Not so much from the climb, he being a mountain boy, as from excitement at their meeting, and the hour's walk to reach this slope. "How much farther?"

"Almost there." Harga's smile gave way to mild concern. "You look pale. How's the head?" She reached out, lifted his tangled hair to inspect the swollen gash on his temple from his fall in the solahinn stockade.

"I'm fine," he said, squirming. "Ready for elevenses!"

“Elevenes?” At the word, a favorite of Stig’s, Harga’s eyes flickered. For a moment, Gom thought he saw hurt, or even anger, but then her long, solemn face cleared. “Oh, dear, you’ve not had breakfast yet, and it’s nearly noon! Some mother I’m proving to be!” She looked past Gom to Stormfleet, bared her teeth, blew her lips out with force, and addressed the cíto colt in his own tongue. “We have to go a little farther up the tail end of this mountain spur. I hope you don’t find the ground too troublesome.”

Stormfleet shook his mane. “Thank you, when I do I’ll let you know it!”

Harga, laughing, patted his side. “You do that, my young friend,” she said, and moved on.

Gom listened with great satisfaction to his mother conversing with Stormfleet in the cíto’s own speech. He’d always thought that it was from her that his own gift had come. No other humans in the world beside them could speak the tongues of beasts, so Stormfleet said. Behind him, the cíto slipped, *frrrrippped* in irritation. Born of the plains, he didn’t take as kindly to climbing as he’d have Harga think, Gom was sure.

A map lay folded in Gom’s jacket pocket. With that map, Harga had shown that they were in the Dunderfosse: magical forest, vast, primal tract between the Wilds to the east, and a mass of snowpeaks down its western side. From these peaks, the spur they climbed tapered like a tail down into the treetops.

Gom breathed deep, expelled the air with pleasure, feeling more and more at home among the gloomy trunks and rising slopes.

The ground got steeper, yet still the forest persisted as though reluctant to give ground within its fastnesses. But at last, undergrowth dwindled to open spaces; deadfall, to a mat of dry brown needles. Boulders lay about like huddled sheep.

All at once, Gom caught the tang of resin.

Pines.

He slowed and looked around, thinking of Windy Mountain, and the

log cabin Stig his father had built, then enlarged for his and Harga's growing family. Ten children, of which Gom was the last. He sighed, staring through the dimness, remembering

Before leaving home to find his mother, Gom had buried Stig by the front door, and raised a tall cairn over his venerable head. Owl had uttered eulogy, and Wind had keened among the frozen stones. And his mother's rune, briefly sparking to life, had made strange sweet music to mourn the passing

"Gom." Harga turned him about, and pressed him to her silently.

Her embrace felt stiff and awkward; her small, slight body, unfamiliar. Only two other women had ever held him thus: Hilsa, his sister, and Mudge, the motherly farmer's wife near Green Vale who'd nursed him back to health. Big, matronly women they were, generous bodies engulfing him in warmth.

But this was his mother! Impulsively, he returned her squeeze, catching, as he had at their joyous meeting, the faint dry smell of her skin, and a whiff of wintergreen from the folds of her shawl.

Stormfleet trod somewhere near, cracking brittle needles under his hooves. Stig's walking stick—Gom's staff—which Gom had slipped under his arm in order to hug Harga—was now poking his ribs painfully. He shifted, trying to ease his growing discomfort without breaking that moment, but Harga pulled back, took a large brown handkerchief from her brown skirt pocket, and blew her nose with vigor.

"What a day!" She stuffed the handkerchief back in her pocket. "Come on. Let's get you home. We have so much to talk about. And you look more in need of—elevenses—by the minute." She spun around, hitched her skirt above her high brown boots, and strode off again.

Gom started after her, thinking While Stig had grieved for Harga until his dying day, it was becoming clear that Harga had missed Stig no less.

Stig had never ceased to talk of her, and to remark proudly how Gom took after her in every way, not least in looks. "Like you, son," his father would declare. "You're her very double."

Gom's lips parted suddenly.

That this woman, with the long face, long, bent nose, sharp eyes, and long brown hair coiled at her nape, was his mother, Gom had no doubt. But—he recalled Stig sitting by the fire, his fair hair turned white, his limbs enfeebled with age—after all those years, she was still as Stig remembered her: *aged not one whit!* He eyed the small figure dimbing sturdily before him. Was she not the greatest wizard in all Ulm? That surely would have something to do with it. Nodding, he moved on.

The ground grew steeper. Stormfleet struck his hoof against rock, shied skittishly. Gom stopped, waited for his friend to recover.

"I'm fine," Stormfleet snapped. "Let's keep going"

Almost home, Harga had said. What was a little more discomfort now? He was with his mother at last, with all the time in the world to learn of her wizardry, and fit himself for the danger ahead. And ahead it surely was. For though Harga hadn't said, the thought of Katak lay between them.

He firmly pushed that grim thought aside to think on Harga's house. Was it like their old cabin? If not, he could make it more so, add touches of Stig, carve bits and pieces after his father's way. Wouldn't she be glad to have him then!

Of course, she'd expected him. Had already mentioned that he had his own room. Had she some magic ready for them to make together? His first lesson? Gom tried to imagine Harga's workshop, what he'd find there. Jewels, he was sure, for hadn't Ganasz told him that "from precious gold and silver and priceless gemstones is much magic made." Making magic, he decided, must be somewhat like cooking: a bit of this, a pinch of that, mixing them up, setting them to brew. In that case, she'd have bowls and spoons, and dishes. And bottles to store things in. Stig had spoken many times about the glass jars in which Harga kept the makings of remedies for the family. Those she'd taken with her when she left. A wave of impatience spurred him up the slope to the crest where Harga already stood, gazing down the other side.

“Here we are.”

Gom looked out expectantly. The spur curved away to distant peaks that reared above the treetops. But directly before them was a green-clad dip, round and smooth as a pudding basin. In the middle of the basin was a lake. In the middle of the lake was an island, a plug of sandstone cliff high as the tall, three-storied houses Gom had seen in Pen'langoth.

He scrutinized the diff's flat bare top, the sweep of wooded shore, but saw no sign of dwelling. “Where?”

Harga pointed to the island. “There. Come on.” She started down to the water's edge.

As Gom hesitated, eyeing the waves from cliff to shore, Stormfleet pawed the ground uneasily. Gom stroked his neck in sympathy. “I hate water, you hate heights, and here we are, headed for a mountain lake. Courage.”

“It's all very well for you to say.” Stormfleet started down, grumbling.

Harga was already waiting on the shore—or rather, off the shore, on a small log raft that bobbed in the waves. She beckoned them to join her. “The raft will feel unsafe at first, my young friend,” she warned the cíto, “but in fact it could carry a dozen folk with no trouble.”

Nevertheless, Stormfleet watched Gom get on first. Only then did the colt step nervously across. The raft dipped, and bobbed, awash with waves, and Stormfleet shied, but Harga and Gom caught him, held him steady until the bouncing stopped.

Harga took up a long paddle and pushed off from the shore.

“Here, mother. Let me.” Gom set down his staff, and reached to help. Harga shook her head. “I'm used to it, thank you.”

Gom stood stiffly looking out, dashed at her refusal. But as they neared the cliff, he was glad Harga had taken on the paddling, for it gave him chance to take a good first view of his new home—Harga's aim all along, he'd bet. He relaxed, drawing in the high, clear air, while Harga paddled and poled away beside him. By the time they moved under the lee of the island cliff, he was cheery again.

The yellow sandstone face, Gom saw, was pocked with holes, the sort that swallows nested in. Sure enough, just then a brown bank swallow swooped out from one, caught an amber damselfly and darted back again.

Harga followed the island around to the western side, where Gom got a surprise. The cliff was not the solid plug it seemed, but hollow, like a crescent moon, bounded by a strip of sandy shore. Behind the shore curved a hedge of dark green holly. Was Harga's house behind that?

Gom helped beach the raft, then eagerly pushed his way through the prickly screen to the other side, where he pulled up in surprise. Every inch of the level space from hedge to cliff was garden: neat beds of vegetables and herbs, clumps of flowering shrubs, orchard—and bee-hives! The green of vegetables was splashed by bright flowers: lavender, and lilies; stocks, and daisies, and snapdragons, portulaca, poppies and anemones, regardless of their proper season. Birds flew everywhere, and clouds of insects hummed through the heady air.

Gom gazed about, minded of his brother Stok's vegetable patch, and his sister Hilsa's flower beds, and her hives, and recognized now Harga's influence. A wonderful garden indeed—but *where was the house!*

He finally lit upon a low shed at the far side, with plain thatched roof, a narrow dark doorway—no door, and but a hole for window. A fat nanny goat sauntered out, bleated a lazy good morning, then put her head down to graze.

Gom looked at the shed in dismay. That was it?

"Good morning, Jillifer!" Harga called to the nanny-goat. "Jilly's been with me since she was a new-born kid, as her mother before her," she told Gom, then added with a wave to the shed behind Jilly, "That's my barn-cum-dairy"

"Oh." Gom relaxed. "And the house?"

Harga jabbed a finger triumphantly at the curving cliff. "Why, there."

Gom stared.

"You still can't see, can you?" She laughed out loud. "Good. Wizards don't like their houses to show, even under your very nose. See those

holes? The small ones harbor swallows' nests. The larger ones? My windows! Come, see. But first"—she turned to Stormfleet—"let's make you welcome, friend."

She led the colt to the orchard, to a patch of grazing watered by a quick spring. "You'll be comfortable for a while?"

Stormfleet sampled the grass, then whuffled with pleasure. "Take your time. Don't mind me. This is good!"



Harga led Gom along a pebble path to a spot midway along the cliff base, and pressed a crack waist-high in the stone. A narrow slab swung inward, a cunning door cut into massive sandstone wall.

Harga stepped through, Gom after. The slab closed with a *thock*, shutting out the lap of water, and the noise of bird and insect, leaving them in sudden cool and quiet. At last Gom understood, and marveled. The crescent cliff was hollow.

They stood in a low cave spanning the width of the cliff from east to west. The morning sunlight beamed in through clustered holes in the opposite, eastern wall, reflecting off blue-washed stone the color of the summer sky. Gom crossed over, and looking out, saw waves dancing just below his feet.

"My front hall," Harga said. "The rest of the house is upstairs."

A narrow spiral stair cut into the far wall brought Gom up into a second-story passage that curved the length of the cliff on either hand. The passage was blue-washed, like the rest of the house, and flooded with light from doorways in both east and western walls.

Harga took the one directly opposite the stairwell.

Gom followed.

Two paces in, he stopped, looking in astonishment on Harga's kitchen, hung with pots and pans, lined with shelves for dishes and utensils and jars of herbs and spices. A cave, transformed into Stig's cabin: log walls

and beams, stone hearth and two small windows—even loft and ladder!

Gom dimbed the ladder, and peered into the loft above, half-expecting to find old sleeping pallets, relics of Stig's crowded family. But the bare scrubbed boards smelled of root and apple: Harga's winter storage place under curving sandstone roof.

"You like it?" Harga called. "Come, see your room."

She drew him back out into the hall, then led him right. Past the open doors, Gom glimpsed small chambers; more caves, all with scattered round windows letting in light, brilliant sunshine on the eastern side. So this was his mother's house—a stranger place than he could ever imagine: a wizard's house, and his, too, now. He thought of the years to come in this wonderful house—he and Harga, two wizards working their magic peacefully together— His face clouded. He was forgetting Katak. Could he speak of that now? He shot Harga a look. No. This was not yet the time.

Gom's bedchamber was four doors down from the kitchen, on the same side, facing east into the morning sun. It was low and small, a comfortable space that put him in mind of the little lean-to in Hort and Mudge's house. A bright red mat ran from the door to the most remarkable bed Gom had ever seen. Its carved headboard stood the height of the right hand wall, not overly high, but massive enough in that small room. A carved wooden hoot owl presided over the top rail in the angle between wall and curved ceiling, its small, stern eye fixed on Gom. Not as good as Stig's handiwork, lacking the fine, sure detail that made Stig's animals spring from the wood seemingly alive, but well enough. The counterpane was a crocheted blanket worked with suns and moons and stars, like the one Harga had given Stig.

Gom set down pack and staff, and tested the bed. It was soft and bouncy with, he lifted the cover, smooth white sheets that smelled of lavender.

Across the bed, in the outer wall, was a large oval window. Gom slid across the counterpane, and, leaning into the deep sill, gazed into the high

morning sun, to the ridge they'd climbed.

A swallow shot past, making Gom jump, and alighted twittering shrilly in its hole somewhere above, telling, if Gom heard aright, of the human fledgling that had just flown into its mother's nest, and the strangeness of human ways. Smiling, he turned back into the room, to find his mother still standing in the doorway, watching.

He felt a sudden awkwardness. "You never wanted to leave us, did you?"

Harga shook her head. "No." She advanced into the room, her face sad. She'd not had an easy time of it on Windy Mountain, Gom knew. And after she left, folk had condemned her for, as they were pleased to say, heartlessly abandoning her brood. Unfair! It had been hard enough to take his leave of Stok and Hilsa, and even Hort and Mudge. How much harder it must have been for Harga to leave her family of thirteen long years.

Gom pictured her returning to this lonely place, reshaping her kitchen cave into that cabin, thinking of Stig. She must have felt such a loss to have done that. At least, he thought, he and Stig had had each other. He seized up his staff and held it out.

"Father made this just before he died. Take it."

Harga closed her hand upon it, ran her thin brown fingers over the carved animals leaping and twisting about the stave: snake, and rabbit, and turtle and mouse, and pert brown sparrow perched on top. Then gave it back. "Keep it," she said. "It will make a fine wizard's staff one day."

Wizard's staff.

Gom's hand went to his chest, but of course, the stone wasn't there. He'd returned his mother's magic rune hours since, and it was hanging at her chest now. Would he ever grow used to its loss?

Harga drew him to the door. "Come on, if you're a true sprig off the bush, you're starving. Your father always ate enough for six!"

As they turned to go back to the kitchen, Gom caught sight of another stair at the end of the passage, going up again. "Where does that lead?"

“To my workshops,” she said.

Harga’s workshops! Gom’s heart did a little jig. “May I see?”

Harga smiled faintly. “Perhaps after you’ve eaten, young man. I don’t believe you’ll need persuading!”