

T Chapter One

Far into the West, then north a way, lies a forest, very old, and vast, and full of mystery. The Dunderfosse, we humans call it, and many's the rumor of travelers who've gone in there and never come out.

Yet you and I know of one certain somebody who not only goes in and out of it at will, but actually lives there, studying magic in his mother's house, and that is Gom.

Deep within that wood, that house is, partway up a mountain spur and in the middle of a lake—you have to pole a raft to get to it. What's the house like? You could argue that it isn't one, exactly, but a bow-shaped plug of hollow cliff that sticks up sheer out of the water. It's not at all that high. If you fell off it on the landward side you'd maybe sprain your ankle. But it's roomy, with lots of steps and niches, and round holes in the outer walls that serve as win-

dows and nesting sites for swallows.

There it lies, though you'd never know unless you had a key. Without the key—a ring that you turn a certain way around your finger—you'd walk across a patch of grass, no sign of water. Turn the ring and that patch is gone and there's the lake and crescent cliff cradling a garden with cabbages and bean rows and herbs and bright-bloomed flowers and birds and moths and honeybees.

Gom went there right after the battle of Sundor and shut himself away to work and catch his breath. He was pulling the season's last peas for supper when his friend Keke the marsh hawk swooped down and flew about his head in wide excited circles.

“The Lady Leana's dead! Her baby, too, and Aelyth-Kintalyn's destroyed, by Lord Urolf's own command!”

Gom looked up, shading his eyes from the setting sun.

“Urolf's dead, too, now and most of his people with him—though he didn't mean that to happen. He just got caught up in his own stupidity, serve him right. An abominable creature, to do that to a wood. Selfish, to say the least. So many creatures have lived there for generations, and now they're homeless! And winter is coming! You might guess they're all scrambling to find shelter before the freeze sets in.”

For a moment, Gom continued to stare at her. Then he set down his basket and folded his arms. “If this a jest, Keke, it isn't funny.”

As he spoke, high calls split the air. Glancing up, Gom saw flocks of all kinds circling way above, black against the deepening sky, watched them spiral down as the Dunderfosse opened up its branches to offer shelter.

Keke alighted on a nearby bramble cane. “They're the first of the refugees. They flew here nonstop. They're saying that when they left, lake folk camped on the forest's fringe, holding watch. Some Yul Kinta had survived and were headed for them. It looks as if there's going to be a fight. What are you going to do?”

Gom's first impulse was—as usual—to drop everything and rush to help in any way he could. But after a minute, he simply picked up his basket. “Nothing,” he said, and went indoors.

He hardly remembered getting upstairs into the kitchen. Leana and her new baby *dead*? Urolf and all those people? And Aelyth-Kintalyn laid waste?! How could that be?

Gom set the basket on the kitchen table, sat down and started shelling the peas into a small blue bowl. Had Leana fallen sick? Hardly, under Yul Kinta protection. Had she and the baby had an accident? One that had made Urolf angry enough to order his domain destroyed? Gom shook his head at the very idea. And yet he'd once come up against the Yul Kinta lord and found to his cost that Urolf was arrogant and selfish. If provoked, Urolf might well be capable of such rashness against all reason.

He popped a pod, dropping a shower of plump green peas into the bowl. He picked one up and chewed on it, remembering his mother's words:

They walked our forests long before we rose from the primordial slime. Their powers are great, and quite different from mine . . .

Urolf must have called on much powerful magic to destroy an entire forest. Maybe too much? Maybe he'd been making some sort of gesture and realized too late he'd gone too far. Immortal Yul Kinta—dead. Gom thought somberly of his friends Vala and Feyrwarl. Had they made it through the Battle of Sundor only to fall at their own lord's hand?

There were survivors, Keke said. Gom hoped that Vala and Feyrwarl were among them.

Were they now standing face to face with Leochtor and Nasidda? Gom tried to picture them struggling out from horror only to confront Leana's angry kin. Come to think, why were Leochtor and Nasidda camped there on the domain's edge—without invitation? Why had they undertaken such a long and arduous journey and on

the edge of winter—Nasidda so soon after the birth of her son? Had things not been right with Leana, and had word gotten to the Lakes? Gom sat upright. Did they know that Leana and her baby were dead? If so, blood would flow, for whatever the ins and outs of it, Nasidda would lay the blame on Urolf.

Gom leapt up, tipping back his chair. He must go, do something—now!

At the kitchen door, he halted. By the time he got there, it would be over. And anyway, it was none of his business.

That evening, Gom ate a silent, solitary supper, remembering Urolf and Leana's wedding, how happy and in love they'd seemed. How had she died in a place where she should have lived forever?

After supper, Gom sat by the kitchen fire and sought out Vala *alar*; to no avail. If she had survived, her mind was too preoccupied to sense him. Which was maybe just as well, he told himself guiltily, for she didn't know about his gift and likely shouldn't.

He went to bed with heavy heart and dreamed all night of screaming winds and the cries of the dying.

The next day, out in the orchard, an assortment of feathered refugees brought further news. A hungry towhee swooping low and feeding up on gnats told how Leana and her baby had died fleeing the woodland in the middle of the night; how she'd slipped while crossing a waterfall to be swept underground into the Nethermost River. "That fall was their main gate. They had a deadly spell on it," the towhee said. "Many creatures died from the touch of its spray. I tell you, it was sheer danger to fly by that place. But now that the spell is gone and we can pass freely, no one will go near it."

A garrulous blue jay scavenging in the bramble patch told how just hours after Leana and her baby's fall, Lady Nasidda had shown up on Aelyth-Kintalyn's doorstep demanding to see her sister. "We listened to the talk. Urolf told a pack of lies, but Nasidda saw clean through them. Lord Leochtor called a siege and Urolf went off with

ruffled feathers. Next thing, Yul Kinta were running about like mad rabbits then a great wind sprang up and things went wild. We flew, I tell you. But many of us didn't make it out of there. While I was catching my breath outside, a few Yul Kinta walked out alive. Then there was a row, I tell you. And they say we blue jays are quarrelsome! The Yul Kinta told the lakefolk how sorry they were about Leana and her nestling. Lord Leochtor let them pass but swore—this I heard with my own ears—that if he ever set eyes on Yul Kinta again he'd test their immortality for sure."

Late that fall, Gom with Keke on his shoulder rode Stormfleet out to see the ruined woodland for himself. Keke grumbled all the way.

"Look at that sky, so dark it is. We're going to have an early snow. What if we're caught in it?"

Gom shrugged. "You can go back, if you like."

"What, and leave you to get lost in that place?" Keke hopped about, then settled, smoothing down her ruffled feathers.

Keke was right, Gom had to admit. Yet he was determined to finish what he had begun.

When they finally arrived, Gom left Stormfleet at the trees' edge and went in, Keke circling overhead to guide him. At first, things seemed normal, but as he went deeper, he found snapped and broken trees bent all ways. Climbing over splintered trunks and limbs, he reached the waterfall, and walked the ledge from which Leana and the baby had fallen. Halfway across, Gom stopped, chilled to the bone and not just by icy water. Here, *here* was the spot where she had slipped, he felt a flash of panic—his? Or a trace of hers still lingering by the rock face? He shuddered, picturing her headlong plunge through darkness into darker depths below. No way had she or the baby survived that fall. Not even Yul Kinta could, Gom was certain. He moved on scarce aware how cold he was now, and

soaked to the skin. Emerging at the far side, he found Keke waiting.

“Well! Take your time, why don’t you? What took you so long!”

Sighing, Gom climbed on.

As he neared what used to be the Concourse, a coil of mist floated slowly from the forest floor ahead and rolled toward him, rising now to form a wall that blocked his view. Gom slowed, then stopped. And there he stood, while the mist enclosed him, blotting out the sky.

At that, Keke took off, her squawks fading in the distance.

Gom turned full about. He was not afraid of that sudden mist, exactly. He had encountered such before, like the Spinrathen mist out beyond the High Vargue that hid alien secrets from Ulm folk. That had been thick and white and featureless. This was patchy, and swirling, and strangely a-glimmer with dancing motes that sparkled though no sun shone.

From all sides there rose a wordless whispering soft as Sessery’s breath.

Gom let out a soft call. “Hello?”

The whispering ceased and all was still.

For a minute, Gom stood, ears cocked for the slightest sound. Nothing. And still the mist remained. Was it the wood, was it magical, like the Dunderfosse? And was he not welcome here? If so, Gom thought, uneasy now, he ought to go.

“I did not come to pry,” he said aloud. “Only to pay my respects. I grieve for what happened to the Yul Kinta—and you.”

Nothing. Yet as Gom turned to leave, the mist thinned, then vanished, revealing the way ahead.

Gom gazed about in awe. Giant trees lay on their sides, their wide trunks high as houses, their stricken limbs and tangled roots stark against the flat gray sky. In among them younger trees, (great oaks they’d seem to us but slender saplings there), stood stiff as poles,

and just as dead: no bud, no token of rebirth. Shreds of silk and velvet and tags of earth-stained parchment lay in among their roots, while underneath the mats of flattened ferns Gom glimpsed specks of gold and silver. Fragments of moss-grown roof and shattered casement, shards of glass and pottery, broken chairs and shelves and tables lay strewn about, all that remained of what must have been a rich and busy enclave.

Gom picked his way down to what had been the Roundel, his boots crunching loudly in the quiet. There was no other sound. No bird calls, no chatter of squirrel, no rustle of chipmunk or rabbit. Save for maggot and weevil gnawing at the rotting wood, Gom saw no other sign of life.

He closed his eyes and bowed his head, thinking of the dead lying somewhere beyond. Buried, surely. Vala and Feyrwarl would have seen to that.

Gom opened his eyes—and widened them in shock. All around, trees formed a large open space, their rich green leaves meeting overhead to form a living canopy through which showed chips of deep blue sky.

Even as Gom stared upward, the circle darkened, and blurred, and he was standing on a grassy floor by two lone trees whose branches met to form an arch. “Rowans,” Gom murmured. Symbol of Yul Kinta.

Sounds came from behind him, of measured footsteps.

Gom whipped around, saw Yul Kinta coming up over the brow of the basin and down the rocky incline toward the trees. He made to go toward them, found he couldn’t move a step.

They passed him, unseeing, then gathered by the trees.

A sudden stir, the crowd parted, and there! Urolf striding through with Thrulvar and a parcel of richly dressed folk. At his command, the people advanced toward the trees. Gom watched, unable to move, or speak.

As the first folk reached the arch, there came a bright white flash and they vanished in a puff of shining sparks. The others started back, Urolf shouted a soundless command, then all was chaos, folk fleeing up the basin walls on all sides. Some made it to the top, and vanished down the other side, but as they ran a wind sprang up and spiraled about the basin, pulling the Yul Kinta back toward the arch, men, women carrying babies, holding their children's hands. Faster it whirled, and faster the people ran, but try as they might, they were pulled back down those slopes and into that deadly arch. Thrulvar, bent against the pull, passed Gom so close they could have touched; face twisted with terror, mouth open on a silent shout. Urolf followed, arms upraised, still calling out directions.

Then the bowl was empty, the people gone. The wind dropped to a gentle breeze, wafting the myriads of shining specks that covered the ground around the arch.

Then the breeze dropped, and all was still.

Now mist rose from the grassy floor, that same mist that sparkled in the dismal light. As before, it thinned, and vanished and Gom found himself standing back in the ruined Roundel.

He shook his head, rubbed his eyes. A waking dream? A vision? Or had he been transported briefly to that place? He could not be sure.

Deep in thought, Gom made his way back to Stormfleet. As he emerged from behind the waterfall, large snowflakes drifted like feathers about his head. By the time he reached the fringe, it was falling fast, softening edges, filling the dips, immaculate as a fresh winding sheet.

When Gom stepped from the Fringe amid the snowswirl, Keke was waiting with Stormfleet. Strangely subdued, she flew onto Gom's shoulder and they set off for home. If Stormfleet was curious as to what Gom had seen, he didn't ask and Gom spoke not a word all the way.

Through into winter, Gom continued to learn from migrating flocks how Feyrwarl and Vala had led their folk—losing some along the way—eastward through the Wilds and over the Sidliths to cross Long Valley and the broad, deep river that emptied into Langoth Lake. And he learned how those Yul Kinta, shamed and sapped of spirit, had vanished at last into the wooded hills that edged the eastern plains. After, when winter came, Gom heard no word of them at all until the following spring, when rumor flew by from time to time of a modest enclave, though none could say exactly where in human terms.

Time and again the seasons rolled full circle. The Dunderfosse broke out its light spring veils, slipped on summer velvets, changed into autumn plumes, then clung to its last tatters against the winters' rage.

All this while, about fourteen years, as near as I can tell you, apart from the occasional excursion up into the north country to visit Hort and Mudge, Gom worked and studied on his mother's island; sowing spring seeds and planting roots, culling and harvesting against the winter snows. Every day he labored over Harga's books and crucibles, sometimes deep into the night—a discipline hard-learned from Folgan.

Though Gom found most of what he needed to make his spells and remedies in the woods around him, from time to time his work called for herbs that grew in high and rocky places. Then, he put on his jacket and hiked west, up the spur on which his mother's house stood. It didn't seem much at first, just a gentle incline going up among the pines. But as the ground grew rockier and the trees, sparser, it reared like a giant shinbone way above the treeline. In the stony scrub clinging to the spur's middle reaches, Gom picked rare mosses, leaves, and wiry roots. When his bag was filled he hurried down again, glad to be back in the warmth and shelter of pine and

lake and of no mind to find out where that shinbone led. Mountain boy born and bred though he was, he'd never been inclined to climb much above the tree line, even on Windy Mountain. Had he done so here, he'd have needed more than boots and jacket. You see, the Dunderfosse's western edge was bounded by a mountain range so high its icy caps were lost in cloud year-round. Gom's spur led up the grandest peak of all, called Snawbyr Crygg.

On gazing up at it you'd certainly be awestruck. You'd never dream, though, as even Gom did not, that it was hollow, and that people dwelt therein. . . .

T Chapter Two

What were those people like? As you might imagine, this was no ordinary pack of souls to be surviving under that stark peak but icefolk called Cryggmoren. For a start, they were every bit as close and secret as any Yul Kinta—maybe more so, for few folk even knew that they existed. In many ways, they were as human as you and I. They worked, and they played; they had friends and quarreled and made up again; they cared for their old folk and loved their children and those children went to school just as you do and learned to make a living. But their ways were harsher, had to be, if they'd survive in a place where nothing much could live or grow and where one careless slip could cost a life.

How come their blood didn't boil up there? And their windpipes didn't freeze? Every night before they went to bed, the Cryggmoren took a sip of elixir. What this was, and how they made it, I have no idea. I've heard only that it smelled foul and had a rotten aftertaste that nothing could sweeten, not even honey. But this elixir was

what enabled them to live so high inside the peak, breathing that thin and frosty air and seldom, if ever, seeing the light of day.

They were a sturdy folk, and stocky, not too tall. Their skin was frost pale, which came from living under the icecap away from natural light. Their hair, which both male and female wore long, looked like fine strands of transparent glass, while their eyes! Most critters that live underground have large, dark, even bulbous eyes that help them make the best of whatever light there is. But Cryggmoren eyes were just like yours or mine—except that they were colorless, and glittery as crystal.

Dwelling under that mountain peak, they did not have to build houses or pave streets. Their homes were caves, their thoroughfares the maze of galleries that honeycomb the peak from root to tip.

Why would they live in a place like that?

I ask you, why do folk live anywhere? In cities with no sign of open meadow? By stony shore where winds blow salt into your eyes and great waves gouge out your back yard and give it to the sea bed? In forests full of strange, fierce creatures that sting or bite or even eat you up? On marshland where one misstep will sink you without trace and your mother would never know what happened? Way up north where winter lasts for over half the year, folk huddle in small round huts unable to tell night from day—why? Why do folk make their homes in such places, when they could live in comfort and plenty in a comfortable village like ours? I can't tell you, yet they do. I suppose that home is where you're born and what you're used to, and where you're not kept standing on the mat.

Whatever the reason, Cryggmoren had lived under Snawbyr Crygg for a very long time.

As I said, theirs was not an easy life.

Since all Cryggmoren had to work, mothers could not take time off to mind their young. So while a few lucky children lived at home, most were reared in communal halls. For the very young,

there were nurseries. Older children lived in dormitory groups called hiksads—boys and girls quite separate—under the care of minders and mentors. Don't mistake me: the children knew their mothers and fathers and spent time with them during High Festivals such as Harvest Day, but those parents did not rear them the way your parents rear you.

While the minders—men and women—were permanent caretakers, cleaning the halls, keeping order, and making sure the children had fresh clothes, the Mentors were volunteers, serving as advisors and tutors in their particular specialty. Soldiers or scouts, foragers—hunters and gatherers; healers, and lawmakers; miners, bakers, potters and smiths: all who would adopted a hiksad, and passed on their wisdom and skills.

Unlike many other communities, the icefolk had no use for lords and ladies, though at this time they had a king called Morok. Neither young nor old, fat nor thin, tall nor short, (for a Cryggmoren), but somewhere in the middle, Morok was a good, fair king, yet stern as need be for his people's good.

A widower, he had a son and daughter, and he loved them well. However, if they did wrong, he punished them as he'd punish any other Cryggmoren. They, too, had to bide by the rules of the mountain.

One morning—a bright summer's morning though you'd never know it within those walls—his daughter, Princess Ystrid, dawdled over her breakfast although the royal mess hall had almost emptied for folk had gone about their business. In fact, Ystrid herself should at that moment have been making ready for her morning lessons with Edsyr, the king's Privy Counselor.

That young miss, though, was intent only on her companion. Leaning across the table, she fixed her glittering eyes on him, pointing a small, white finger. "I know where you went yesterday, Wycan," she said, her breath curling out in clouds.

The youth pushed away his empty porridge bowl and leaned back in his seat, his gray eyes wary. “You’re bluffing. You don’t know anything. And if you did,” he added quickly, “you’d be wrong because I didn’t go anywhere.”

Ystrid sat back, triumphant. “Wrong am I? Father’s confined Ysmorok to his chambers. Why? He was seen up in the Ice Galleries. If he was up there, so were you. In fact, I bet you led him.”

Wycan sat up. “Did you—”

Her eyes flashed. “How dare you! I’m no telltale. Neither is Ysmorok. Not one word has he said about your part in it. So here you are, off free, while your elder and better—hey, come back!” she cried, as Wycan jumped up and walked off.

But he was gone.

Ystrid slumped in her seat, scowling at her porridge. She’d only meant to tease, not to cause a revolution. She sighed. Of all the young folk in that place, Wycan interested her the most. Time and again she sought him out—behavior quite unbecoming for a princess some would say—and always she went too far and said too much. When would she learn? Miss Fire-and-Ice, her father called her in fond moments. Right now, she was in the heated state. Not that there was much of her. Small, she was, even for a Cryggmoren. Small, yet well defined, with strong bones. Narrow face, too narrow to be beautiful, accentuated by the hair drawn back tightly into one long braid; eyes not so large, yet wide-spaced, firm chin, which stuck out when she would have her way, and her mother’s high cheekbones. Oh, she had a will, all right. And just then, Wycan was its goal.

She gazed after him thoughtfully. He was set for trouble, toward which she had just primed and pointed him. She wondered guiltily if she should try to head him off.

A light touch on her arm brought her to. She looked up, bright

flames from the high wall sconces reflecting in her eyes. “Oh. You.” Ystrid eyed the newcomer with no less distaste than she had her porridge. Bomac, the Privy Counselor’s son: like the porridge he was cold, slimy and thick-skinned.

Of an age with her, Bomac thought himself her equal.

He slid onto the seat beside her. “That one looks bent on trouble. Where’s he gone?”

“To see my father. What’s it to you?”

“What does he want with the king?”

Ystrid looked Bomac up and down. He was of a stouter cast than most Cryggmoren, wide-shouldered under his brown pelt vest. Do not mistake, children: the extra stockiness was not what Ystrid minded. If Bomac wasn’t tall and loose and stringy like Wycan, she wouldn’t hold it against him. It was the swagger, the cocksure way Bomac thought himself above regular Cryggmoren for no good reason. Worst of all, he often presumed to get so close he mingled breaths, a gross breach of manners which Ystrid found disgusting.

She shuddered, a fact not lost on Bomac. “It’s a private matter.”

“Well, he has no business taking breakfast in here.”

“I invited him.” Ystrid’s tone was sharp.

Bomac dipped his head, taking her snub on the face of it. The smirk, though, gave him clean away. “Highness. I still think a hick-sad boy should stick to the Commons and not eat in the king’s mess hall.” Bomac, Edsyr’s son, lived in the Privy Counsel’s official quarters and enjoyed the royal amenities with the other privileged few whose parents held high office. Bomac lived in luxury, but to Ystrid’s mind he did nothing to deserve it.

He leaned closer, breathing his cloud into her face. “He’s not even Cryggmoren. We don’t know what he is, he’s but a foundling.”

“What do you want with me, Bomac?” Ystrid was still a girl, and, second in line behind Ysmorok her elder brother, never likely to take the throne, yet even now she could be haughty as any queen.

Bomac stood. “My father would remind you it is time for our weekly instruction in Affairs of State.” He looked down on her with confidence unshaken. “So if you’ll bestir yourself, and fetch your writing tablet, we can—”

“Go tell Edsyr that I—” Ystrid paused. Anything she said in haste would be sure to find its way back to her father. Then she would likely be joining Ysmorok in glorious isolation for having such a rude tongue. “I’ll be along just as soon as I’ve finished my breakfast.”

With another smirking duck of his head, Bomac turned and walked away. As he rounded the corner, Ystrid shoved her porridge bowl clean off the table where it landed upside down upon the floor.