

From *Tales of Gorm* in the

LEGENDS OF ULM

BOOK II

THE RIDDLE
AND THE RUNE

BY

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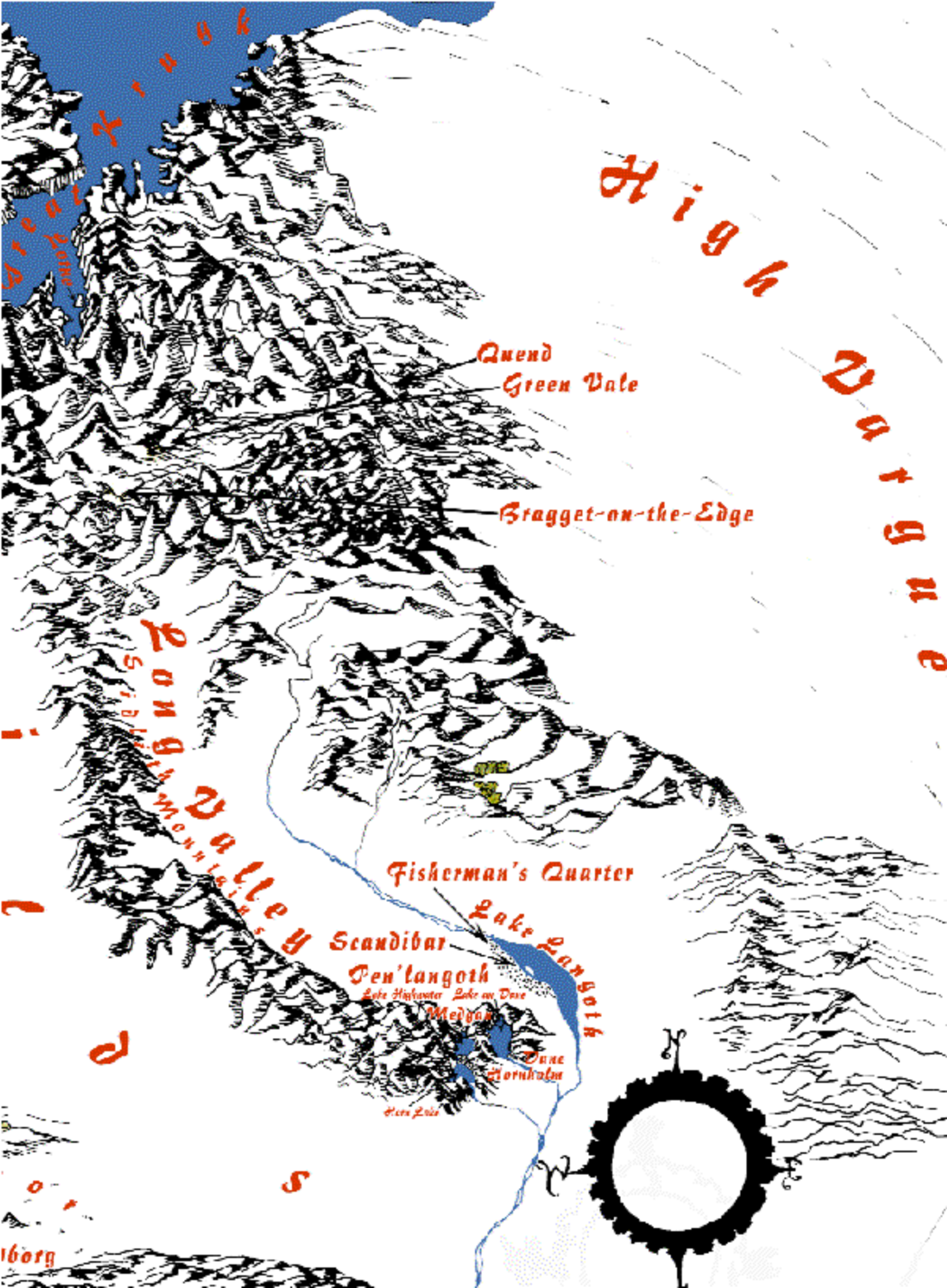
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*For my father, Charles William Chetwin.
In memory.*

From Air and Earth comes seed;
By Fire and Water is tempered:
In Wood is kernel's secret essence known,
And purpose comes to light.

—Harga of the Dunderfosse





High Quarter

Sung Valley

Quend
Green Dale

Bragget-on-the-Edge

Fisherman's Quarter

Scandibar

Pen'tangoth

Lake Langoth

Lake Hiskantor

Lake on Dove

Medgan

Dane
Hornkaban

Horn Lake



1609

CHAPTER ONE



AY AHEAD, OVER THE FAR MOUNTAIN PEAKS, the sun was setting. Halfway toward them, in the middle of the high plateau, the small, solitary figure of a boy stopped, closing his eyes against the brilliant light, and leaning wearily on his staff.

Staff? It was really a walking stick: quite new, finely carved with wild animals chasing up and down and around its length, nose to tail. A pert brown sparrow perched atop it, her tiny black eyes seemingly alive and scanning the way ahead. Stig had fashioned the stick to suit his own great size, with the sparrow for handle. Now it served his son for staff, the sparrow coming level with Gom's chest.

"That's a fine stick, Father. The best you've ever made," Gom had said, not even a week before. Stout, too, to bear Stig's massive weight.

"Aye. It'll serve you well enough when I'm gone," his father had answered, as though he'd known his time had come.

Sure enough, only two days ago Gom had buried his father on Windy Mountain and, grieving, had raised a cairn of gray stones over his grave. After that, in spite of the promise Gom had made to Stig to stay safely

home and become Clack's next woodcutter, Gom had left to seek Harga, his mother.

His hand strayed inside his shirt to the stone that hung about his neck from a leather thong Harga's rune. The magic charm his mother had left with him when she'd disappeared the day of his birth. Feeling its faint vibrations under his hand, he put it to his ear, but heard nothing. All his life the stone had remained silent—save for that last moment by his father's grave when there had come from the rune such beautiful humming as had filled Gom with wonder.

His eyes still tight shut, he pictured the lonely pile of stones above the town. It would be days before anyone could get up there because of the snow. Even for him that last trip down the icy trail had been perilous and no one knew that trail as well as he—now that Stig was dead. At that thought, grief welled up afresh within him, catching at his throat.

Turning, Gom looked back to the far horizon over which night was falling fast. Even after only a few hours traveling Gom had lost sight of the peak that had been his home for all of his life. And why not? Hadn't Hoot Owl said that Windy Mountain was but a pimple on the great face of the world?

Somewhere back in that twilight the townsfolk were drawing curtains and lighting lamps, Hoot Owl was waking up to hunt, while Stig—

His breath became a sob.

Father! Oh, Father.

He stared through a blur toward his distant home, feeling desolate and alone. Alone? Not entirely. A sudden gust reminded him of Wind, old friend of uncertain temper. Wind, who over the years had brought him whiffs of the Sea, and scents from Far Away.

Now that very Wind blew in his face, whipping his hair, snatching his breath. *Stir yourself, or freeze!* it urged. *On your way!*

Still fingering the rune, feeling the familiar lines criss-crossing the smooth black stone, and the tiny knobs and whorls that held the power of Harga's name, Gom turned away from the darkening mountains and

stumbled on toward the radiant peaks ahead, over winter grass and brake until the sun set and the ground glowed with its own luminescence.

He began to look about him in the twilight for a suitable resting place. It was almost too dark to see where he trod when he finally came across a little stream beside a stand of spindly alder hung with vines.

He leaned his staff against a tree and pulled some of the vines down behind him to make a windbreak. Then he groped around for what dead and brittle branches he could find in that poor light. Some of the tinder he set aside, and piled the rest like a tiny corn stook in front of his makeshift shelter. Fishing out his tinder box, he struck a spark against the dusty kindling, where it caught, smoldering. Wind touched the spark, and fanned it lightly into flame. It was small, scarce big enough to warm his hands, but the light was welcome.

He sat, huddled into his jacket, his hands outstretched, staring into the sputtering flames. He thought with longing of Harga's old blanket worked with suns and moons and stars; a blanket small and light enough to roll up and carry on one's back—if only one had thought of it. Fool, to leave home so unprepared at the tag end of winter!

*Gom Gom, dumb as a log;
His head's all wind, and his tongue's all frog!*

The townschildren's old taunt might well be true, he thought bitterly. He pictured the little hut, his bed by the far wall. And Stig's, opposite. And the hearth, dark and cold. There'd be no songs by the fire that night. Or ever again. He doubled over, tight with grief.

Hunger stirred him, finally. He foraged in his left jacket pocket, and pulled out a hunk of stale bread, a wedge of cheese, all there'd been left in the larder. The cheese was too hard and dry to break. He reached into his back pocket for his knife. It wasn't there. He felt in another pocket, then another. It wasn't in those either. Had he dropped it? No. He remembered now. He'd left it on the table in the hut. He, a woodcutter's son, had actually left home without his knife! Disgusted at himself, he settled for

using his teeth. One nibble of cheese, one nibble of bread, and he stowed them away again. He well knew how to make little go far.

From his right jacket pocket, he took out Stig's ancient green glass water bottle and weighed it in his hand. Still half full. He removed the stopper and drank deep, as he could afford to, with that nearby stream.

Gom replaced the stopper and stowed the bottle away again, guiltily thinking how it had been his father's custom every winter's evening to have them wash before going to bed. He certainly needed it. His hands were black from messing with the fire, and he was covered in grit. He glanced toward the stream and shuddered. Too cold.

Cold, and lonely. Everybody in the world that night had a roof to lie under, and someone with whom to share it, he thought miserably. Everybody—save Gom Gobblechuck.

He reached into a back pocket. His fingers encountered a tiny wooden box fitted with cunning hinges that he'd fashioned years ago under Stig's watchful eye: empty, he knew, and not what he sought. He dug deeper and pulled out a small leather pouch. Loosening the drawstring, he shook the contents onto his palm. He couldn't see them well in that feeble firelight, but he could feel his old treasures, mementos of home: seeds, the pod of a hoarbell, a honeybee's sac, the cocoon of a moon moth, and a tiny flake of gold. Lightly, lovingly, he fingered them, caressed them almost, taking comfort from each one, then restored them back to the pouch.

Gom took up the last of the kindling, placed it carefully on the little fire, then pulled his jacket around him and lay down to sleep.

After few minutes, he was aware of the glass bottle pressing into his ribs. He rolled over, tried another way. Ah, that was better. He brought his knees up, wrapped his arms about them, and tried to let his mind drift.

As he lay there, shivering, waiting for sleep to come, his body began to tingle.

He came alert.

He'd not a waking dream since the time he'd found the hermit

Mandrik's bones in the caves under Windy Mountain and had taken them out to bury them under the stars. Ah, what a wondrous dream that had been, when the ancient skull had come to life and Mandrik had told Gom that Harga was the greatest wizard in the world and that Gom must go seek her with the rune after Stig was gone.

The tingling increased, but this time without the warm bright light that usually came to dazzle him. He gazed up expectantly into the darkness, accepting the change. After all, it had been so long.

Suddenly a cold came upon him, colder than the chill of the winter plain. Icy, unseen hands touched him, as though exploring his shape in the same careful way Gom had just fingered his treasures.

He reached out to push the hands away, and with surprise met with nothing. Still the probing went on.

He sat up, angry now, and afraid. This was not a waking dream, but something else. He seized his staff, as the fingers moved down his face, his neck until they reached the rune.

There they stopped. In the darkness he heard nothing but his own indrawn breath, and yet he knew that someone or something evil had come upon him.

Suddenly, there appeared before him a pinpoint of light, a tiny star not an arm's length away. As he watched, it grew into the shape of a skull: not a fine, mellow skull like Mandrik's, but a stark death's-head, bone-white.

In a panic, Gom raised the staff to knock it away, but as he did so, the jaw moved, and a voice grated in the darkness with flat, metallic sound.

"Har—ga"

The coldness intensified, creeping over him like death. Another minute and he'd be paralyzed. Quickly, Gom sought the rune, dosed his hand over it, and silently called his mother's name.

Harga!

Warmth filled his hand, spread up his arm, chasing out the cold.

"Who are you? What are you?" demanded Gom, his courage returning. The skull hovered, silent, the dark sockets on him, watching, waiting.

For what? Gom noticed that the cold was creeping in again, despite the rune. In desperation, he struck out with the staff, and the skull vanished at the sparrow's sudden touch.

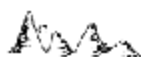
Gom sagged, exhausted. He drew up his knees and hunched over them, the staff still in one hand, the rune in the other. What evil had chanced upon him, he but one day from home? He peered about uneasily.

Chanced?

He shook his head. He had an uneasy sense of having been sought, and found. But for what? And—*who even knew of him outside Clack?*

He sat up again. It was not Gom that had drawn the death's-head, but the rune! He set the staff across his lap, shivering at the memory of the unseen fingers probing him, lighting at last upon the key to Harga's name—and power.

Harga, the skull had said. *Harga*.



Bright sunlight flaking through his shelter awoke him. He lay for an instant, the bad feeling from his vision still upon him. Then he stiffened, becoming aware of warm breath on his cheek. He opened his eyes to find a sharp-nosed gray fox cub bending over him, sniffing him inquisitively.

Relieved, Gom sat up, but before he could utter a word, the fox leapt back with a bark and raced off.

"Hey!" Gom called after him, in the voice of the brown foxes of Windy Mountain, but it didn't even turn its head. Gom watched it go ruefully. Yet what else could he expect? In the wild, all good mothers trained their offspring to beware of strangers. Up on Windy Mountain, where everyone knew Gom, mothers trusted him, knew he'd do no harm.

Being a stranger wasn't pleasant. He felt hurt that the animal hadn't sensed his friendliness, and it left him feeling small and insignificant. Sighing, Gom stood up. Maybe the fox had sensed his lingering fear from

the dream, and had run from that. The idea comforted him, somehow.

He stretched resolutely, and, turning his face to the light, prepared to meet the new day. He'd slept late. The sun was high and climbing. Down in Clack, the townsfolk would already be thinking of elevenses.

Gom pulled out his bread and cheese, took a half-hearted bite of each and stowed them away again. Then he drank from the stream, and gave his face a dutiful splash of icy water.

That done, Gom filled his bottle and returned it to his pocket. Which way should he go? He shaded his eyes, his back to the sun. Why that way, of course, the way Wind was steering him.

He trudged on over the late winter plateau, his eyes on the ground, seeking plantain or fool's-button, any of the wild roots that Harga had taught Stig to use to eke out meager rations. But he found nothing: no dead leaf clumps to tell where roots lay buried, waiting for the sun to touch them back to life. From time to time he glanced back toward the far horizon. Every step he took brought him nearer to his goal—and also farther from home. When he'd said goodbye to his eldest brother and sister, Stok and Hilsa, folk had crowded out to watch, scandalized. Was he still the butt of gossip? Probably, for who else had ever quit that place?

Why, his mother, of course! Gom brightened at the thought, and strode forward with new resolution. He was going to find Harga. He'd fix his mind on that, even though he had as yet no idea where to find her, or how long it would take.

For hours he moved on, but the only thing that seemed to change was the angle of the sun. Slowly, it climbed, hung overhead, then began its downward arc. Gom stopped for a spell, gazing around the plateau at the ring of ever-distant peaks around him. "It's all the same," he cried. "Is this all there is?"

Of course not. Wind breathed on him briskly. As I've told you often enough. This is but a puny pack of petty peaks. Now move on before you starve and catch your death, for there's neither food nor shelter here at winter's end.

Gom heeded Wind's warning and stepped up his pace. Time to look

for another resting place, make another shelter; to find some dry wood for a fire, and water to drink. The sun's warmth wouldn't last much longer. Then Wind would grow cold again, and the thin air would chill him to the bone.



For four more lonely days Gom trudged on, calling out to the occasional fox and evening rabbit, but to his disappointment, not one came up to exchange news with him. Once or twice migrating birds flew overhead: blackbirds, for the most part, and a few wild geese, returning a little early to spring nesting grounds, as Gom would judge, and far too intent on their destination to heed him. Still, it cheered him, going along, to think of warmer weather.

Under the sun he didn't fear the death's-head. But under the night sky when Wind whistled across the darkened plain and around his makeshift shelters, he'd remember his awful vision and he'd wait apprehensively for it to come again. The nights passed, however, without further visitation.

Creeks he found a-plenty to keep his water bottle filled, but by the fifth morning, the bread and cheese were almost gone and hunger shrank his belly. All he had for breakfast that day were a few shriveled berries that even hungry birds had disdained. He must find food soon or perish. It was too far to turn back now.

On, on, Wind shrilled. Things will get better, you'll see. Beyond those mountains ahead the land drops far. It's warmer there. Things are sprouting tender and green already, and you'll be sure to find something to eat.

"If I ever get there," Gom answered, eyeing the knobby spine of low rounded peaks that he must pass to reach it.

By noon, the plateau had come to an end, and the ground was rising. Gom was soon climbing up steep rock face scored with deep defts—massive cracks big enough for him to shelter in—and pocked with small black holes that promised caves.

All his life, he'd lived among the mountains. Even Clack, at the foot of Windy Mountain, was still high up. The idea of going down into lowland, real lowland, rallied his spirits.

It couldn't quite give him the energy to travel faster, though. Only food would do that. Nevertheless, he struggled along, pulling on his staff until late afternoon, when his strength finally gave out.

Not to worry, he told himself. Perhaps if he stopped now, he'd have enough energy by morning to make that last push over the range—or through it, if he were lucky enough to find a pass.

Looking about for shelter, he spotted a small dark hole about twelve feet above where he stood. A cave. He stared upward. The staff was a problem, for he'd need both hands to climb.

On a sudden idea, Gom felt around in his pockets and pulled out a spare bootlace of long and sturdy leather. He tied it firmly about the staff at hand height, then knotted the loose ends together, making a loop. Was it big enough? He put his head through the loop, slipped one arm through it, then slid the staff around until it hung squarely at his back. Pleased with his ingenuity, Gom began to climb the sheer rock face.

Have a care, Wind warned him. That cave may be occupied.

Wind was right: it was.

Reaching level with the cave, Gom peered in. A huge dark shape lay curled up in the back corner: a great brown bear, creature of fierce, uncertain temper that Gom wouldn't presume to tangle with, not even up on Windy Mountain, where he knew every one. It appeared to be still locked in winter sleep.

Yet even as he stood watching, it stirred, and turned over.

Gom left, fast.

It was almost dark before he found another shelter, a second cave, which he entered against Wind's most urgent warnings.

Remember what you found the last time! Agh, you may be sorry.

The cave was small, and sheltered—and empty.

With a triumphant wave to Wind, Gom went in. It was indeed a good

find, with solid walls, no holes for chilly draughts. Or sudden bear.

Gom stood the staff by the back wall, and sat down, leaning against the rough stone, and gazing out at the twilight sky. He took a good swallow of water, then lay down to sleep, rubbing his middle to comfort it. If only he weren't so hungry, he thought, for with hunger came such cold. He pictured a small fire burning in the middle of the floor, throwing welcome golden light onto the walls, filling the tiny shelter with snug warmth. But there wasn't the smallest twig of a tree on this bare rock face.

He sought the rune for comfort, slid his nail along the grooves etched in its smooth, shiny surface. Why had Harga left it with him? And why, if Mandrik spoke true, was he supposed to take it to her? If Harga really were the most powerful wizard in the world, couldn't she get it back herself in a finger-snap? Gom frowned. Did even wizards have their limits?

The sun was suddenly gone. The shadows in the cave deepened, smudging the sharp rock walls, filling the corners with menace. Gom glanced around, thinking of bears—and skulls. Stop it, he told himself firmly. Another few hours and you'll be on your way.

The shadows flowed together into one dark mass, enveloping him. The moon rose, faintly outlining the cave entrance in silver.

He lay on his side, and drew his knees up. "Mother," he murmured, huddling into the warmth of his jacket. "Where are you? When shall we meet?" With his hands clasped about the rune for comfort, he lay facing the dim moonlight and drifted.

When he came to, the moon's radiance filled the cave. Atop the staff, the sparrow's tiny black seed-eyes gleamed mysteriously.

All at once the light cut as a huge shambling shape blocked the cave entrance.

A bear!

Gom went stiff with panic.

A bear, and there was he, lying in the middle of its floor!