

The Runelords

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Worlds of the Golden Queen
(comprising *The Golden Queen* and *Beyond the Gate*)

BROTHERHOOD OF THE WOLF

❧ DAVID FARLAND ❧



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
NEW YORK

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BROTHERHOOD OF THE WOLF

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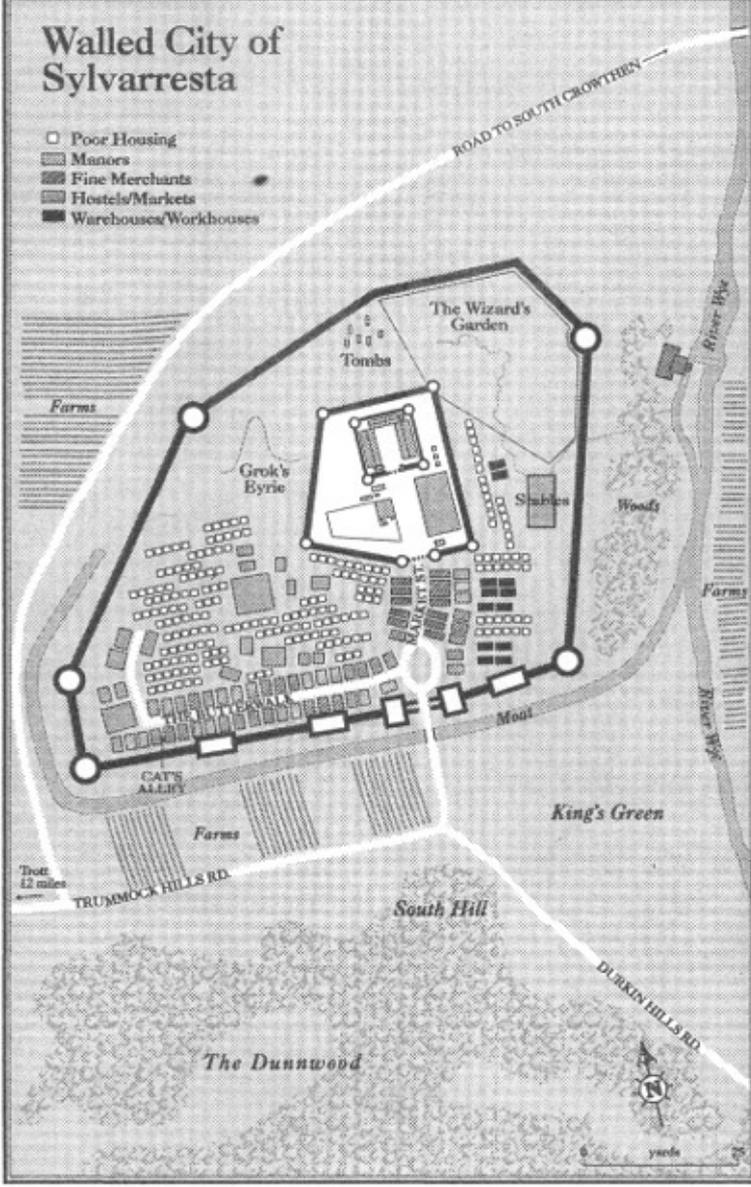
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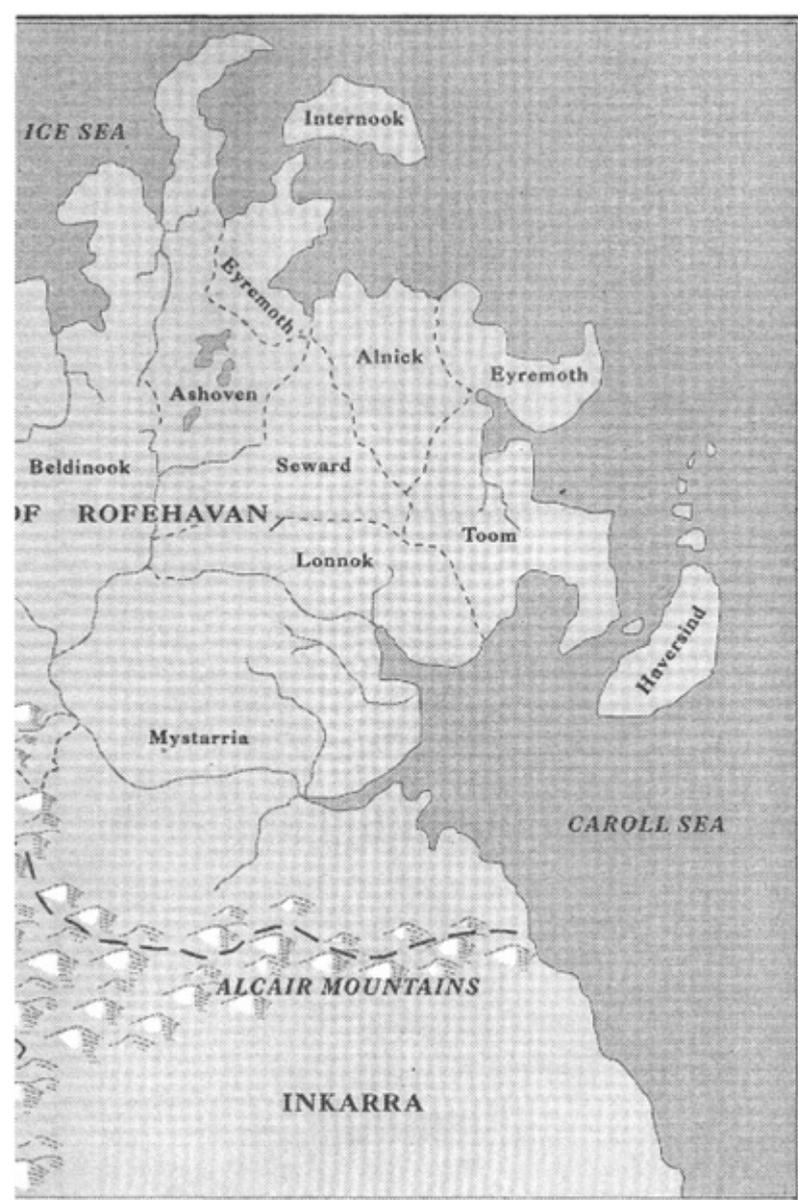
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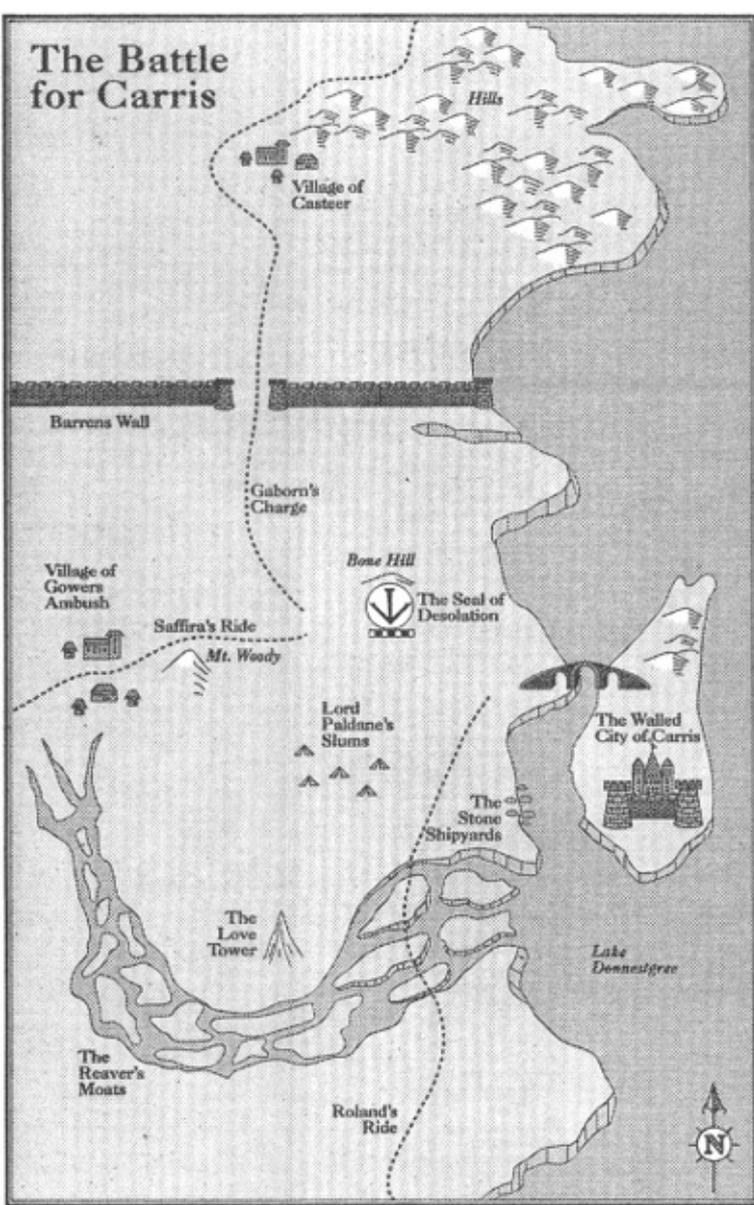
Walled City of Sylvarresta

- Poor Housing
- ▨ Manors
- ▩ Fine Merchants
- ▧ Hostels/Markets
- Warehouses/Workhouses





The Battle for Carris



BROTHERHOOD
OF THE WOLF

The week of Hostenfest began with a festive air at the Castle at Tal Rimmon in northern Mysterria.

On the first morning of Hostenfest, the spirit of the Earth King came as usual. Fathers and mothers took delight in heaping gifts of food for their children onto kitchen tables—honeycomb dripping in sweet piles, the small brownspotted tangerines common to Mysterria, almonds roasted in butter, sweet grapes fresh from the vine and still wet from the morning dew. All of these represented the bounteous gifts that the Earth King would bestow upon those who loved the land, “the fruits of the forest and of the field.”

And on that same first dawn of Hostenfest, the children rose and anxiously ran to the hearth. Their mothers had left their daughters dolls woven of straw and dry wild flowers, or perhaps a box with a yellow kitten in it; and there young boys might find bows carved of ash, or finely embroidered woollen cloaks to help warm them through the coming winter.

So the children’s joy was full, and the week of Hostenfest came to Tal Rimmon under skies so warm and blue that they belied the coming of autumn.

Summer is forever, those skies promised. No wind shook the forested hills around the castle.

And if during the second day of Hostenfest, parents spoke in hushed tones of a fortress that had fallen, few children took note. Tal Dur was far to the west, after all, and Duke Paldane, the Huntsman who served as regent while the King was away, would be swift to repel the armies of Indhopal.

Besides, it was still a season of joy, and reminders were everywhere. New herbs were strewn on the floors: meadowsweet, pennyroyal, lavender, or rose. The icons of the Earth King were still in place beside every doorway and window, inviting the Earth King into the people’s homes. It had been nearly two thousand years since an Earth King had risen to lead mankind. The old images carved of wood showed him in his green traveling robes with his staff in his hand, a crown of oak leaves woven into his hair while rabbits and foxes played at his feet.

The icons were meant to serve only as a reminder that an Earth King had once come. Yet on that day, some old women approached their icons and whispered, as if to the Earth King himself, “May the Earth protect us.”

Few children noticed.

And later that evening, when a rider said that far to the north in Heredon a new Earth King had indeed arisen, and that the name of that Earth King was Gaborn Val Orden of Mysterria, the people of Tal Rimmon erupted in jubilant celebration.

What did it matter if the same messenger bore dire news of lords slaughtered in far places, of the troops of the Wolf Lord Raj Ahten striking all through the kingdoms of Rofehavan? What did it matter that Gaborn’s own father, old King Mendellas Val Orden, had fallen in battle?

A new Earth King had arisen, after all, and of all the wonders, he was Mysterria’s own sovereign.

Such news filled the young ones with unaccountable pride, while the elders looked at one another knowingly and whispered, “It will be a long winter.”

Immediately the smiths around Tal Rimmon went to work forging swords and warhammers, shields and armor for man and horse. The Marquis Broonhurst and the other local lords all rode back to the castle early from the autumn hunt. In the Marquis’s Great Hall they argued for long hours about the portent of dispatches—the dark tidings of sorcerous attacks, of the movements of enemy troops, of Duke Paldane’s call to prepare for battle.

Few children noticed. As yet their joy was undiminished.

But on that day it seemed a shift in the air brought an indefinable sense of urgency and excitement.

All week long, the young men of Tal Rimmon had been preparing for the tournaments that accompanied the end of Hostenfest. But now the boys who prepared to fight suddenly had a feral gleam in their eyes. And at midweek, when the first rounds began, those who jousted or took part in mock combat attacked their opponents with abnormal ferocity. For now they did not seek to win honor only among themselves, but fought for the right to someday ride into battle with the Earth King himself.

The Marquis noted the change, and when he told his lords, time and again, "It is a good crop this year, the best I've ever seen," he was not speaking of apples.

At midweek the skies darkened, and an afternoon thunderstorm flashed above Tal Rimmon and shook the city. Many of the local children huddled abed with their mothers and fathers, safe beneath their quilts. That night, five hundred powerful Runelords rode from the east, answering Duke Paldane's summons to defend Carris, the largest castle in western Mystarria. For the latest reports said that the Wolf Lord, who had been retreating toward his homeland in Indhopal, had suddenly struck south toward the heart of Mystarria.

The Marquis Broonhurst could not sleep with so many lords with his troops, so he had many of them wait out the storm in his Great Hall or in the hostels just outside the castle proper. There the lords and knights argued long and forcefully about how to repel the impending invasion.

Raj Ahten's troops had taken three border fortresses already. Worse, he had taken endowments from perhaps twenty thousand people. He had taken to himself their strength, wit, stamina, and grace, turning himself into such a fierce warrior that none could best him in battle. He sought to become the Sum of All Men, a being that old stories said would be immortal. Some feared even now that he could not be killed.

Worse, he had taken so many endowments of glamour that his beauty outshone the sun. Hundreds of miles north in Heredon, when his troops besieged Castle Sylvarresta, King Sylvarresta's people had taken one look at Raj Ahten's face and thrown their weapons over the castle walls, welcoming him as their new lord. And at Longmot, it was said that Raj Ahten had used the tremendous power of his Voice to shatter the stone of the castle walls, as a songmaster might shatter crystal.

It was nearly dawn when Raj Ahten struck Tal Rimmon.

He came pulling a handcart filled with onions, a battered cloak pulled low over his forehead to keep out the night's rain. The guards at the castle gates paid him little notice, for other peasants had also brought their carts to the gates. They stood sheltered from the rain beneath the eaves of a weaver's shop.

Raj Ahten began to sing a song that was not words, but instead a low throaty moan of incredible volume, a sound that made the stone walls of Tal Rimmon hum at first, and that made the bones of a man's inner ear vibrate as if a hornet were trapped within his skull.

The gatekeepers swore and drew weapons. The few farmers near Raj Ahten grasped their heads in pain as his song began to slowly shatter their skulls. They dropped unconscious before they died.

Within seconds the stone of Tal Rimmon's towers began to shiver violently. Bits of stone flaked away as if artillery battered the walls.

In moments the castle's battlements trembled, heaved, and then toppled, as if struck by a mighty fist.

Raj Ahten stood in his ragged cloak and lifted his voice high, until the Marquis's towers collapsed.

in on themselves and his Great Hall fell in a protest of screaming timbers.

The Runelords within those edifices were crushed under stones. Broken oil lamps spilled their contents into the timbers and tapestries, setting much of the castle aflame.

No common man could approach Raj Ahten without being slain. Two Runelords had enough endowments of stamina to withstand his Voice. But when they charged from the ruins of a hostel and tried to draw steel upon him, Raj Ahten drew his own dagger in a blur and spilled their guts.

Once the castle and most of the buildings in the market were down, Raj Ahten turned and fled down dark city streets, into the shadows.

Moments later, he reached his own Imperial warhorse, tied behind a farmer's barn at the foot of a low hill. Two dozen of his Invincibles had gathered there in the darkness, waiting for his return.

A flameweaver named Rahjim sat upon a black horse and gazed hungrily toward the ruins of Tal Rimmon, toward the sheets of flame twisting up into the sky. This was the third castle his master had destroyed in a single night. He breathed rapidly in excitement, vapors of smoke issuing from his mouth, an unnatural light gleaming in his eyes. He had no hair, even on his eyebrows. "Where to now, O Great Light?" the flameweaver asked.

As Raj Ahten drew near, he felt the dry heat of the creature's skin. "Now we ride to Carris," Raj Ahten answered.

"Not to the Courts of Tide?" the flameweaver pleaded. "We could destroy their capitol before their lords ever learn of the danger!"

"Carris," Raj Ahten said more firmly, determined to resist the flameweaver's arguments. He did not wish to raze all of Mystarria yet.

Mystarria's king was still safely secluded far to the north in Heredon, holed up deep within the Dunnwood, protected by the spirits of his ancestors.

"To strike down the capitol at the Courts of Tide would be a fell stroke," Rahjim urged.

"I shall not attack it," Raj Ahten whispered in a deadly tone. "The boy will not come if I leave him nothing to save."

Raj Ahten leapt onto the back of his warhorse, but for a long moment he did not ride for Carris. Tal Rimmon could be seen bright as day beneath columns of firelit smoke. Distantly, people screamed and tried to throw water upon their burning homes or to pull the fallen from beneath collapsed buildings. He could hear the children crying.

Raj Ahten watched the city burn while reflected flames danced in his dark eyes.

BOOK 6

DAY 30 IN THE MONTH OF HARVEST



A DAY OF CHOICES

THE VOICES OF MICE

As King Gaborn Val Orden rode toward Castle Sylvarresta on the last day of Hostenfest, the day of the great feast, he reined in his horse and peered up the Durkin Hills Road.

Here the trees of the Dunnwood had been cleared back from the road, three miles from town. The sun was just rising, casting a sliver of silver light over the hills to the east, and the shadows of leafless oaks blotted the road ahead.

Yet in a patch of morning sun around the bend, Gaborn spotted three large hares. One hare seemed to be on guard, for it peered up the road, ears perked, while another nibbled at sweet golden melilot that grew at the margin of the road. The third just hopped about stupidly, sniffing at freshly fallen leaves of brown and gold.

Though the hares were over a hundred yards distant, the scene looked preternaturally clear to Gaborn. After having been underground in the darkness for the past three days, his senses seemed invigorated. The light appeared brighter than ever before, the early morning birdsong came clearer to his ears. Even the way the cool dawn winds swept down from the hills and played across his face seemed new and different.

“Wait,” Gaborn whispered to the wizard Binnesman. He reached behind his back, untied his bow and quiver from his saddle. He gave a warning glance to his Days, the skeletal scholar who had followed him since his childhood, bidding the Days to stay behind.

The three were alone on the road. Sir Borenson was following some distance behind them, bearing his trophy from the Hostenfest hunt, but Gaborn had been in a hurry to get home to his new wife.

Binnesman frowned. “A rabbit, sire? You’re the Earth King. What will people say?”

“Shhh,” Gaborn whispered. He reached into his quiver, pulled his last arrow, but then paused. Binnesman was right. Gaborn was the Earth King, and it seemed fitting that he should bring down a fine boar. Sir Borenson had slain a reaver mage, and was dragging its head into town.

For two thousand years, the people of Rofehavan had looked forward to the coming of an Earth King. Each year during the seventh day of Hostenfest, this last day of the celebration, the day of the great feast, served as a reminder of the promise of the Earth King who would bless his people with all “the fruits of the forest and of the field.”

Last week the Earth Spirit had crowned Gaborn, and charged him to save a seed of humanity through the dark times to come.

He’d fought long and hard these past three days, and the reaver’s head belonged as much to Gaborn and Binnesman as it did to Sir Borenson.

Still, if Gaborn brought in nothing more than a single hare for the great feast, he could imagine how the mummers and puppetmasters would ridicule him.

He braced himself for the mummers’ scorn and leapt lightly from his charger, whispering “Stand” to the beast. It was a force horse, his fine hunter, with runes of wit branded along its neck. It stared at him knowingly, perfectly silent, while Gaborn put the lower wing of his bow on the ground, stuck a leg between the bow and the string, then bent the bow and pulled the upper end of the string tight into its nock.

With the bow strung, he took his last arrow, inspected the gray goose quills, and then nocked the arrow.

He crept forward, staying low along the brushy side of the road. Wizard's violet grew tall here by the roadside, its flowers a dark purple.

When he rounded the corner, the hares would be in full sunlight. So long as he stayed in the shadows, they'd not be likely to see him; if he remained silent, they'd not hear him; and while the wind blew in his face, they'd not smell him.

Glancing back, Gaborn saw that his Days and Binnesman remained on their mounts.

He began stalking down the muddy road.

Yet he felt nervous, more nervous than mere hunting jitters could account for. He sensed a vague apprehension dawning. Among the newfound powers that the Earth had granted him, Gaborn could sense danger around those people he'd Chosen.

Only a week ago, he'd felt death stalk his father, but he'd been unable to stop it. Last night, however, that same overpowering sense had enabled him to avoid disaster when the reavers staged an ambush in the Underworld.

He felt danger now, but vaguely, distantly. Death was stalking him, as surely as he stalked these rabbits.

The only weakness of this newfound power was that he could not know the source of the danger. It could be anything: a crazed vassal, a boar lurking in the underbrush.

Yet Gaborn suspected Raj Ahten, the Wolf Lord of Indhopal, the man who had slain Gaborn's father.

Riders on force horses had brought word from Mystarria that in Gaborn's homeland, Raj Ahten's troops had taken three castles by subterfuge just before Hostenfest.

Gaborn's great-uncle, Duke Paldane, had marshaled troops to contain the problem. Paldane was an old lord, a master strategist with several endowments of wit. Gaborn's father had trusted him implicitly, and had often sent him out on campaigns to track down criminals or to humble haughty lords. Because of his success, he was called the "Huntsman" by some, the "Hound" by others. He was feared throughout Rofehavan; if any man could match wits with Raj Ahten, it was Paldane. Surely Raj Ahten could not march his troops north, risk the wights of the Dunnwood.

Yet danger approached, Gaborn felt certain. He placed his feet carefully on the dry mud of the road, moved as silently as a wraith.

But when he reached the bend in the road, the hares had left. He heard a rustling in the grass by the roadside, but it was only mice stirring, scampering about under dry leaves.

He stood a moment wondering what had happened. *Ah, Earth*, he said in his thoughts, addressing the Power he served. *Could you not at least send a stag from the forest?*

But no voice answered. None ever did.

Moments later, Binnesman and the Days came trotting up the road. The Days bore the reins of Gaborn's duncolored mare.

"The hares are skittish today, it seems," Binnesman said. He smiled slyly, as if pleased. The morning light accentuated the creases in the wizard's face and brought out the russet hues of his robe. A week ago, Binnesman had given part of his life to summon a wylde, a creature strong in the earth powers. Before that, Binnesman's hair had been brown, and his robes the green of a leaf in summer. Now his robes had changed color, and the fellow seemed to Gaborn to have aged decades in the past few days. Worse yet, the wylde he'd sought to summon had vanished.

"Aye, the hares are skittish," Gaborn answered suspiciously. As an Earth Warden, Binnesman sought to serve the Earth, and claimed that he cared as much about mice and snakes as he did

mankind. Gaborn wondered if the wizard had warned the hares off with some spell, or perhaps something as simple as a wave of the hand. “More than a little skittish, I’d say.” Gaborn swung up in his saddle but kept his bow strung and his arrow nocked. They were close to the city, but he imagined that he still might see a stag by the roadside, some enormous old grandfather with a rack as big as his arm span, come down out of the mountains to eat one sweet apple from a farmer’s orchard before it died.

Gaborn glanced over at Binnesman. He still wore that secretive grin, yet Gaborn could not tell if it was a sly expression or a worried smile.

“You’re happy that I missed the hares?” Gaborn ventured.

“You’d not have been pleased with them, milord,” Binnesman said. “My father was an innkeeper. He used to say, ‘A man with fickle innards is never pleased.’”

“Meaning?” Gaborn said.

“Choose your quarry, milord,” Binnesman answered. “If you are hunting reavers, it’s silly to go chasing after hares. You wouldn’t allow your hounds to do it. Neither should you.”

“Ah,” Gaborn said, wondering if the wizard meant more than he said.

“Besides, the reavers proved a harder match than any of us had bargained for.”

Bitterly, Gaborn realized that Binnesman was right. Despite the powers of Gaborn and Binnesman combined, forty-one strong knights had died fighting the reavers. Besides Gaborn, Binnesman, and S Borensen, only nine others had made it from the ruins alive. It had been a bitter struggle. The nine were back with Borensen now, dragging the reaver mage’s head to town, opting to stay with their trophy.

Gaborn changed the subject. “I didn’t know that wizards had fathers,” he teased. “Tell me more about yours.”

“It was long ago,” Binnesman said. “I don’t remember him much. In fact, I think I just told you everything I recall about him.”

“Certainly you recall more than that,” Gaborn chided. “The more I know you, the more I know not to believe anything you say.” He didn’t know how many hundred years the wizard had lived, but he suspected that Binnesman must have a story or two.

“You are right, milord,” Binnesman said. “I don’t have a father. Like all Earth Wardens, I was born of the Earth. I was but a creature that someone sculpted of mud, till I formed this flesh for myself of my own will.” Binnesman arched an eyebrow mysteriously.

Gaborn glanced at the wizard, and for just a moment, he had the nagging suspicion that Binnesman spoke more truly than he pretended.

Then the moment passed and Gaborn laughed. “You are such a liar! I swear, you invented the art!”

Binnesman laughed in turn. “No, ’tis a fine skill, but I did not invent it. I merely seek to perfect it.”

At that moment, a force horse came thundering along the road from the south. It was a fast horse, with three or four endowments of metabolism, a white charger that flashed in the sunlight as it moved between shadows and trees. Its rider wore the livery of Mysteria, the image of the green man upon a blue field.

Gaborn reined in his horse and waited. He’d felt danger. Now he feared the courier’s news.

The messenger rode up swiftly, never slowing his mount, until Gaborn raised a hand and called out. Only then did the messenger recognize Gaborn, for the King wore nothing now but a simple gray traveling robe, stained from the road.

“Your Highness!” the messenger cried.

He reached for a leather pouch at his waist, then proffered a small scroll, its red wax seal bearing the mark of Paldane's signet ring.

Gaborn opened the scroll. As he read, his heart sank and his breathing quickened.

"Raj Ahten has moved south into Mystarria," he told Binnesman. "He's toppled castles at Gorlane Aravelle, and Tal Rimmon. This was near dawn two days ago.

"Paldane says that his men and some Knights Equitable made Raj Ahten pay. Their archers ambushed Raj Ahten's troops. You can walk from the village of Boarshead to Gower's Ridge on the backs of the dead."

Gaborn dared not relate more of the horrific news. Paldane's observations were extremely detailed and precise, noting the exact type and number of enemy casualties—36,909 men, the vast majority of whom were common troops out of Fleeds. He also noted the number of arrows spent (702,000), defenders slain (1,274), wounded (4,951), and horses slain (3,207) versus the amount of armor, gold, and horses captured. He then gave precise notes on the movements of enemy troops along with the current dispositions of his own men. Raj Ahten's reinforcements were converging on Carris from Castles Crayden, Fells, and Tal Dur. Paldane was reinforcing Carris, convinced that Raj Ahten would seek to capture the mighty fortress rather than casually destroy it.

Gaborn read the news and shook his head in dismay. Raj Ahten had engaged in savagery. Paldane had paid him in kind. The news revolted Gaborn.

Paldane's last words were: "Obviously, the Wolf Lord of Indhopal hopes to draw you into this conflict. He has decimated your northern border, so that you cannot come south with the hope of bringing in fresh troops of any consequence. I beg you to remain in Heredon. Let the Huntsman bring this dog to bay."

Gaborn rolled the scroll back up, tucked it into the pocket of his robe.

This is maddening, Gaborn thought, to sit here nearly a thousand miles away and learn when my people died days after it happened.

He could do little to stop Raj Ahten. But he could get news faster. ...

He glanced at the messenger, a young lad with curly brown hair and clear blue eyes. Gaborn had seen him at court on many occasions. He looked the young man in the eyes and used the Earth Sight to stare beyond his eyes, into his heart. The courier was proud, proud of his position and his riding skill. He was daring, almost eager to risk his life in his lord's service. A dozen wenches at inns across Mystarria thought they loved him, for he tipped well and kissed even better, but the fellow was torn between his love of two women who had vastly different personalities.

Gaborn did not think particularly well of the young man, but saw no reason not to Choose him. Gaborn needed servants like this, needed messengers he could count on. Gaborn raised his left hand, stared the lad in the eyes, and whispered, "I Choose you for the Earth. Rest now, but head back for Carris today. I currently have one Chosen messenger there. If I sense danger to you both, I'll know that Raj Ahten plans to attack the city. If ever you hear my Voice warning you in your mind, obey me."

"I dare not rest, Your Highness," the messenger said, "while Carris is in danger."

To Gaborn's satisfaction, the lad wheeled his mount to the south. In moments he was gone, only the dust hovering above the road to show that he'd come to Heredon at all.

With a heavy heart, Gaborn considered what he should do. He would have to notify the lords in Heredon of this disturbing news.

As they rode through the dawn, Gaborn suddenly had the urge to get away. He put his heels to

horseflesh, and his roan hunter raced under the shadowed trees along the road, with Binnesman's mount easily keeping pace beside and the Days on his white mule struggling along behind. At last they reached a wide bend on a hilltop that afforded them an unobstructed view of Castle Sylvarresta.

Gaborn drew in his reins; he and the wizard halted, staring in surprise.

Castle Sylvarresta was set on a small hill at a bend in the river Wye, its high walls and towers rising like pinnacles. All around that hill squatted a walled city. Beyond the city walls, there was normally just the countryside—empty fields with a few haystacks, orchards, and farmers' cottages and barns.

But over the past week, as news of the rise of an Earth King spread, lords and peasants from all across Heredon—and even from kingdoms beyond Heredon—had begun to gather. Gaborn had a premonition of what was to come. The fields before Castle Sylvarresta had been burned black by Raj Ahten, yet already so many peasants had amassed that the grounds around the great walled city of Sylvarresta were covered by pavilions. Not all of the pavilions belonged to peasants; many tents belonged to lords and knights from around Heredon—armies that had marched when they'd heard of the invasion but had arrived too late to offer any aid. Banners of Orwynne and North Crowthen and Reeds and various merchant princes from Lysle mingled among the hosts, and off on one hill camped thousands of merchants out of Indhopal who—after having been driven off by King Sylvarresta—had hurried back to see this new wonder, this Earth King.

The fields around Castle Sylvarresta were dark, but they were no longer dark from the blackened grass. They were dark with the massed bodies of hundreds of thousands of men and animals.

“By the Powers,” Gaborn swore. “Their numbers must have quadrupled in the past three days. It will take me the better part of a week to Choose them all.”

Distantly, Gaborn could hear music drifting above the smoke of cooking fires. The sound of a jousting lance cracked across the countryside, followed immediately by cheers. Binnesman sat ahorse, gazing down, just as the Days rode up. All three mounts breathed heavily after their short run.

But something caught Gaborn's eye. In the sky above the valley, a flock of starlings flew, thousands strong, like a living cloud. They weaved one way, then another, swooped and then soared upward. It was as if they were lost, searching for a place to land but unable to find safety. Starlings often flew thus in the autumn, but these birds seemed peculiarly spooked.

Gaborn heard the honking of geese. He looked along the Wye River, which wound through the green fields like a silver thread. A hundred yards above the river, miles away, the geese flew in a V along the river course. But their voices sounded strained, crass.

Beside him, Binnesman sat upright and turned to Gaborn. “You hear it, too, don't you? You feel it in your bones.”

“What?” Gaborn asked.

Gaborn's Days cleared his throat as if to ask a question, but said nothing. The historian seldom spoke. Interference in the affairs of mankind was forbidden by the Time Lords that the Days served. Still, he was obviously curious.

“The Earth. The Earth is speaking to us,” Binnesman said. “It is speaking to you and to me.”

“What does it say?”

“I don't know, yet,” Binnesman answered honestly. The wizard scratched at his beard, then frowned. “But this is the way it usually speaks to me: in the worried stirrings of rabbits and mice, in the shifting flight of a cloud of birds, in the cries of geese. Now it whispers to the Earth King, too. You are growing, Gaborn. Growing in power.”

Gaborn studied Binnesman. The wizard's skin was oddly tinged a bit of ruddy red that almost matched his baggy robe. He smelled of the herbs that he kept in his oversized pockets, linden blossom and mint and borage and wizard's violet and basil and a hundred other spices. He looked like little more than a jolly old man, except for the lines of wisdom in his face.

"I will check into this. We shall know more tonight," Binnesman assured Gaborn.

But Gaborn was unable to lay aside his worries. He suspected that he would need to convene a war council, but dared not do so until he knew the nature of the threat that his Earth senses warned him against.

The three riders headed down the road into a deep fold between two hills that had been burned black last week.

There, at the base of the hill, Gaborn saw what he took to be an old woman sitting by the roadside with a blanket draped over her head.

As the horses came stamping down the road, the old woman looked up, and Gaborn saw that she was not old at all. Instead, it was a young maiden, a girl he recognized.

Gaborn had led an "army" from Castle Groverman to Longmot a week ago. The army had consisted of two hundred thousand cattle, driven by peasant men and women and children and a few aging soldiers. The dust of their passage as the herd crossed the plains had been ruse enough to dislodge the Wolf Lord Raj Ahten from his attack on Longmot.

If Raj Ahten had discovered Gaborn's ruse, Gaborn felt sure the Wolf Lord would have cut down every woman and child in his retinue out of sheer spite. The girl at the foot of the hill had ridden in Gaborn's army. He remembered her well. She'd carried a heavy banner in one hand and a nursing babe in the other.

She had acted bravely and selflessly. He'd been glad for the aid of people like her. Yet Gaborn was astonished to see her—a mere peasant who probably didn't have access to a horse—here at Castle Sylvarresta, more than two hundred miles north of Longmot, only a week after the battle.

"Oh, Your Highness," the girl said, ducking her head as if to curtsy.

Gaborn realized she'd been waiting by the roadside for him to return from his hunt. He'd been gone from Castle Sylvarresta for three days. He wondered how long she'd been here.

She climbed to her feet, and Gaborn saw that the dirt of the road stained her feet. Obviously, she had walked all the way from Longmot. In her right hand she cradled her babe. As she stood, she put her hand beneath her shawl to ease her nipple from the babe's mouth and cover herself properly.

After giving aid in a victorious battle, many a lord might have come to seek a favor. Gaborn had seldom seen a peasant do so. Yet this girl wanted something of him, wanted it badly.

Binnesman smiled and said, "Molly? Molly Drinkham? Is that you?"

The girl smiled shyly as the wizard dismounted and approached her. "Aye, it's me."

"Well, let me see your child." Binnesman took the infant from her arms and held it up. The child, dark-haired thing who could not have been more than two months old, had put its fist in its mouth and was now sucking vigorously, eyes closed. The wizard smiled beatifically. "A boy?" he asked. Molly nodded. "Oh, he's the very image of his father," Binnesman clucked. "Such a precious thing. Verrin would have been proud. But what are you doing here?"

"I come to see the Earth King," Molly said.

"Well, here he is," Binnesman said. He turned to Gaborn and introduced Molly. "Your Highness, Molly Drinkham, who was once a resident of Castle Sylvarresta."

Molly suddenly froze, her face pale with terror, as if she could not bear the thought of speaking to

king. Or perhaps she fears only to speak to me, the Earth King, Gaborn thought.

“I beg your pardon, sire,” Molly said too shrilly. “I hope I’m not disturbing you—I know it’s early. You probably don’t remember me—”

Gaborn alighted from his horse, so that he would not be sitting high above her, and sought to put her at ease. “You’re not disturbing me,” he said softly. “You’ve walked a long way from Longmot. I remember the aid you gave me. Some great need must have driven-you, and I’m eager to hear your request.”

She nodded shyly. “You see, I was thinking...”

“Go on,” Gaborn said, glancing up at his Days.

“I wasn’t always just a scullery maid for Duke Groverman, you see,” she said. “My father used to muck stables for King Sylvarresta’s men, and I lived in the castle. But I did something that shamed me, and my father sent me south.” She glanced down at her child. A bastard.

“I rode with you last week,” she continued, “and I know this: If you’re the Earth King, then you should have all of Erden Geboren’s powers. That’s what makes you an Earth King.”

“Where did you hear this?” Gaborn asked, his tone betraying his concern. He suddenly feared that she would ask some impossible task of him. Erden Geboren’s deeds were the stuff of legend.

“Binnesman himself,” Molly said. “I used to help him dry his herbs, and he would tell me stories. And if you’re the Earth King, then bad times are coming, and the Earth has given you the power to Choose—to Choose the knights who will fight beside you, and to Choose who will live under your protection and who won’t. Erden Geboren knew when his people were in danger, and he warned them in their hearts and in their minds. Surely you should be able to do the same.”

Gaborn knew what she wanted now. She wanted to live, wanted him to Choose her. Gaborn looked at her a long moment, saw more than her round face and the pleasing figure hidden beneath her dirty robes. He saw more than her long dark hair and the creases of worry lines around her blue eyes. He used his Earth Sight to stare into the depths of her soul.

He saw her love for Castle Sylvarresta and her lost innocence there, and her love for a man named Verrin, a stablemaster who had died after being kicked by a horse. He saw her dismay to find herself at Castle Groverman doing menial work. She wanted little from life. She wanted to come home, to show her babe to her mother, to return to the place where she’d felt warm and loved. He could see no deception in her, no cruelty. More than anything, she was proud of her bastard son, and she loved him fiercely.

The Earth Sight could not show Gaborn everything. He suspected that if he peered into her heart for long hours, he might get to know her better than she knew herself. But time was short, and in a few seconds he saw enough.

After a moment, Gaborn relaxed. He raised his left hand. “Molly Drinkham,” he intoned softly as he cast his spell. “I Choose you. I Choose to protect you through the dark times to come. If ever you hear my Voice in your mind or in your heart, take heed. I will come to you or lead you to safety as best I can.”

It was done. Immediately Gaborn felt the efficacy of the spell, felt the binding, the now-familiar tug in his gut that let him feel her presence, that would warn him when she was in danger.

Molly’s eyes widened as if she felt it, too, and then her face went red with embarrassment. She dropped to one knee.

“No, Your Highness, you misunderstand,” she said. She held up the infant in her arms. The boy’s fist flopped from his mouth, but the child seemed to be half-asleep, and did not mind. “I want you to

Choose him, to make him one of your knights someday!”

Gaborn stared at the child and began to shiver, unnerved by the request. The woman had obviously been raised on tales of Erden Geboren’s great deeds, and so she expected much of an Earth King. But she had no comprehension of Gaborn’s limits. “You don’t understand,” he tried to explain softly. “It’s not that easy. When I Choose you, my enemies take notice. My war is not with men or with reavers, it is with the unseen Powers that move them. My Choosing you puts you in greater danger, and though I might be able to send knights to your aid, more often than not you must help yourself. My resources are far too thin, our enemies too numerous. You have to be able to help yourself, to help me get you out of danger. I—I couldn’t do that to a child. I couldn’t put him in danger. He can’t defend himself.”

“But he needs someone to protect him,” Molly said. “He doesn’t have a da.” She waited for him to speak for a moment, then begged, “Please! Please Choose him for me!”

Gaborn studied her face, and his cheeks burned with shame. He looked from side to side, from Binnesman to his Days, like a ferrin caught in a dark corner of the kitchen, hoping to escape.

“Molly, you ask that the child be allowed to grow up to become a warrior in my service,” Gaborn stammered. “But I don’t think we have that long! Dark times are coming, the darkest this world has ever seen. In months perhaps, or maybe a year, they’ll be on us in deadly earnest. Your child won’t be able to fight in battle.”

“Then Choose him anyway,” Molly said. “At least you’ll know when he’s in danger.”

Gaborn stared at her in utter horror. A week ago, he’d lost several people that he’d Chosen in the battle for Longmot: his father, Chemoise’s father, King Sylvarresta. When they’d died, he’d felt stricken to the core of his soul. He hadn’t sought to explain the sensation to himself or anyone else, but he felt as if ... they each had roots, and were pulled from his body, leaving dark holes that gaped and could never be filled. Losing them was like losing limbs that could never be replaced, and he was mortified by the thought that their deaths were a sign of his own personal failure. He carried the guilt as if he were a father who, through neglect, had let his own children drown in a well.

Gaborn wetted his lips with his tongue. “I’m not that strong. You don’t know what you ask of me.”

“There’s no one to protect him,” Molly said. “No father, no friends. Only me. See, he’s just a babe!”

She unwrapped the sleeping boy, held him up, and stepped in close. The child was thin, though he slept soundly and did not appear to be hungry. He had the sweet scent of a newborn on his breath.

“Come now,” Binnesman urged her. “If His Majesty says he can’t Choose the child, then he can’t Choose him.” Binnesman gently took Molly by the elbow, as if to steer her toward town.

Molly turned on Binnesman and shouted viciously, “So what would you have me do, then? Dash the little bastard’s head against a stone by the road and be done with him? Is that what you want?”

Gaborn felt dismayed, cast adrift. He glanced at his Days, and feared what might be written of his choice. He looked to Binnesman for help. “What can I do?”

The Earth Warden studied the babe, frowned. With the barest movement he shook his head. “I fear that you are correct. Choosing the child would not be wise, nor would it be kind.”

Molly’s mouth dropped in shock, and she stepped back as if she’d just recognized that Binnesman, an old friend, had become an enemy.

Binnesman tried to explain, “Molly, Gaborn has been charged by the Earth to gather the seeds of mankind, to protect those he can during the dark times to come. Yet even all that he does might not be enough. Other races have passed from the face of the earth—the Toth, the duskins. Mankind could be next.”

Binnesman did not exaggerate. When the Earth had manifested itself in Binnesman's garden, it had said much the same thing. If anything, Binnesman was being far too gentle with Molly, holding back the truth from her.

"The Earth has promised to protect Gaborn, and he has sworn in turn to protect you as best he can. But I think it best you protect your own child."

This was how Gaborn planned to save his people—by Choosing lords and warriors to care for their charges. Before the hunt, he'd Chosen over a hundred thousand people around Heredon, had selected as many as he could—old and young, lords and peasants. At any moment, if he considered one of those people, he could reach out in his mind, know their direction and distance. He could find them if he had to, and he knew if they were in danger. But there were so many of them! So he'd begun Choosing knights and lords to protect certain enclaves. He struggled to Choose wisely, and he dared not reject the frail, the deaf, the blind, the young, or the weak-minded. He dared not value these less than any other man, for he would not make of them human sacrifices to his own conceit. By placing a lord, or even a father and mother, in charge of the safety of his or her own charges, he relieved some of the pressure he felt. And to a great degree, he'd done exactly that. He'd been using his powers to instruct his lords, requiring them to prepare their defenses and weapons, prepare for war.

Molly paled at the thought that she would be placed in charge of her infant, looked so stricken that Gaborn feared she would faint. She wisely suspected that she could not protect it adequately.

"And I too will help protect your child," Binnesman offered in consolation. He muttered some words under his breath, wet his finger with his tongue, and knelt by the roadside to swirl the finger in the dirt. He stood, and with muddy fingers he painstakingly began to draw a rune of protection on the child's forehead.

Yet clearly Molly believed the wizard's aid would not be enough. Tears coursed down her cheeks, and she stood in shock, trembling.

"If it was yours," Molly begged Gaborn, "would you Choose it? Would you Choose it then?"

Gaborn knew that he would. Molly must have read the answer on his face.

"I'll give him to you then—" Molly offered. "A wedding present, if you'll have him. I'll give him to you, to raise as your son."

Gaborn closed his eyes. The despair in her tone struck him like an axe.

He could hardly Choose this child. It seemed a cruel thing to do. This is madness, he thought. If I Choose it, how many thousands of other mothers might justly ask the same? Ten thousand, a hundred thousand? Yet what if I don't Choose it and Molly is right? What if by my inaction I condemn it to die? "Does the child have a name?" Gaborn asked, for in some lands, bastards were never named.

"I call him Verrin," Molly said, "like his father."

Gaborn gazed at the child, looked beyond his sweet face and smooth skin, deep into his small mind. There was little to see—a life unlived, a few vague longings. The child felt relieved and grateful for his mother's nipple and for the warmth of her body and the way she sang sweetly to get him to sleep. But Verrin did not comprehend his mother as a person, did not love her in the way that she loved him.

Gaborn stifled a sob. "Verrin Drinkham," he said softly, raising his left hand. "I Choose you. I Choose you for the Earth. May the Earth heal you. May the Earth hide you. May the Earth make you its own."

Gaborn felt the binding take force.

"Thank you, Your Highness," Molly said. The girl's eyes glistened with tears. She turned and headed toward Castle Groverman, ready to walk the two hundred miles home.

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