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The autumn moon was at its fullest, a hunter's moon, the harvest moon, depending on where you lived. Yet no light shone through the tiny casement. Thick fog smothered the treetops, and the cunning houses nestled in their shelter.

High up in the ancient oak, Vala's chamber was still: no breeze stirred its rusting branches. . . .

Vala sat at a small, round table. On it was a lighted lamp, a jug of water, and a small, round copper bowl.

Across the table, Feyrwarl leaned forward, motionless.

Taking up the jug, Vala tipped water into the bowl. Cupping her hands, she lowered them into the bowl, rippling the water. The ripples began to glow, then vanished, yet the light remained. In the hollow of her palms, an image formed: a woman's face, eyes closed, lips lightly parted, skin bone-pale.

Feyrwarl let out a quiet breath. “Still no sign of the child.”

Vala looked up. “As always.”

Feyrwarl stayed gazing down until the image had faded. Only then did he look up. “This year would have marked—”

“His coming of age. You never let go.” Vala wiped her hands on a napkin. “They’re long gone. They are both gone. It’s time to move on.”

Color flashed into his face. “Did she look dead to you?”

“Remember that first time when I took a sighting for Urolf? Her lips were black, Feyrwarl, black!”

“Her lips were dark, yes. But she was under water that was icy cold. They haven’t been since. In fact, she’s looked as if she’s just peacefully sleeping.”

Vala shook her head. “Our willpower is strong. We’re seeing what we want to see.”

“For fourteen years?” Feyrwarl sat back in his chair. “You’re frowning. In fact, you’ve frowned at me a lot of late. Do I offend you suddenly?”

“No. You make me worry. When we came into this place, we vowed we’d never leave it. Yet tomorrow at your whim some two dozen good folk leave this place at risk of their very lives. We haven’t been out there in years, who knows what’s out there—not to mention the dangers that we know we have to pass through: Lakemen out to kill on sight, the creatures of the Wilds, and barghest. You say that it’s to mark the fourteenth anniversary of our people’s passing and my Lord Althlafor’s Coming of Age. But you and I both know what really drives you. You are using them, it is not right.”

“This is no whim, Vala, you mistake to call it so. And those who would travel do so with willing heart and of like mind. You do not have to come.”

Vala eyed him sadly. “Nay. I must come as they do for these reasons that you give. But you? Your tongue says one thing but your heart says quite another.”

“Oh?” Feyrwarl looked about to protest, then changed his mind. “Out with it.”

“You still harbor hope of finding them.” Vala looked to the darkened casement, to his lighted reflection in the glass. “Every one of us carries the weight of it now no less than on the night they fell. But it is the weight of mourning.” She turned back to face him. Much the same, he looked, as he had in the old days, save for his eyes. So merry they had once been, so quick to spark with mischief. Vala sighed. “Fourteen years, Feyrwarl! They cannot possibly live.”

Feyrwarl sat up. “Here we go again. Your speech grow stale!”

“But it’s true. If Leana or that dear, sweet boy still lived, surely we’d have heard by now.”

“Not if they’re sleeping!”

“*Sleeping?* This long? Where? Under whose roof?” Vala rose and set the bowl aside. “A storm is coming.”

Feyrwarl pushed back his chair and stood. “Storm or no, we still leave tomorrow.”

“Aye. By Hanselor’s reckoning we must if we would mark the day of our leaving.” Vala took his hands. “The journey will do great good at least in laying ghosts to rest. And healing the sickness in you,” she added under her breath.

Feyrwarl pulled away, ran down the spiral stair that wound around the oak’s stout trunk. At the bottom, he paused, looking up at Vala outlined in the lighted doorway.

“Moonset. Don’t be late!”

He vanished under the trees.

One hour to dawn, they mustered: Feyrwarl, Vala, Hanselor, and two dozen fellow-pilgrims: Yul Kinta journeying back to the ruins of their old home. Their baggage stowed, they mounted their horses and rode swiftly like fleeting shadows from their fastness by the High Vargue’s edge, heading west.

K Chapter One

High above the Dunderfosse, the full moon arced across the sky, then slid below the treeline.

One hour to dawn.

Deep in the thickets of that ancient forest, small night creatures fled into their burrows, their hunters to earth and hollow trunk.

The night wind expired with a long, last sigh, and all was still.

Gom came up from some deep, fast-forgotten dream. Rolling onto his back, he lay staring up at the wooden hoot owl perched atop his bed, the sharp eyes and polished feathers gleaming in the starlight. The dream had left him feeling anxious. Not a good way to wake up. Maybe he should sleep some more and try to shake it off. He was just wriggling back down into the covers when he remembered why he'd set himself to wake at that dark hour. He needed to gather some poor man's whin, a stunted gray gorse that clung to the stony reaches high above

the forest's mountain edge. Now was the time to get it, for soon its meager sap would dry up and the stems would wither into brittle sticks.

According to his mother's journals, it was best culled at dawn, while still damp with dew. If he didn't stir himself right now, by the time he got to it the sun would be up and it would be too late.

There was just one problem: once he left the safety of the forest to climb above the treeline, he was in mortal danger. Displaced by Sundborg's drowning, packs of fierce creatures called barghest had swarmed northward and were now roaming the countryside in search of prey. No other creature was safe from them, unless it had wings. Weasels, stoats, racoons and foxes no longer went abroad at night above the treeline but sought sanctuary down within the Dunderfosse.

On hearing of these barghest, Gom had looked them up in Harga's chronicles.

After the robber king, Galt, had stormed Marshaven and turned it into Sundborg, his own evil lair, no one could touch him. Sundor, Galt had named it, a dark place, shunned by wary travelers. Safe in a stronghold whose only approach—the Causeway—was easily guarded, he had preyed on neighboring lands, even as far as the Lakeland cities.

But he was not invincible. Rumor had it that one day the ghost of Marshaven's old king would rise and that would signal Sundor's fall.

Driven by tales of Galt's evil-doing, Harga had gone to seek the ghost of Gorfid, hoping thereby to hasten Galt's demise. She'd combed the fen, had gone under the mountain several times to roust him out, but to her disappointment, Gorfid's ghost had never showed.

In her explorations, Harga had made a chart of that hollow kingdom: its various levels from base to peak, of the Nethermost river that flowed beneath it, and the great salt sea below that. Not much there that Gom hadn't found for himself when under Sundborg, save for mention of the barghest:

Under Sundborg they dwell, Harga wrote. In the dark currents that flow below the mountain's roots. I am told that they cannot stand sun-

light though I cannot say for sure if this be so. I myself have seen them only deep under Sundborg, and glad I was that they did not sense me. Spawned in total darkness, they are well fitted for slithering over the rockslime in which they thrive. With eyes like black marbles, long spidery limbs, and toes by means of which they can walk up walls, they are more than a match for the other creatures that live down there. They sniff out their prey, devour it alive, gnawing and tearing out the soft parts with serried rows of needle teeth then crunching and grinding up the bony remains. While Under, I rescued many small creatures from their grasp, but all too often heard only the screams of those hapless enough to fall into their clutches. . . .

In addition to their sharp teeth and voracious appetites, the barghest had posed another danger, as Harga discovered during her first visit. When its skin was punctured, a mucous-like ichor—the equivalent of our good red blood—oozed from the wound. Any creature touching this slime died fast and in great pain.

On seeing this, Harga wrote, I got a sample of the slime and set to work to find quick antidote. I never entered Sundborg thereafter without a flask of it in my pocket!

Gom recalled with a shudder how he'd crawled through those underground passages, following stream and rock fault to drown the mountain never suspecting, and without Harga's remedy!

You can bet he sought out that flask, (of thick brown glass, it was, and stitched into a stout leather sheath) and Harga's notes for making up the remedy. From then on, Gom kept that flask full, and never left the forest without it.

Fetching the flask down from the workshop, he stowed it in his jacket pocket, picked up his gear, and went out.

Poling the raft to the lake edge, he beached it, locked up, and set off along a path that neither you nor I would pick out in a million years, and certainly not in that predawn dark. In the early days, Gom had stepped along with care, as one might blindfold in an obstacle race. But

as time passed, and he never missed a step or ended up in the wrong place, he grew to trust the forest's ways, and turn his mind to other matters. Usually at some point in his forest wanderings, he thought of his mother and how she had first brought him to her house full fifteen years before: Harga poling the raft and he in a huff because she would not let him do it. How he'd stood at the front door, still looking for the house. How delighted she'd been at his bewilderment.

"And the house?"

Harga had jabbed a finger at the curving cliff. *"Why there. You still can't see, can you?" She'd laughed outright then. "Good. Wizards don't like their houses to show, even under your very nose. . . ."*

How foolish he'd felt, when he'd been wanting her to think him sharp of wit and clever. Not for long, though. In their short time together, she'd made it plain how much faith she had in him, and how much she was relying on him to keep an eye on things.

He had missed her sorely in the beginning, but after a while, he had grown used to her being far away. They spoke together, alamar, from time to time, by the Tamarith tree up in the sky hall east of the High Vargue, though she was always rushed, always in the middle. The war of the Realms was not going well; Karlvod was gaining ground.

Yet still she put a good face on it, insisted it was early times, that she and Jastra would turn things around. After all, she said, she'd been up there for only a few months. Months, when it was fifteen years for him! Time yawed between the Star Realms and Ulm and never remained steady.

Gom jabbed his staff into the path as the way got ever steeper.

Most of the time, he was quite content with only hawk and horse for company. (Just then he had only Keke, Stormfleet and Hevron having gone to visit kin out on the High Vargue.) When the need for human company grew really strong he went to see old friends: Essie and Carrick in Pen'langoth, Hort and Mudge way up north. Lonely or no, he always worked to keep his pledge to do his bit, mastering the magic

lore and keeping to his daily chores, readying himself for the second Spohr that was streaming toward them on the stellar winds to threaten Ulm's existence.

Exactly how and when it would arrive, how and when it would set to work to broach the stargate—the Tamarith up in the skyhall atop the crystal stair—no one knew.

Gom was nowhere near prepared for its arrival. Oh, folk outside thought him the great wizard, a boy wonder, having stopped a war and sunk a mountain. The truth of it was, he hadn't used a stitch of magic. He'd simply pulled a bung in the mountain wall and Sundborg had sunk itself, and even that he'd done at the direction of a ghost. Admittedly, he had destroyed Katak soon after, thus saving Ulm from being blown away like chaff on a granary floor—but only with a simple spell born of a hashup. No one knew about that, of course, nor could they, ever.

Gom moved on through the dark, somber-faced, while the path opened up the way he wished to go.

The thought that the second Katak might appear any day worried him constantly. Its journey from the Star Realms to Ulm would take long, Harga and Jastra were always quick to tell him. But where was the comfort in that when time went in and out so erratically? Of course, he did have the starstone with all its latent power. Abroad, he kept it stowed in his pouch but in the safety of the Dunderfosse he wore it at his chest, that small unprepossessing crystal on its sturdy silver chain. As he walked, he raised his hand to feel the small hard mass of it beneath his flannel shirt. Over the years, he'd stored much magic in it. But even after fifteen years he hadn't begun to tap its own alien mysteries and no one from the Star Realms seemed to know how to do it, either. At least, that's what they said. But they didn't tell him everything. Not even Harga did. When he'd returned her rune, she'd given him the starstone in its place but she hadn't told him what it was. All those years he'd worn it, unsuspecting—which had almost caused the end of everything.

Gom shuddered, remembering how in his innocence he'd brandished it in Katak's face, the triumph in the creature's eyes at seeing the very thing it sought, its contempt for him:

Fool! You have the starstone, yet you know not how to use it!

No, he was not at all ready to face the second Spohr. The bad dreams didn't help, either. Even as he tried to boost his spirits and stick to work, they left him sapped of energy and filled with dread.

He put on pace, as if to throw off his morbid mood. Being hard on himself would get him nowhere. And hadn't two wise men each at different times told him not to be so anxious?

Almost at the forest's upper limit, he slowed, peering up through the thinning trees. Ahead was open land with rock and scrub. Plenty of places for barghest to hide, not enough for cover. The sky was greying. While he should be safe, Gom knew well that dawn and dusk, when it was neither dark nor light, could be a time of bad surprises. He peered up through the murk. A mite too early yet for owls to go to bed—and likewise for hawks to rise. But one certain hawk had said she'd meet him at this very spot to scout around for prowlers.

A shadow swooped down straight toward him.

“Keke!” True to her promise, and on time.

The marsh hawk alighted on his shoulder, then settled, smoothing down her feathers.

“Don't forget I'll need to find my breakfast, too,” she said. “Let's go.”

Way above the slopes that Gom was climbing, Wycan lay at the foot of the cliff from which he had fallen, still as the boulders scattered about him. A sudden sound brought him to, a coarse and strident cry, shredding the quiet.

Chorl!

He struggled to sit up, fell back again, the weight of his backpack pulling him down. There he lay, staring up into the dim grey light.

Light! His mind began to clear. Not chorl, then, for light was death to

them. He sat up, wincing at his pack's pull. He made to unhitch it, then thought the better of it. If he had to move in a hurry, he'd need both hands, and he didn't want to leave the pack behind, for in it he'd crammed his only possessions: a change of clothes, and a few mementos of a life spent under the peak. No food, though, there hadn't been time. And now he was hungry.

Still, he told himself, at least he was in one piece. Chorl could well have taken him during the night. Invisible as he might be, those things had no need to see him: they'd have sniffed him out.

Remembering the loud screech that had awakened him, Wycan looked around for its source. Had it been a bird? If so, there was no sign of it. Behind him rose sheer cliff, high and smooth, no footholds that he could see. He had fallen from that? Those chasing him must have seen him topple, had not ventured after him, not in the dark, and not down into this forbidden place. Now they likely thought him dead, of the fall, or whatever lurked down here.

Wycan peered through the greying light. Before him, gravel slope fell off into dry, runty scrub. Below the scrub, stunted, malformed pines hugged the ground, seeking refuge from the scouring winds. He looked higher onto misty nothing. His middle knotted at the sight. Would he ever get used to having so much space around him?

Wycan looked down, fixing on the ground around him. He was still above the tree line—and far from shelter. Soon, the sun would be up with its deadly heat and blinding light. He'd be wise to find himself some shade. *Up! Get up!* He got up clumsily, groaning under his pack's weight. His shoulders hurt, his back hurt, he hurt all over!

The call came again, close above him now. Wycan squinted skyward through his visor—by some miracle still in place. A bird, not so big, but with a sturdy wingspread, was circling him. *Circling him?* He must be visible! With its cry, clearly one of discovery, that bird had broadcast his presence for miles around. While he was safe from chorl in daylight, there could be other creatures close by, large and fierce ones, prowling for some tasty breakfast bite.

Eye on the gliding shape, Wycan shifted.

At Wycan's sudden vanishing, the bird let out a screech and swooped, so low it brushed his helmet. Then it shot off down the slope. Wycan gazed after the dwindling shape. Where had it gone?

There's an old forest, way below. We do not speak of it. Some have strayed down there and never returned. . . .

Wycan worked his shoulders and stretched inside his suit. His scalp itched. He raised his hand to scratch and met his helmet. Come to think, he itched all over under that thick hide suit but dared not take it off. When the sun came up, the heat would be unbearable. He turned about to face the way he'd come. There was no way back up that cliff that he could see—not that he would wish to climb it. His only way was down.

He hadn't limped but half a dozen steps when the bird was back, heading straight for him with quick, strong wingbeats and urgent cries. This time, answering calls came from farther off, a companion bird, by the sound of it.

Wycan ducked his head, even though he'd shifted. Eyes fixed on that bird, he crouched, out of reach of beak and claw. No sign of the second one as yet.

So intent he was, children, on scanning the skies that he didn't see the human figure toiling up toward him—and Wycan squarely in his path.

At the last minute, Wycan saw, and scrambled to his feet. Too late, they bumped and bounced apart.

"Ouf!" the figure said.

"Ouf!" Wycan echoed, for that word is the same in any tongue.

The newcomer—no beast or monster, but a boy, a youth—stepped back a pace, eyes wide, lips parted in shock. Almost, Wycan thought uneasily, as if he had seen him.

Wycan wished for his knife, but he'd strapped it on beneath his suit. All he could do was hold himself still. *Remember you're invisible*, he told himself. Then added, *but altogether too solid. Step back some more—and make it quick and quiet.*

As Wycan backed off, the youth, grim-faced, raised the stick he carried and swung it full circle, just missing him. Stepping back yet more, Wycan eyed the youth, taking stock. He was not too large, about the height of a Cryggmoren. Not stocky, though, but skinny, like him. Wycan relaxed, some. The youth didn't look so dangerous. He carried no weapon that Wycan could see. Dressed in warm jacket and breeches, in one hand he carried a bag somewhat like a gatherer's satchel. In the other, he held only the stick he'd just swung around: a carved wooden staff topped with a tiny bird.

Wycan took in the shock of dark brown hair that reached the youth's shoulders, the long, thin face, nose bent at the bridge, sharp brown eyes, deepset, and long, firm chin. At first glance, he didn't seem so old, maybe a year or so younger than Wycan, but a second look at those eyes and he was not so sure.

Frowning, the youth opened his mouth and let out a series of piercing shrieks.

Wycan started, goosebumps popping out all over. Here was the second bird!