



## PROLOGUE

Late morning, time for elevenses . . . Gom was standing over Harga's tenth compendium, staring at the crystal dangling from his hand. The compendium lay open at the page containing her moving spell, with which she had plucked him from the whips of the Solahinn those many years before. Stormfleet, too; rare and wondrous cíto, the true target of those fierce and cruel horsemen.

    Laboring over flask and crucible, Gom had worked that spell successfully many times by now—up to a point.

*Be sure, Harga had written, to mix the right amounts of everything before adding to the pot. Stir vigorously until the mixture thickens. As it does so, it will bubble and spit, but keep stirring firmly until it goes to paste. Be warned: the moment that happens the paste will glow then suddenly turn to vapor. That is the moment to catch and store it.*

And the moment, Gom had found, where he got stuck, every time.

The change from paste to gas was so abrupt and the result so strong and fast that before he could move a finger, power surged from the crucible and unconstrained, just fizzled out.

He'd mentioned his struggles to Harga up in that very chamber once, *alamar*—in mind but not in body.

In answer, she had smiled, looking wry. “That spell’s a tough one, but one you cannot do without. Strong mind, nimble fingers, that’s the crux. Keep at it, it’s just a matter of time.”

So he’d worked on, taking comfort in the memory of her voice.

But however much stronger and faster Gom became, storing that force had ever proved too much for him—until now.

Mind attuned, starstone at the ready, Gom had focussed on the paste brightening in the crucible, on the flash as vapor formed. Had drawn out that vapor needle-fine then with all speed had thrust it deep into the crystal, compressing it to a bright blue point.

Now, *now* came the test. The point flashed, looking about to flare, but just as Gom feared that he’d failed once more, it dwindled to a tiny dot and winked out, merging with the crystal.

Gom gazed into its depths. “I did it,” he breathed, and let the crystal fall against his chest.

In that moment, he became aware of light flashing against the workshop roof, at the far end of that long, low, curving chamber.

He hurried along a narrow space between dusty benches piled

with bottles and jars and paraphernalia toward the pot-bellied stove and the two rockers in front of it. Beside Harga's chair was a small table. On the table was a crystal globe the size of a fist. Harga herself had set it on that very spot during his first night up there.

As Gom had waited with Harga, the flashing globe had summoned them to the crystal stair. Later, by means of it, Harga had vainly tried to reach Tolasin, her old mentor.

Lit, the solid globe seemed like a fragile bubble. In the curved interior, he'd seen the wizard's workshop: books, boxes, bottles, and all.

Harga had left it out for him, he'd found, on his first return to the house.

Curious to learn how to use it, Gom had succeeded only too well, disturbing Tolasin in the middle of an incantation. And lucky that Gom had, for the wizard had passed on news from Scandibar of thieves being caught stealing gemstones and dying in the strangest way. Vital news to Gom, as Tolasin evidently guessed—though didn't pry.

They had spoken together several times after, Tolasin always bringing news, some of it alarming: of a snuffbox skull-embossed, of Galt and his raids, of impending war. After the battle of Sundor, although Gom was barred from practising magic officially, the old mage had sent work his way by means of the globe, minor tasks for folk who couldn't pay Hierarchy fees. Taking care of Harga's son, as Gom would bet—for which Gom was duly grateful.

As he reached the globe, the light was steady, and there within Tolasin waited.

The wizard never changed much: deep-set eyes, sharp nose, high cheekbones, strong jaw covered in a wispy beard. His silver locks hung to the shoulder of his wizard's robe—a robe, Gom saw with interest, as much-stained as his own shirt and breeches.

“Ah, Gom. Your mother still not home?”

“No, sir.” Gom strove to keep the worry from his eyes, to keep his voice steady under Tolasin’s sharp gaze.

“Um, hrumph,” the wizard said. It had been years now, since Harga had vanished, but whatever the old man thought, he didn’t press further. “No matter. You’re the one I’m looking for.”

“Oh?” Gom waited. Another errand? More folk needing his skills?

“There’s to be a gala celebration in Pen’langoth. In Scandibar, to be precise.”

“Gala? Celebration?” Gom backed off a step.

“Come back here, my boy, where I can see you. That’s better,” Tolasin went on, as Gom bent to the globe once more. “There’s been a reconciliation between Leochtor and the Yul Kinta. A new treaty’s been drawn up. And this one should hold better than the last, with Uroff gone.” Tolasin cleared his throat loudly. “Your presence is required. Decreed, I might say. Scouts have been out looking for you all this past month. Haven’t a hope of finding you, though, have they? But Leochtor is set on having you attend, Lady Vala and Lord Feyrwarl, too. So I decided to take a hand. My boy—pack your things and come.”

Pack his things? Leave his work for such an errand? “Sir!” Gom cried, as the globe began to dim. “I cannot go!”

The globe brightened up again, and Tolasin thrust his face up close. “Explain.”

Gom hesitated. What excuse could he possibly give? Not the real one, for sure, for not even Tolasin could be told of Spohr and stargates. He thought quickly. There was one, one that Tolasin might well expect. “The members of the Hierarchy—will they be there also?”

The old man frowned. “Well, of course.”

“Then I must not go, for I—”

The wizard’s face softened. “You are invited to a meal and ceremony only. Not commanded to perform magic. All the highest nobles will be there. And the lords of Medgar, Hornholm, and Dune.” The three lesser Lake cities.

“But the Hierarchy—”

“Some will grind their teeth to see you there—and we know who they are. Look, Master Gom—” Tolasin leaned in even closer, his face now bulbous in the globe’s curve. “You cannot hide away forever. Wizardry is not all magic. You must learn to build bridges, to compromise, to get along with folk, even those who publicly deny you.”

Gom eyed him in silence. This, from the most reclusive mage in all Ulm, not counting Harga! The excuse was not going well.

“Your mother learned to do it. Always on the quiet, you understand.” The old man cut a narrow smile. “You’d be amazed at who in the Hierarchy has gone to her for help—and taken all the credit after.” His voice went stern. “She’d have you go to Scandibar, no argument. So ignore that parcel of petty incompetents. You have fifteen days to get here. On your way!”

The globe went dark.

On his way? Gom bit his lip. He respected the old man, and valued his wisdom. And he owed him much. . . .

Fifteen days.

With Stormfleet’s help, he could do that. But fifteen days there and fifteen days back with any number of days in between was far too long to be away from home. He couldn’t stop his work. Couldn’t leave the island to kick his heels in Scandibar. Nothing could make him. Harga was up among the Realms, way out of reach, Gom argued uncomfortably. Who really knew what she’d

want him to do. Whatever Tolasin said, the choice was his to decide which was more important—wasn't it? Gom was so roiled up by now that he began to pace the floor. If only, he thought, he had someone to talk to, to help him get his thinking straight. . . .

Stormfleet and Hevron! They'd listen. They'd understand. They'd tell him he was right to stay! Turning on his heel, Gom strode up the chamber, making for the door.

Halfway there, though, he stopped. Turned back to the open compendium, and read some more. Pulled a portion of the new-stored power, uttered a command—and vanished in a whirl of sound and light.