

WORLDBINDER

DAVID FARLAND



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Praise for The Runelords Saga

“[Farland] explores the very nature of virtue and finds disturbing contradictions at the heart of every moral question.... When I reached the end of *The Runelords*, and saw grace arise from a devastating battlefield where too many great hearts lay dead, Farland had earned the tears that came to my eyes. It was not sentiment but epiphany.”

—Orson Scott Card, author of *Empire*,
on *The Runelords*

“The suspense is real, the action is nonstop, and the characterizations continue to convince.... [This is] a series that has put Farland on high-fantasy readers’ maps.”

—Booklist on *The Lair of Bones*

“Sometimes truly terrifying, sometimes impossibly sweet, *The Lair of Bones* is a tale sure to entrance any reader. This is a superb story with deeply empathetic characters.”

—Sara Douglass, author of *The Serpent Bride*

“Sure, *Brotherhood* has incredible edge-of-your-seat, nail-biting battle scenes—the finale being an exceptional example—but Gaborn’s struggle to make a decision, and then his facing the consequences, is equally thrilling. *Brotherhood of the Wolf* is a welcome sequel.”

—Starlog

“The author’s imaginative approach to magic, coupled with a richly detailed fantasy world and a cast of memorable heroes and villains, adds depth and variety to this epic tale of war and valor.”

—Library Journal on *Wizardborn*

“*Worldbinder* is more character driven and less action intense than the previous books in the Runelords saga.... [It] can stand alone appealing to apocalyptic fantasy fans, but series fans will definitely enjoy Farland’s newest tale.”

—Alternative Worlds

The Runelords

Brotherhood of the Wolf

Wizardborn

The Lair of Bones

Sons of the Oak

Worldbinder

*The Wyrmling Horde**

*forthcoming

WORLD BINDER

❧ DAVID FARLAND ❧



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NEW YORK

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For Mary, as always.

With special appreciation to Matt Harrill
for his copious help.

Though your heart may burn with righteous desires, your noblest hopes will become fuel to fire despair among mankind.

That which you seek to build will crumble to ash.

War shall follow you all of your days, and though the world may applaud your slaughter, you will come to know that each of your victories is mine.

And thus I seal you, till the end of time....

—Asgaroth's curse upon Fallion

The tree riveted Shadoath as she stalked into Castle Coorm. It was no more than a sapling perhaps eight feet tall, with a dozen branches spreading wide in a perfect umbrella. But the sight of it smote her at even a hundred yards, urging her heart to melt. Every winding branch was perfect. Every crook of every twig seemed to have been preconceived by an artist's genius before being executed. The leaves were darkest green above, a mellow honey beneath, and looked something like an oak. The bark was the rich golden color of ripe wheat, warm and soothing, inviting to the eye.

Shadoath had seen such a tree once before, countless ages ago, on another world.

No, she thought. It can't be.

But she knew that it was. It wasn't just how the tree looked. It was how it made her feel. Her eyes wanted to drink it in from the distance. Her arms wanted to embrace it. Her head and shoulders yearned to shelter beneath it. Her lungs ached to breathe the perfumed air that exuded from its leaves. Her eyes longed to lie beneath it and stare up, and dimly she recalled the ancient days, when those leaves emitted a soft golden light during the nights, and those who took pleasure beneath it would peer up through layers of foliage and try to make out the light of distant stars. The sight of its limbs made her yearn for perfection, to be better than she had ever been, to do more than she had ever done, to *change* for the better.

The tree was dangerous, she knew. Left alive, it would grow and develop, rising up like a mountain, insinuating its branches for miles in every direction. It would silently tug at the minds of men, urge them to become its servants. Left alone, it would do even more. It would silently nurture the souls of men, urging them to become virtuous and perfect.

Every instinct in her shouted, Kill it now! Burn it down!

Only the shock of seeing it stayed her hand.

There were mighty changes going on in Rofehavan. The children born in the past generation were more like Bright Ones from the netherworld than children of the past.

And now the One True Tree had risen again.

She wanted to be sure. She studied the knotty roots coming up from the grass. The tree had been planted in the green at Castle Coorm, in the center of a roundabout. A small rock wall perhaps four feet tall, surrounded the tree. A fountain rose at the back, water splashing down gray stones from the mouth of a gargoyle. At one time there had been a pleasant rock garden

here, rife with flowering vines. A few of them still remained, trumpet flowers of red.

But Shadoath could not look for long. The tree drew her eye, the golden bark rising from the grass, where the small roots were already beginning to splay wide, questing for purchase, the bole of the tree twisting as if in torment; the branches rising up to embrace heaven.

Shadoath stood peering at it, and all weariness seemed to leave her, all of her aches and worries. It was as if she laid aside every care, and an upwelling of hope rose inside her, strange longings.

The tree is my master, and I am its servant, her body told her.

But a voice whispered inside her, the voice of the tree. "You are *my* master; how may I serve you?"

An image of their true relationship formed in her mind. Neither was whole without the other, the tree told her. Neither of us should live alone.

Damn, she realized, the young tree has already gained consciousness. Left alone, it would become wise and venerable and forbidding.

There was a rustling sound behind her, one of the guards on the castle wall. Across the courtyard, Warlord Hale was stumping down from the tower, lugging his great weight along as fast as he could. She had almost forgotten that he existed, even though he was the one who had sent the urgent message asking what to do about the damned tree.

"So," a girl asked, "do you like my tree?"

Shadoath shook her head, let her vision clear, and suddenly spotted the young woman there beneath the tree, squatting cross-legged upon a rock. Shadoath had been so captivated that she hadn't seen the girl, even though she sat in plain sight, as quiet and motionless as a mushroom.

She was some indeterminate age between twelve and sixteen, Shadoath imagined, with hair so pale yellow it was almost white, and eyes as pale as sea foam. Her skin had the greenish cast of one who was Wizardborn, and she wore a robe that looked not to have been woven but to simply have grown around her as roots that interlocked. It was the pale green of new leaves. She bore a staff of golden wood, hewn from the tree itself.

"I love your tree," Shadoath said.

The girl smiled broadly, stood, and raised a hand, beckoning Shadoath to come forward, to rest beneath its limbs.

Shadoath could hear Warlord Hale pounding down the wooden stairs, his huge bulk and assault upon them. He was nearly to the door of his keep.

Now that her mind had cleared, Shadoath realized *why* the young wizardess had chosen to plant the tree here in the courtyard of Castle Coorm. It was to honor the last Earth King, Gaborn Val Orden, of course. This had been his residence before he wandered off into the wilderness to die.

So the wizardess had brought the tree here in his honor. She wanted to restore him to the people's memory even as she and her damned tree created a new world order.

Shadoath reached the rock wall, and the young woman stretched down to give her a hand.

That's when Shadoath struck, as quick as the thought touched her.

Shadoath had taken the body of a warrior this time, a pale assassin from Inkarra, with skin whiter than bone, hair the color of spun silver, and pale blue tattoos that covered her arms and legs. Shadoath's speed was blinding, and her curved dagger bit into the wizardess's armpit with great force.

Shadoath grabbed the proffered hand, for Earth Wardens, as this young wizardess surely was, had great skill at both hiding and healing. Shadoath held on while the young wizardess tried to leap back and buck, like a young deer. She saw the girl's pleading eyes as war blood pumped over Shadoath's hand.

Shadoath twisted the blade, and she saw strange visions. Suddenly she seemed to be standing in deep rushes at the edge of a pond while a huge grouse thundered up from the ground. Obviously the vision was meant to startle her, get her to loosen her grip, but Shadoath held on.

Suddenly she seemed to be holding a great bear whose vicious fangs were mere inches from her throat. Shadoath drew out her blade, plunged it beneath the young wizardess's sternum, and let it quest for her heart.

The bear disappeared, and for a moment she saw the wizardess's true face, her pupils constricted to pinpricks, and she saw an image of the One True Tree as it might be someday, with tens of thousands of people living beneath it, giving it water and food, giving it life even as it sheltered them from the elements and from the eyes of all enemies.

And then the young wizardess was dead, nothing but a piece of bloody meat gurgling and jerking at Shadoath's feet.

Shadoath pulled her away from the tree, for she knew that the tree itself had healing powers, and might even be able to raise the newly dead if her body remained beneath its boughs for long.

"Why?" the tree begged.

Shadoath merely smiled secretively as she dragged the bloody girl far across the green.

The bloated form of Warlord Hale appeared at the door of the keep, his head towering above those of his guards: he trundled across the cobbled pavement to meet Shadoath.

"Killed 'er, I see?" he said. "Glad you were up to it. I tried it myself a dozen times, but couldn't seem to get near her, even though she never went more than a dozen yards from the tree. What do ya want me to do with the damned tree now, chop 'er down, burn it?"

Shadoath considered as Warlord Hale babbled on inanely.

"It's one of *those* trees, ain't it? I told the boys it was, a World Tree, just like the old tale. Didn't know what to do with it. Didn't want to just let it stand—bad for morale. That's why I sent for you."

Hale obviously yearned for approval, so Shadoath said, "You did well, sending for me."

"So, do I chop it down?"

The human spirit would revolt at such a task. It might even break. She doubted that many of Hale's men could do it. But Hale was far enough gone in the ways of evil that he could

hardly be called human anymore.

Shadoath considered. She wanted the tree dead. But there was one thing that she wanted more—Fallion Orden. For nearly a year now, since she had lost the battle at the Ends of the Earth, she had been considering ways to subvert him—or barring that, to destroy him. She had been taking deep counsel with others of her kind, and they had begun to devise a trap. All that they lacked was the right bait.

Could this be it? Fallion Orden craved to restore the Earth, make it whole, as it had been before the cataclysm. And the very fact that the One True Tree had been reborn was a sign that the restoration—somehow, beyond Shadoath's understanding—was moving forward rapidly.

Fallion did not know it yet, but he would need the wisdom of a World Tree in order to advance his plans.

Given that, would not the spirit of this tree call to his? And would not his spirit call to the tree?

And when the two met, would it not be a good time to thwart both of their plans?

“There is good news in the Netherworld,” Shadoath told Warlord Hale as she considered what to do. “The Queen of the Loci has escaped. The Glories sought to bind her in a Cage of Brilliance, but their powers failed them. They are not as strong as they were in ages past, and we have managed to free her. She is gathering armies more powerful than ever before. Remain true, and your reward shall be great and endless.”

“Glad to hear it,” Warlord Hale said. “I—I am true to you, you know.”

There was malice in his eyes, she saw, and desire. He wanted to give his soul to her, let his spirit become the home of a locus. Because her kind had trained him from youth, he believed that in doing so he would gain a type of immortality, that his soul would be bound into the black soul of the locus, and carried down through time.

He was fit for it, she knew. His soul was a black pit. There was true and monstrous evil in him, and he would be a comfortable abode for a locus. But he yearned to be possessed so badly that she could not resist the urge to deny him this reward.

“Soon,” she promised. “Your time is coming.”

She turned to the tree, regarded it coolly. “Leave it alive for now. I want Fallion Orden to see it.”

THE HOMECOMING

I do not know when I first began to dream of healing the Earth. There was so much pain in the world, so much suffering and heartache. It could have been when I was among the Gwardeen. One of our fliers, a small boy of six named Zel, was feeding a hatchling graak, and the great reptile took the boy's arm. It was an accident, I am sure. But try as I might, we could not staunch the flow of blood, and Zel died in my arms. I remembered thinking, In a better world, I could have saved him. In a better world, children would not have to die this way.

It was only three years later that I began to be haunted by a dream of a wheel of fire, a vast rune, and I began to suspect that there was a way to heal our broken world.

—from the journal of Fallion Orden

They came creeping through the woods just before dawn, four of them, weary but resolute like hunters on the trail of a wounded stag. They halted at the edge of the trees, silent regarding summer fields thick with oats and the brooding castle beyond.

“Castle Coorm,” the leader, Fallion, whispered. “As promised.” The sight of it filled him with nostalgia and soothed his frayed nerves like mulled wine.

The pre-dawn sky still had one bright star in it, and the castle mostly lay in shadows, the limned walls looking soft blue instead of white. There were pinpricks of yellow in the tower windows, and watch-fires burned outside the city gates like blistering gems. The dancing fires, the smell of the smoke, beckoned him. But Fallion merely stood silently regarding the scene. The castle was falling into ruins, but was obviously still inhabited.

He had seen too much devastation, too many ruined cities since his return to Mystarria. The Courts of Tide had been laid waste. Its once-fair streets were now dark lanes, blockaded by gangs that fought like wild dogs to protect their few scraps of food and clothing. The women and children there had a haunted look. They had suffered too much rape, too much plunder.

The sight of it had left Fallion reeling. In a more perfect world, he told himself, the women would wear flowers in their hair, and children would not learn to fear strangers.

Upon the death of Fallion's father, Gaborn Val Orden, assassins from a dozen lands had descended upon Mystarria, hoping to strike down Fallion and his brother. These were not ordinary assassins. These were powerful runelords that had taken brawn, stamina, speed, and grace from their subjects, making them warriors that no commoner could hope to withstand. And though Mystarria had been a wealthy country then, with many strong runelords of its own, it could not withstand the sustained onslaughts of such men.

Only by strengthening its forces could it hope to survive, but that required forcible-magical branding irons that could draw out an attribute from a vassal and then imbue it upon the lord.

But there was a dearth of forcibles. The rare blood metal from which they were made was running out. Rumors said that the lords of Kartish, far to the west, were hoarding what little they found, intent on protecting their own realms in the dark times to come.

Chancellor Westhaven, who had been left in charge of Mystarria, had even taken a journey to Kartish, hoping to sway those who had once been allies.

He had never returned. Some said that his mournful spirit could be seen at night in the towers at the Courts of Tide, wandering the hallways, rummaging through the empty locked boxes in the treasure room.

And so Mystarria had been attacked on a dozen fronts, like a great bull taken down by jackals that ripped it apart and gorged themselves while leaving their prey still only half alive. Its treasuries had been looted, its towers knocked down, its farms and cities burned, its lands divided. The Warlords of Internook held the coast, while Beldinook took the east, and Crowthen to the north split the rest.

Frankly, after the rapes, the looting, and the murder, Fallion did not see that there was much of a country left worth fighting over.

He eyed the remains of Castle Coorm, dully surprised to see it still intact.

The towers of the castle stood, but dark stands of ivy grew up them, looking like rents in the darkness. The eastern-most walls were a decrepit gray, most of the lime having washed away after years of winter storms. A lone bullfrog bellowed amid the placid reeds of the moat.

Fallion held to the shadows. He wore a gray half-cape, fastened with a silver cape pin in the form of an owl, long black hair sweeping back over his shoulders, brown eyes so full of light that they seemed a perfect mirror for the distant fires. A naked blade gleamed silver in his hand.

He studied the fires, and for an instant an image came to mind of a vast rune made of flames, encircled by flames—The Seal of the Inferno. It had been almost three years ago that he had first seen it in a dream while staring into the hearth after a midwinter's dinner. Since then he had begun practicing his skills as a flameweaver, listening to the many tongues of fire, seeking inspiration in sunlight. He knew which direction the seal lay, deep in the Underworld. The wheel of fire haunted him, came to mind a hundred times a day. He could not so much as glance at the sun or even a silver moon without seeing the afterimage of the rune imprinted on his retina.

He had crossed the oceans to find it. Just a couple hundred more miles now, and he would descend into the Mouth of the World, hoping to locate the Seal of the Inferno and repair the damage to it. By mending its defects and binding it to the Seal of Heaven and the Seal of Earth, he hoped to restore balance to the world, to remake it in the perfect image of the Original True World of legend.

Behind him came Rhianna, following so close at Fallion's back that she touched him. Her fierce blue eyes looked troubled, and she clung to her quarterstaff as if she was lost at sea and it was the only thing that might save her from drowning.

"I remember this place," she said, her voice shaky. "I remember..."

She placed a hand on Fallion's shoulder and just stood. Her flawless face was white with shock, a grimace of pain formed by the slash of her lips.

For nearly a decade, Rhianna had blocked out her memories of this place. But now, Fallion could see, they threatened to overwhelm her.

At her back stood Fallion's younger brother, Jaz, followed by their foster sister, Talon. Jaz carried a war bow carved from ruddy red reaver's horn. Talon bore a light saber that some dainty gentleman might have worn for a night on the town, but in her practiced hands, the blade would never be confused for a mere adornment.

"What do you remember?" Fallion asked Rhianna.

Rhianna's brows drew together in concentration; she recalled racing down a mountain on a force horse that had been richly endowed with runes of brawn and metabolism. Fallion sat in the saddle ahead of her, and she clung to him for dear life. Even then she realized that she was falling in love with him. She remembered thinking him strong and handsome, and she prayed that he would be able to save her. They must have been traveling at eighty miles per hour, for the pines at the margin of the road seemed to fly past. Her heart pounded as if trying to beat its way out of her chest, and in her young mind, she could not imagine that she would live until she reached the castle. Her stomach had ached, and she worried that something was eating her. A stregi-saat had placed its eggs in her womb to hatch, and the young were eating their way out. She remembered it all.

"We were being chased by monsters," Rhianna said, suddenly planting her staff firmly in the ground. She had been a child back then, with a child's fears. But for years she had been practicing with weapons, and she was growing dangerous. The staff that she bore now was bejeweled and covered in runes. It had once belonged to the Earth King himself. She grimaced. "Now we're back, and *we're* the monsters."

Jaz laughed. He always seemed to be light of heart lately. Rhianna had come on this journey because she loved Fallion, because she would throw herself in death's path to protect him. But Jaz had come because, as he'd said, "I've been following him around since I could crawl. I don't see why I should stop now."

Jaz said, "I was sure we'd blundered past this place ten leagues back. And look, there are *people* inside. You think if we beg nicely, they'd part with a mug of ale?"

Jaz sat down and tried pulling off a boot. It had mud inside and came free with a sucking sound.

"People will do astonishing things for money," Fallion said, "even part with perfectly good ale."

He turned back to the castle. The long war had taken its toll. A village had once thrived on the hill below, a place named Weeds. A few dozen cozy mud-and-wattle cottages had grown up here with roofs thatched from wheat straw. As a child, Fallion had imagined that the cottages were living things, lounging among the herb and flower gardens, partitioned with rock walls. The homes had been shaded in the long summer by fruit trees.

He regarded the ruins of a cottage on a knoll, and suddenly had a memory from when he was a child of three. In it, his father had come home from his wanderings, and had taken him out into the village among the crowds. Fallion had ridden on his father's shoulder, until he

father stopped beneath a cherry tree on the knoll. There, Fallion pulled the red cherries from the tree, and they were so ripe that they burst at his touch, and juice ran thick down his fingers. He licked it off and picked his fill, all the while begriming his father, he was sure now.

But his father had only laughed with delight.

Fallion remembered riding upon the shoulders of a king, being taller than everyone looking down upon men that had dwarfed him, wishing that he could be that tall forever.

He smiled. It was a good memory, and one of only a handful that he recalled of his father. The journey across the ocean had been worth making just for that.

But no cottages graced the fields anymore. Nothing was left but burned-out remains: the rocky husks down in the distance looked like dead beetles.

The folk in the castle had probably burned the houses so that the monsters would not be able to hide in them. *Strengi-saats*, the enemy was called in the old tongue, the “strong ones.”

And it was rumored that worse things had begun to haunt the woods. It was rumored that one of them might even haunt Castle Coorm.

“Castle Coorm has become an island, a refuge of stone besieged by a wilderness of trees,” Fallion mused. “Now there’s not a hamlet within thirty leagues.”

“We should know,” Talon grouched. “We just floundered through every bog between here and the Courts of Tide.” She crouched, resting on her heels.

Fallion was more leg-sore and hungry than he had ever been. Worse, he had a bad cut on his calf. It wasn’t much, but the smell of congealed blood drew *strengi-saats*.

He wasn’t sure if he should try to rest here. He had heard a strange rumor of this place, the strangest that he’d heard in his life. It was said that several years past, a woman of Coorm had given birth not to a child, but to a tree—a short, stunted tree with a handful of roots and two gnarled limbs. The tree, it was said, had bark that was a ruddy gold. Fallion wondered about the tale. It was said that the woman’s flesh was green, like one of the Wizardborn filled with Earth Powers, and some speculated that her offspring was a “World Tree,” like the One True Oak of legend that had spread its branches wide, giving shelter to all of mankind at the beginning of creation.

Among the peasants, the idea of a woman giving birth to a World Tree somehow did not seem beyond the realm of possibility. After all, since the coming of the Earth King, Fallion’s father, the world had changed. The children born after his coming were stronger than men of times past, wiser and more purposeful, even as the world around them grew stranger and more treacherous. Men were becoming more perfect.

So was evil.

The tree, so the tale went, had been planted in the castle green, where it could be protected and admired, but then a bandit came from the woods, Lord Hale, a man of great power.

It was said that he slaughtered the wizardess.

Many had fled from Coorm then, and for years now, there had been no news from the castle.

Suddenly, a woman screamed down below.

“What’s that?” Jaz asked. He pulled on his boot, leapt up. It was not the drawn-out wail of someone grieving past loss. It was announced first by grunts and short yelps of pain, shriels of terror.

“Someone is fighting,” Fallion said.

“Someone is dying!” Rhianna corrected.

From across the fields, at the eastern verge of the woods, a deep snarl erupted, like the sound of thunder on the horizon, followed by the strange bell-like cry of a strengi-saat.

In the woods just up the hill, a pair of crows suddenly cried out, “Claw, claw, claw.”

Fallion glanced up. The woods here had been burned back, blackening the great oak, searing away the brush, leaving the strengi-saats fewer places to hide, Fallion speculated. Up in the nearby trees, he spotted the crows. The birds were half asleep, but they watched the castle as if it were the sprawling carcass of a dying giant.

The woman screamed again, her voice echoing from the castle walls. Fallion, willed his heart to slow, and listened.

The sounds of the scuffle at Coorm came to him with unnatural clarity, as often happened in the mountains on a clear morning.

He wished for more, half-wished that he had taken endowments of hearing or sight from others. Some had offered when he left—the children that had served under him in the Gwardeen, there in the outposts at the Ends of the Earth. But he had declined. It was an evil thing to take an endowment from a man, for if a man gave you his strength, his heart might fail thereafter. Fallion could not bear the thought of using another person that way. Still, he had nearly three hundred forcibles in his pack as part of his inheritance, and if the need was great enough, he knew that someday he might yet have to take endowments.

There was a gruff cry, a man shouting, “Damn the wench,” followed by a smack, the sound of a fist pummeling a face. “She bit me.”

The woman’s wail went silent, though she grunted and struggled still.

“Open the gates!” the attacker cried in his deep voice. “Open the damned gates, will you?”

In the hills, strengi-saats roared.

“They’re going to give a woman to the strengi-saats,” Rhianna whispered.

The thought horrified her. She found her heart pounding so hard that she was afraid it would burst.

The strengi-saats wouldn’t simply eat the woman. Though they were fierce carnivores, with claws like reaping hooks and teeth like scythes, they didn’t simply rend one’s flesh. No, one of the females would rape the woman, inserting a long ovipositor into the woman’s womb so that it could incubate half a dozen leathery eggs.

Then the strengi-saat would drag the woman into the woods, hide her high among the limbs of a tree, and keep her, terrified but alive, until the eggs hatched, and the young ate their way from the woman’s body.

“Fools,” Fallion growled. “What are they thinking? In killing her this way, they on

reinforce the numbers of their enemies.”

“Something more heinous is going on here,” Talon concluded. “Perhaps that is what they want—to increase the numbers of the strengi-saats.”

The castle’s gate began to creak open. Talon clutched her blade, which was as long as her arm and two fingers in width.

Fallion studied the sentries along the wall. He could see their shadowed forms, pacing. There were no more than half a dozen. Two were peering down inside the gates, watching whatever struggle was occurring, but the others showed better judgment, and kept their watch still.

The castle gate swung out, and a pair of burly guards in chain mail and helms dragged the woman outside, hurled her to the ground. The guards turned, trudged back into the castle, and slammed the gate.

Fallion could see a tangle of blond hair on the woman, a white night dress ripped and dirty. She cried in terror and tried to pull her torn dress up, covering her breasts.

She looked forlornly at the gate, went and pounded on it.

“Better run, lass,” one guard shouted from the wall. “In ten seconds, our archers open fire.”

She peered across the darkened fields. There was no shelter out there, only the ruins of a few cottages.

An arrow bounced off the ground at her bare feet, and then another. She leapt away from them, gathered her courage, picked up her skirt, and took off running.

West. She was heading west, toward a tall hill where a lip of woods protruded closest to the castle.

“Not that way, silly wench,” Rhianna hissed.

From the western hill, a strengi-saat raised a barking call, one that Rhianna recognized as a hunting cry.

The woman stopped in her tracks, spun, and headed east, closer to Rhianna’s direction, racing along a muddy track that looked black among the fields.

Rhianna saw where it would reach the woods, just two hundred yards to the north. With any luck, Rhianna thought, I could meet her there.

But it would be a race, with the strengi-saats hot on the woman’s trail.

Rhianna leapt forward, racing through the dark woods.

We’ll have to fight them, Fallion realized, chasing after Rhianna, leaping over a fallen tree, running through a patch of ashes. The morning air was wet and full of dew, thick in his nostrils, muting the biting tang of old ash.

Fallion pumped his legs, driving hard.

In a more perfect world, he thought, a rescuer could run with infinite swiftness.

As he raced, crows came awake, squawking and taking flight in the night air, black wings raking the sky.

“The strengi-saats are coming!” Jaz warned, as he and Talon raced up behind Fallion.

Out across the field, several large, nebulous shadows moved in from the east. Fallion could not see what lay within them. The strengi-saats drew in the light, deepening the darkness about them. In the night, in the woods or upon a lonely street, so long as they remained still they would stay hidden, camouflaged among their shadows. But running across the field their strange ability did them little good. True, their forms remained indistinct, but their presence was easily detected.

The woman reached the woods just ahead of Rhianna, then halted and dropped to her hands and knees, gasping for breath, looking up to peer about in wide-eyed terror. She glanced in Fallion's direction but seemed not to see him. It was not until Rhianna's boot snapped a twig that the woman leapt in terror, rising up with a small branch as her only weapon.

"Don't be afraid," Rhianna whispered. "We're friends."

Rhianna turned and took a guard position, peering among the trees, her staff at the ready.

The young woman stood staring at them all, holding her stick out like a rapier. Apparently she could not believe that anyone would be out here in the forest by night, among the strengi-saats. "Who are you?"

Fallion peered hard. The woman looked to be eighteen or nineteen, a little younger than he. Her face was familiar.

"Ten years is a long time," Jaz offered. "But not long enough so that I would forget your name, Farion. Your father was a good teacher."

Farion stood rooted to the ground, shaking. "Jaz?" she said, incredulous, then looked at Fallion. "Milord?" she cried, dropping to one knee. Tears began to flow freely down her face. "I—we thought you dead. I thought you had died ages ago."

"We're sorry to have left," Fallion said. "Our enemies were too numerous to fight. It had to look as if we were dead."

"Have you come to take back Castle Coorm? Where's your army?" she looked back into the woods, as if hoping that thousands of runelords marched at his back.

"There is no army but the four of us," Fallion admitted.

The words seemed to break Farion's heart. She sagged to the ground, as if all hope were lost, and just began to sob. Nearby, Fallion heard the rumbling growl of a strengi-saat.

Dawn was still minutes away, but it was dark here in the woods. He knew that a fire would keep the monsters at bay. It would also alert the soldiers at Castle Coorm to his presence.

"All is lost then," Farion muttered. "All is lost."

"Not all," Fallion said. "I'll gather an army soon."

Farion shook her head. "Lord Hale tried to force me to his bed. I fought him, and he threw me out, as an example to the others. I'm afraid ... he'll make an example of my sister. She's only thirteen." She looked forlornly to each side of the woods. Then she peered up into Fallion's eyes. "Please, she's all that I have left."

"Damn," Jaz swore, looking to Fallion, urging Fallion to fight. He added hopefully, "The men on the walls have ashen bows. Mine has a farther reach."

“So,” Fallion said, “you’ll fire on the guards while I batter down the gate? I think your jokes are getting better.”

The group had not planned to stop at Coorm. They had more urgent business farther on.

Now they had to stop, Rhianna realized. They couldn’t leave these women to suffer. A woman alone might live a night or two here in the woods, but the strengi-saats would get her in time. Rhianna knew by the look on Jaz’s face that live or die, he would not leave Castle Coorm without a fight.

But Fallion seemed reticent.

What’s wrong with you? Rhianna wondered. We both know what it’s like to be children, to be held in the clutches of an enemy. Don’t you dare walk away from this, Fallion. If you do, I will stop loving you.

But Fallion looked to the west longingly, unsure.

He wants to mend the earth, Rhianna thought. The need presses him, and it breaks his heart to hold back, even for a worthy cause. He must weigh the risk that many might die during the time that is lost against the certainty that this one *will* die.

“All right,” Fallion said at last. “I’ll free your city. But afterward, we will have to redouble our speed.”

Relief flooded through Rhianna. I’m right to love him, she thought.

Fallion kicked some leaves into a pile, knelt over it, and sparked some flint against the hilt of his sword. The leaves were dry in midsummer and caught fire instantly. If Fallion thought it strange that they took fire so fast, it did not show in her face. Only relief was revealed there.

In moments a fierce little blaze was going.

“Is your father well?” Fallion asked. “I have often missed his counsel.”

“His Dedications were killed years back,” Farion said. “He lost his wit, his stamina, his metabolism. All of the lore that he once knew, it’s all gone. For a while, Lord Hale made him his fool, but now he is little more than a simpleton for me to care for. He fetches wood and can feed the cats, but he’s no use for aught else.”

Fallion grieved silently. In all of the realm there had not been a man who loved learning half as much as her father, Hearthmaster Waggit. Among the many ruins that Fallion had encountered in the week since his return to Mysteria, this one seemed to sadden him the most.

He peered into the flames for a long moment, and the Seal of the Inferno appeared, like a burning wheel, imprinted upon his retina. He pulled a log onto the fire. The dancing flames seemed to beckon him.

Off to his left a shadow moved, perhaps thirty paces from the fire. A strengi-saat. Fallion peered in its direction, and the shadows thickened.

“Jaz,” Fallion warned. He picked up a stick from the fire and hurled it toward the shadow. The twig flipped end over end, hit something and blazed bright, revealing the strengi-saat.

It was a large one, perhaps eighteen feet from nose to tail, but had looked smaller as

bellied low to the ground. Its jaws were wide enough to carry a man whole, and its head was leathery and seemed to have scales instead of fur like that found on its back and belly. Ugly black hide stretched over a face as naked as a buzzard's. It had no ears, only tympanum round membranes the size of plates, just behind its enormous eyes. It whirled to race away.

Jaz fired. The arrow *plocked* into the monster's chest, skewering a lung. Black blood gushed out in a fountain as the strengi-saat roared and began rolling among the pine needles. Rhianna shouted and rushed toward it, her staff at the ready, and the monster leapt away, hoping to escape. It lunged off into the shadows, leaving Rhianna far behind. Fallion knew that it would only find a quiet place to die.

The sun had not yet risen, but the sky was growing light. In a moment, the bright disc would rise and hang like a shield upon the shoulder of the world. Fallion warmed his hands by the fire, let its energy seep into him for a few moments longer.

For the past year, he had been seeking to master the flameweavers' arts in earnest. He could feel the energy building inside him, a hidden inferno. When he judged that he could hold no more, he abruptly stood and announced, "Let's go deal with this Lord Hale."

Far above Fallion a star shone so dimly that it could not be seen, a light so distant that even upon the darkest of nights it was only a hazy malformed speck in the vastness of space, unremarkable and unknown. Fallion had never seen the star, for only those with many endowments of sight could discern it. He had never gazed up from a meadow at night and wondered whether worlds spun lazy circles about it. He had never dreamt that it might harbor people similar to his.

Yet upon that world a young man, not entirely human in form, faced challenges of his own....

UPON A FAR WORLD

When the great Rune of Creation was shattered, the One True World shattered with it into a million million Shadow Worlds, each a distortion of the perfect whole, each diminished.

Do men even exist on such worlds? I used to ask. I believed that they must, at least on some of those worlds, for the Bright Ones dwelt upon the One True World, and we are but shadows of them.

How many times had I wondered if upon one of those shadow worlds there was another me, a twisted mockery of what I am, or a shining example of what I might yet become.

If I were to walk upon such a world, I wondered, and happen upon my shadow self, would I even recognize myself?

But never did I guess that it would happen in my lifetime. I do not blame Fallion for what he did. None of us could ever have guessed the terrible consequences of what would come.

—the Wizard Binnesman

The Great War was finally near an end, and mankind had lost.

The castle at Caer Luciare was now a last and lonely refuge perched on the sides of a rocky mount. The forbidding wastes below were a rocky tumult. To the north, west and east, the ruins of ancient cities climbed above the scree. The vast oaks that had once refreshed the land were gone, tree and acorn, razed during battles with the wyrmlings, and now the fields boasted little but boulders, weeds, and thistles. Only in a few distant fens could green still be seen.

Refugees had swelled Caer Luciare's numbers to more than thirty-eight thousand. The High King himself had come after the fall of Gonart, and the Light of Dalharristan had resorted here with his family now for six years. And this past month alone, four hundred good Kartoche warriors with skin whiter than bone had journeyed north to take refuge among Caer Luciare's ranks.

Everyone said that the warlords were preparing for some fierce assault against the evil that dwelt in the north, at Rugassa.

Had you been walking the tower at Caer Luciare that morning, you might have seen Alun, a young man of nineteen who still seemed far more a boy than a man, down on the green outside the gates amid a swarm of dogs. The hounds around him bayed excitedly at the promise of the hunt, while mastiffs woofed.

Alun knelt with his neck and back bent like a willow frond as he groomed an old hound. Alun was a gangrel, he was, with a crooked nose, stick-like arms, and a head and hands that were too meaty for his body. His leather trousers and red wool tunic were matted with hair and smelled of dog.

The dogs looked fierce in their masks and cuirasses of boiled leather, their wicked collars bristling with spikes. Yet the nubs of their tails wagged furiously, belying their fierce

appearance. Their tails wagged despite the fact that some of the dogs knew that they would die this day as the warriors scoured the forest, hunting for wyrmling “harvesters.”

There weren't enough dogs for the hunt, Alun knew, not enough healthy ones. He had others in the kennels, limping on mangled paws or with bellies ripped open; right now he was preparing to send Wanderlust into the fray.

“What do you say, love?” Alun asked the hound as he combed. He wanted her to look nice in case she died today.

Wanderlust was old. The black hair on her snout had gone gray. Her joints were swollen, and as Alun held her muzzle, peered into her loving brown eyes, and strapped on a fighting collar, she barely managed a slow wag of her tail, as if to say, “Another battle? I'm so weary, but I will go.”

At first glance, she didn't look like much of a dog. But Wanderlust was more than a common hound. Her mother was a sand hound, a breed so named for its sandy color, renowned for its good nose. But her father was a brute, descended from three strains of war dog. Wanderlust was almost as large as a mastiff, and she had a warrior's heart. Even in old age, if she smelled a wyrmling, she would be first to the fray.

Alun put on Wanderlust's mask, as red as a bloodied skull. He had fashioned it himself, and it reminded him that all too soon there would be nothing left of her but a skull. If the wyrmling didn't get her, age would.

A hound named Thunder rushed up and bayed in Alun's face. Alun gave Thunder a stern look, warned him to go sit, then Alun twisted over to dig in his big rucksack for Wanderlust's cuirass.

A shadow fell over Alun; he looked up. Warlord Madoc stood above him, a tall man in his forties, astonishingly big-boned and broad at the chest. He was a powerful man, a dog relentlessly bred for war as any of the dogs in Alun's care. His bald head was painted in a red war mask, though he had not yet donned his armor. At his back were his twin sons, Connor and Drewish, both eighteen, in masks of blue. Alun drew back reflexively, for Drewish had often kicked him.

“G'day, milord,” Alun said. “Nice day for a hunt.” He nodded toward the wastes. The rising sun sprang above the fog-shrouded vales, staining the mist in shades of rose.

“Fagh! I grow weary of hunts,” Madoc grouched, his tone equally full of fatigue and disgust. He nodded at Wanderlust. “Sending the old bitch out?”

“Aye, milord.”

Warlord Madoc grew thoughtful. “You're grooming her for her burial. She deserves such honor. But I have a more vital task for her today—and for you, I think.”

“Milord?”

“Master Finnes tells me that your dog has a nose so strong that she can track the trail of a quail a day after it has taken to air—even if it flies over open water.”

“True enough,” Alun said, his heart suddenly pumping, excited to hear that Wanderlust might get a reprieve.

“Then, I need you to track ... *someone*.”

Alun wondered whom. He had not heard of any criminals that had escaped the dungeons or highwaymen hiding in the wastes. No one dared stray outside the castle these days. “Whom, milord?”

“Swear on your eyes and your hands that you won’t tell?”

That was a serious oath. If Alun broke it, Warlord Madoc would require his eyes and hands as payment. “I’ll nay tell nobody.”

“I want you to track Daylan Hammer.”

“Milord?” Alun asked, surprised. Daylan Hammer was a hero. No, he was more than a hero, he was a legend, not some common criminal to be hunted and spied upon. Tales of his exploits stretched back for centuries. It was said that he was immortal, that in his youth he had traveled to another world, where he had drunk a potion that somehow let him cheat death. Some thought that he might even be from another world. He could not be killed, yet he had a habit of disappearing for decades on end, then showing up again. He had come to Caer Luciare last summer, at the end of the month of Wheat, and had been wintering a season.

“You heard aright,” Madoc said. “Daylan Hammer has a habit of abandoning the hunt, taking off into the wastes alone. There is a pattern to it. If I’m right, he’ll leave the hunt today. I suspect him of foul deeds. I need to know where he goes.”

Alun must have looked worried. At the very least, he did not know how to answer.

“Are you up to the task?” Madoc demanded. “Would you risk the wastes alone, with nothing but that dog?”

“I’m—not afraid,” Alun said. “Wanderlust will warn me if there is any danger about.”

“Do this for me,” Madoc said, “and I’ll make you Master of the Hounds....” He fell silent, letting this sink in. “With the title comes your freedom and a grant of all of the rights owed to a warrior of the clan....”

Alun’s jaw dropped in astonishment. He and his ancestors had lived as serfs for generations. They were the most ill-bred of mankind—the servant caste—made slaves by nature. As a child, Alun had often been told that warlord Madoc would geld him when he got older so that he wouldn’t pollute the blood lines. Alun had never dared to dream of rising above his fate.

But as a warrior of the clan, he would gain the right to own property. He would someday be able to buy himself a fine house instead of sleeping in the kennels among the dogs. He would eat at the warlord’s table and drink the warlord’s wine, instead of eating scraps. He would be eligible to marry a fine woman, a warlord’s daughter. “Master Finnes is growing old,” Madoc explained. “He tells me that you know dogs as well as any man alive, and you will be a great service to the clan. You are ready to move up in this world.”

Alun listened, but worried. Compliments, he found, were like grease on an axle. When applied liberally, they will speed one along on a journey—but soon wear out.

Madoc was offering too much for this one small act of service. There was more going on here than Madoc let on. At his back, Drewish only leered.

Madoc is afraid to his send his own sons to spy on Daylan Hammer, Alun realized. The game is more dangerous than it appears. It’s not just the wyrmlings I have to fear—it

Daylan himself. If he's involved in some plot, he might kill to cover it up. That's what Madoc fears. That's what he suspects.

Indeed, Sir Croft had died under suspicious circumstances on the hunt some four weeks past, off on the trail alone. Now that Alun thought of it, hadn't someone said that Croft had gone out to search for Daylan Hammer?

But at the time, Alun hadn't given that a second thought. He'd imagined that Croft was slain by a wyrmling before he found the immortal.

Daylan Hammer seemed to be a virtuous man, wise and brave. He was as handy with a joke or a song as he was with a bow—and after centuries of practice, no one was handling a bow. Everyone admired him. He was ... the kind of lord that Madoc could never hope to be.

Is Madoc's jealousy clouding his judgment? Alun wondered.

"You suspect him of Croft's death," Alun said.

Wanderlust inched forward, pressing her muzzle into Alun's chest, reminding him that she needed her cuirass. Up at the castle gate, hooves thundered on the drawbridge as a pair of warriors issued forth, and in the fields below the castle, a murder of crows began to caw and fly up out of a field of oats.

Madoc grinned. "Smart lad," he said. "There's more to you than meets the eye. I suspect him of murder, and more. If he is the traitor that I think he is, I'll tie his hands behind his back and let the headsman take a few swings at him."

Drewish laughed, "Then we'll find out just how immortal he really is."

If I follow Daylan Hammer and find something to accuse him of, what then? Alun wondered. If Madoc succeeds in taking vengeance, for the rest of time people will remember me as the man who betrayed Daylan Hammer.

Madoc seemed almost to read his mind. "It is possible," he said, "that Daylan Hammer is as fair as he seems. But I have found that it is a rare man who can really be trusted. Every man's hand seeks his brother's purse, especially in days like these. And if Daylan Hammer sees some advantage in betraying us ...

"I'd send a warrior again, or Connor or Drewish, but you have a chance to succeed where they would fail. If Daylan catches you, you can tell him that you were out hunting for a lost dog. That is, after all, your lot in life, and it would sound feasible that you would go out and hunt for an animal that you love."

"I think ..." Alun said, "that Daylan Hammer is a good man."

"Good to who?" Madoc asked. "Is he loyal to this kingdom? Of course not. He was born before it was, and it will fade and die long before he does. We are like dreams to him that come vividly in the night and just as soon vanish. I make plans for my lands. My serfs know that we will plant barley in the field for three years, and let it lie fallow for two. But think how Daylan Hammer must scheme. What does he plan for these lands in a hundred years, or a thousand, or in ten thousand?

"More to the point, what will he do to bring those plans to bear? Will you and I suffer for it?"

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