

# Maple Vale

On the Eastern coast of E'atara, there is a large bay north of the Stepping Stone Hills and south of Carver. What the map does not show is that there is a sizable river, called the Lutenburn, which leads some fifty leagues inland to the end of navigable depth where there is a small free city of same name. The river continues northwest from Lutenburn town into a low chain of mountains known to the locals as "The Mountains" but to mapmakers as the Northern Mounts of the East. These mountains are home to many creatures, including a small Dwarven stronghold, several Goblin lairs, a strange kind of Dragonkin known as the GroundWyrms, and, according to local legend, at least one Green Dragon. On the southern side of the chain, there are several small baronies and villages that surround the free city of Lutenburn, while to the north is wilderness.

The Mountsea Highroad is the main thoroughfare through the valley of Maple Vale and connects most of the baronies with Lutenburn. The Valley Road is a side road, less used than the Mountsea Highroad, but since it leads to the headquarters of the Druidic Order known as the Fellowship of the Tree, it is well-traveled and well maintained. It leaves the Highroad, runs down into a wooded valley for some three leagues, and then rises to rejoin the Highroad. At its center, at the edge of the Valley Road, is the common green, used for public worship services, fairs, etc. To the west is the Chapter House, with an indoor worship area, kitchen and dining hall, library, offices, classrooms, hospital and dispensary, armory, etc. Directly behind are various outbuildings, including stables, barns, dormitories and small private living quarters. To the south is the farm, growing grains, herbs and vegetables of all kinds, including many not native to the area nor the weather, kept healthy by judicious use of greenhouses and druidical magic.

Across the river, the forest stretches to the west for some 30 leagues and about 8 leagues both north and south from the grove. About a league into the forest is the sacred grove, hidden by many magical guards and wards. Druid's Peace reigns in the grove; any who begins aggression there of any kind, including digging, striking a spark or cutting a plant, meet horrible fates. None but Druids and their invited guests can ever find it.

Past the grove is the Wyrms track. Giant GroundWyrms, relatives of the Dragons, live in the mountains to the north. From time to time, they seem to need to travel to the sea to the south, where they dredge up shellfish and eat them in large quantities. Ages ago, a truce was worked out by the founders of the Valley Road Grove; the GroundWyrms would stick to one trail through the land on their trek to the seas, and honk from time to time as they passed to warn others away. In turn they would be allowed unmolested passage. This truce has remained in effect since that time.

## The Druids

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There are about 200 initiated Druids living in the Grove. While this is a large number, it is because it is the home of the High One, leader of the Fellowship of the Tree, so it contains many bureaucrats and

functionaries. All of these, however, take their turns at all chores, including the High One. The Valley Road Druids are known for their humility and lack of false pride. There are also about the same number of lay brothers and sisters, novices, students, merchants, ambassadors or other visitors at any given time.

The Brethren are divided into four groups: the Brothers and Sisters of Earth, Air, Fire and Water. The Brethren of Fire are responsible for the safety and protection of the Order, the Brethren of Air are the recorders, secretaries and archivists, and the Brethren of Water cultivate the plants and animals and keep the people healthy. The Brethren of Earth are charged with keeping contact with the outside world. Some wander the length and breadth of the continent, bringing back information and ministering to the worshippers of the Tree in far-flung areas. Others act as roving trouble-shooters, working (behind the scenes as much as possible) at maintaining the Balance and meting out justice when necessary. Brother Bartholomew was Eldest Earth Brother of the Order, acting as a combination of Foreign Minister and Ambassador at Large. Sister Rowanna is Eldest Water Sister. Together with the Eldest Fire Sister and Eldest Air Brother, they made up the second level of the Order. When the High One is "gathered to the roots" one day, one of these four will succeed him. Such choice is usually by a 3 to 1 vote, the new High One being the lone dissenter.

Sister Elmorra is the Eldest Fire Sister and Sister Rowanna, Bartholomew's former consort, is Eldest Water Sister. Sister Bellarcha has replaced Brother Bartholomew as Eldest of the Earth Brethren, while Brother Lindenell has been chosen to replace the renegade Brother Terwillowger as Eldest Air Brother.

It was this grove, peaceful, cloistered and yet quite busy, which the Companion of the Tree called his home for twenty-seven years, until his duties drew him elsewhere.