

the Eighth Power

Book I

The Book of the Living

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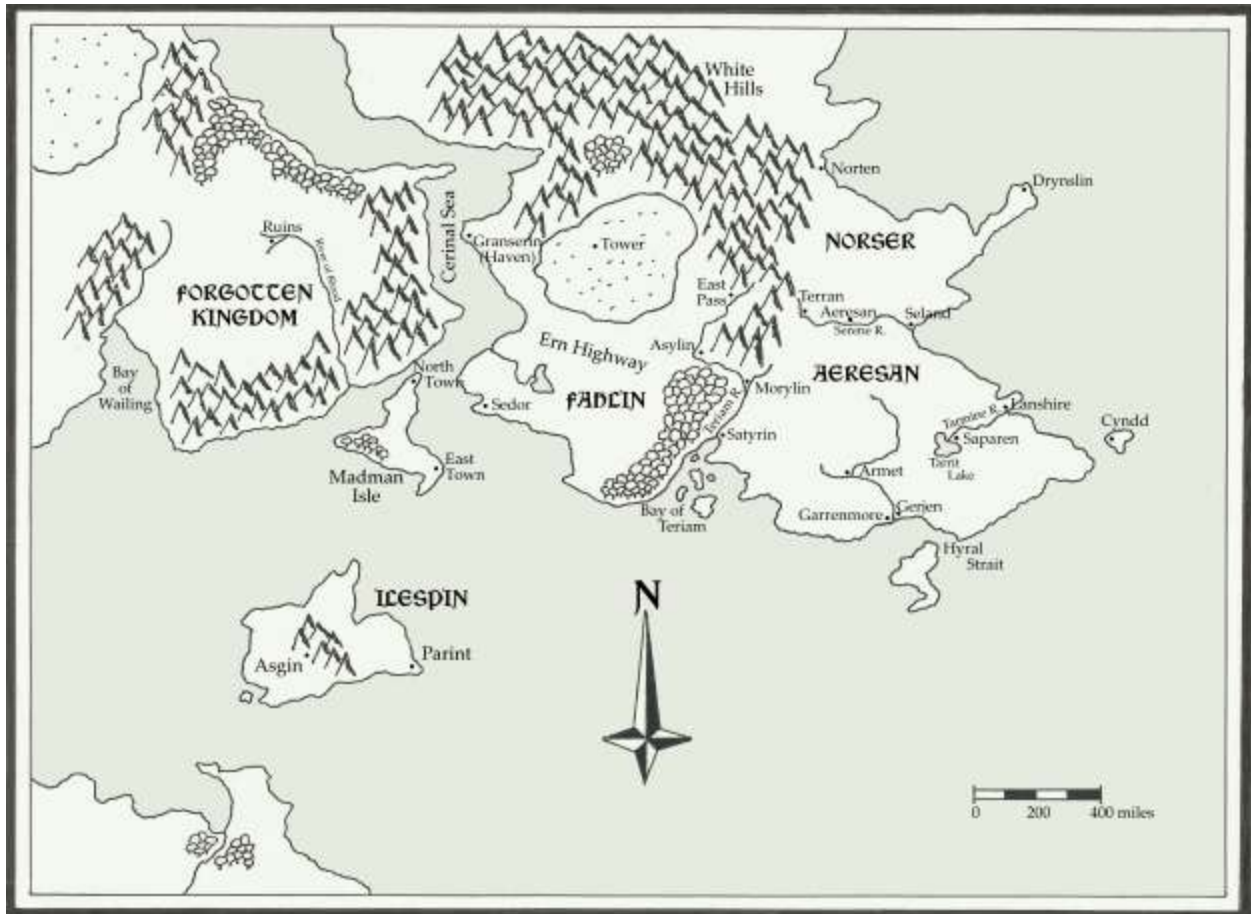
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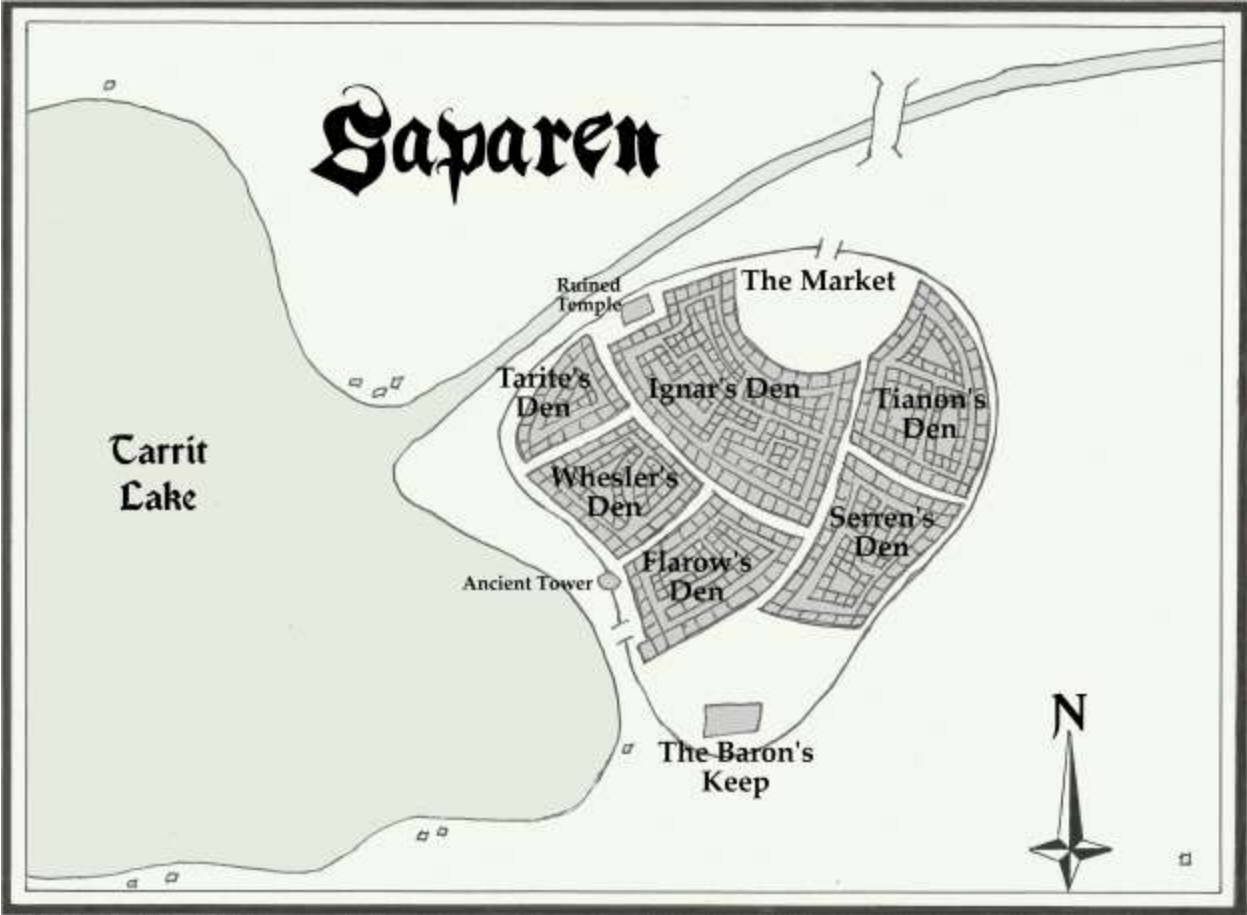
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The Pantheon of the Gods



Maps





The Book of the Living

Chapter 1

It was Serren's Day, or so the Prophet of the Wind believed, since it was nearly impossible to tell one day from another in the damp dungeon, especially after so many months of imprisonment. It was almost certainly the month of Osilar, even if it was not its eighth day (which was a Serren's Day), and there was little doubt that it was still the year 8704. Not for the first time in the last six moons, Larras Eysentgath wondered about exactly which dungeon he was languishing within. Perhaps it was the one at Saparen or Garrenmore, or another further west, toward the lands saturated with ern, but there was no way to be sure, for he had never even visited the prisons in any of those cities. Prophets were generally given rooms in palaces rather than cells in dungeons.

An odd string of thoughts, Larras realized of himself, considering that there was a rather large man standing over him with a dagger coated in dark blood. The blood that was dripping off the blade had belonged, only a few moments before, to Larras, but that dagger had taken much from him over the previous six months. So much, in fact, that Larras was awed that he even had any left.

Behind the Torturer were Mute and Ern, or so Larras called them, since they had not once revealed their true names. He called the first one Mute because he never spoke; he merely waited in the dark corner and watched. He wore a hooded cloak at all times, and Larras wondered if the hood was in place because the face behind it was too recognizable. Would the Prophet of the Wind know this man if the hood were pushed aside? Was it possible that Mute was known to Larras? Or maybe he just preferred shadow for this dark work. Another odd thought, but the Prophet hadn't the strength any longer to concentrate on any one subject for an extended period, even when a dagger was piercing his belly. Ern was, in fact, an ern, and remarkably intelligent for his race, and it did the questioning when the fiendish trio was in the room. Ern had one eye, the other lost assumedly many years before (based on the look of the scar), but the creature could give such a glare with that one bloodshot eye as to make the most willful of Thanés shiver in fear.

"Tell me the secret," Ern said, its words slithering off its tongue. It ran its pale and clammy hand over Larras' face. The touch was almost worse than the knife. The

Torturer seemed challenged in that regard, and he made his own touch, a cold and sharp one, worse still.

"I don't know what you mean," Larras replied as best he could. They had asked the same question of him for six months. "I have no secret. I don't know of any such thing! What you ask is impossible."

It truly was impossible; he wasn't lying. Larras Eysentgath could not understand why these men – this dark group, led by an ern, of all things! – were so insistent in their efforts. Did they simply not understand? Could they not see that he was telling the truth?

There was a groan from the corner, and Larras turned, even though he knew the source of the noise. It was Baret Tsantle, the Prophet of the Flame, and he was rolled tightly into a ball, hoping that the position would quench the pain. He had once been a large and husky man, muscular and proud. Once. Now the man was so thin it was a wonder he remained alive. Odd thought, because Baret would not, in fact, live much longer. There was a good possibility that the Prophet's last sound might have been that muffled moan. All Larras could think was, *Thank the gods, thank the gods*, for death was the best relief Baret could have hoped for anymore.

It was astounding – these people had captured two of the seven Prophets, amongst the most powerful men in the world. How had they done it? For Larras it had been in his sleep. For Baret, they had come during a terrible downpour, when he had no hope to find fire. Without fuel, the man had been defenseless.

Larras had resisted for a long time. They could keep fire from Tsantle, but they could not keep air from Larras, and where there was air, the Prophet of the Wind had a weapon. But the Power, the Magic, as many called it, would not work when pain overcame it, and Ern knew that fact well. They had defeated that Power over time. They had defeated even the Prophet of the Wind.

"After all these months," Ern was saying. "You still will not say. We know that you have the ability to teach us."

"I do not," Larras said, and though the words were merely an answer to the allegation, the tone was one of pleading.

Ern looked to Mute, and the latter nodded. Permission, but for what? The answer was soon in coming. Mute took the Torturer's dagger and stepped forward for the first time in six months. Slowly, carefully, almost as torture itself, the man reached up to his dark hood, the hood that had kept his face in shadows for so long. The wool cloth yielded to his touch, and the man revealed himself for the first time.

"Whesler be merciful," Larras prayed to his deity, reeling from horrible understanding of what he saw. Suddenly, he understood exactly how two Prophets had been captured. Suddenly, so much made sense. This man who stood with Ern and the Torturer answered so many questions by merely showing his face. But Larras would not be able to tell those answers to anyone.

Such was his last thought, for, still without a word, Mute drove the dagger into Larras Eysentgath's heart.

Chapter 2

"What about the other one?" the Torturer said, breaking the silence that had lasted several minutes.

The man Larras had called Mute spit at the comment disapprovingly, and said, darkly, "What about him?"

"Do we start again on him?"

Mute walked over to the Prophet of the Flame and laid a hand on the frail man's chest. Baret Tsantle did not stir. Mute made his report, "He's dead. Just get rid of both of them. We can gain no more from them."

"Did we gain anything to begin with?" asked the ern, but he was ignored.

The torturer said, "Two new Prophets will be born on the same day."

Ern grunted. "It has happened before. When the nobles attacked the Tower during the time that the Wizards controlled the human world, a full five Prophets died within two weeks. The last two had to finish the war without help."

Mute looked to the green creature in surprise. "You know your history well, for an ern."

"I do not easily forget."

"What do we do now?" the Torturer asked. "Do we capture another one?"

"No, not yet," Mute replied.

The big man with the knife pointed to the two bodies excitedly, saying, "Look, the Magic is departing."

Truly, mist was rising from the mouths of both dead Prophets, only faintly, yet still visible even in the dim lighting of the dungeon. The thin mist dispersed just as quickly, yet the Torturer leapt forward and down upon his knees, trying to breathe in what he supposed to be the final breath of each man.

Mute grabbed the Torturer and pulled him to his feet, saying, "Get off them, you fool."

"You would just let the power escape?" the Torturer asked, bewildered.

"There is nothing we can do," Mute replied. "The power transfers to a newborn child without fail. You cannot interrupt that transfer by breathing in the mist."

"But some of the others told me . . ."

"What? You would listen to peasants and old women before me? There is some truth told over dice and ale, but very little in the ways of Magic. You would do well to remember that."

The dual mists seemed gone, but they were not. They were merely thinned beyond sight, spreading outward along the ground. They were blocked by no wall, hindered by no mountain, wearied by no sea. They merely spread farther and farther, expanding in a perfect circle with their hubs, being the corpses of two Prophets. For miles in every direction was the ground covered in the mists, and yet so thin were they that no one saw, and so light that no one felt them. They continued in this manner for several hours, until each found what it was searching for, and then each contracted to its individual chosen spot instantaneously. The giant circles of mist that had covered a fourth of the continent for that brief period of time were gone and were each contained in a very small vessel somewhere else.

Chapter 3

Larras had been right: it was Serren's Day, which was a tribute to his disciplined mind, that he kept track of the passing days even though he had hardly seen the sun in six months. But Larras, his sharp mind and all, had passed on to the Otherworld, and his Power, along with Baret's, was at that moment still spreading over the land as a fine mist. In the evening it was passing over the small town of Lanshire, where Barrin Iylin was waiting just outside his one-room home, sitting in the grass, browning in the Autumn cold, with his head in his hands. He did not feel the mist, or see it, and he did not notice when it disappeared, contracting once again.

"Barrin," said a voice just before the man. Iylin was a tall and lanky farmer, his face worn and tanned, his eyes bright blue, shimmering like little lakes upon his tattered face. His cheeks were sunken and cratered, and his short beard could do nothing to hide it. He was not an attractive man physically, and his mind was occupied with little except farming techniques and strategies, but his heart was of the warmest kind, and that alone made him a man worth calling a friend.

Iylin looked up to his neighbor, a kindly man increasing in years. In another time or another place, it might have been strange for such a wizened old man to be carrying a sword, but not there. Not then. "They've come 'gain, Barrin," the neighbor said. "Lord Draffor says t' get all the men together."

"Not now," Barrin pleaded, as though it was anyone's choice as to when such calls were made. "It cannot be now."

"Can't help none o' that," the neighbor said. "I'm sorry, but we need ye." And he walked off.

There was a scream inside the house, a yelp of pain. It was happening, and Barrin Iylin could not be there. He stood and touched the hilt of an old sword that hung at his side. He was a decent swordsman; people had to be in those times to

survive.

The tall man crossed the dirty village in only a few score steps – Lanshire was barely a smudge upon the map, a cluster of houses where the Tarmine River met the sea. On the other side of the village, the western side, away from the ocean, he found Lord Draffor, who owned the land in and around Lanshire. He was a kindly young man, not rich compared to other nobility in the area, but respected well enough. He wore clothes only a little more expensive than the farmers did, dyed red to match his hair and beard. He was also the fattest man in the village, which meant only that his figure was about what a man's should be, and not abnormally thin from hunger.

"Barrin," he said. "I'm sorry to bring you out today of all days."

"The ern come when they come," was Iylin's reply, and he drew his sword. It was a ritual to those men, performed irregularly throughout the year, but not so irregular that hope of its end ever shone within the minds of the farmers there.

The ern were slightly larger than the humans, and stronger as well. Their skin was pale white, almost colorless. If those were the only differences between the humans and the shadow creatures, one might pass itself off as a man, but the ern had snouts instead of noses, and two sharp teeth protruded from their lower lips. Their fingernails were like claws, and they curved inward to a point. They clothed themselves sparingly, only torn shirts and breeches they had stolen from their victims, worn out from time and lack of care. Perhaps they might have been a form of beast, except that they were utterly hairless from head to toe, and so no beasts were they, unless related more to lizards than dogs (which might have been since their cold skin suggested that they just have been a form of snake). But the ern were, in the end, an abomination, and that was all. A serpent was not evil; an ern was.

They came from over the hill to the west, axes and swords bared. They yelled in their own native tongue, which seemed senseless to the men defending their land. Yes, the calls came as threats and curses, and curses also against the gods. *Let the Holy Six hear them, Barrin Iylin thought, and know who fights for them, and who against.*

The bowmen of Lanshire struck first, and a meager wave of arrows sprung upon the ern as they charged. Added to the yells for war were cries of pain, and five ern fell in the attack, their blood almost white upon the brown grass. There were only a score in this raiding party, Barrin counted. Five had already fallen. They would not overcome the town on that day. They would try again, however. That was the true danger with the ern – they never quit trying.

The approaching monsters had no ranged weaponry (the ern rarely did), so they could do nothing but continue forward, desperately trying to reach the men before the arrows took them all. Another wave was let loose from the bows, and two more fell dead. There would be no time for a third ranged attack, for the ern were upon them.

Swords clashed with axes, and no one could hear the tauntings any longer. The ern overcame two of the men in their charge, for they threw themselves against the

humans with weapons outstretched, and red blood splashed over the land as well as white, but the townsmen struck back, and their superior numbers pushed the beasts back. Iylin thrust his sword forward almost randomly when the enemy came, but the blade found the belly of an ern, and the enemy fell. The farmer withdrew the weapon, now covered in the corrosive blood, and struck again, always thrusting. Swinging a sword around might be a technique attractive to the eye, but his weapon was too dull for a slash to do much damage. At best it would break a bone, but ern would still fight with a broken bone. Only thrusts would hold off the ern. The blade had to pierce the skin to do any good.

Five enemies were left, and four men had fallen. A heavy price, but the battle was almost done. The village would survive another day. Lord Draffor called for his subjects to move forward, more around them, and the men, never pausing their attack, worked to surround the remaining enemies. The ern showed no fear. They never did. They would march right over a cliff if it meant the possibility that merely one human would die. They were that dedicated, that deranged.

Clang, the blades rang a hundred times, the battle continued. The lines became confused as the enemy mixed with defenders, and Barrin had to be careful with his sword to not strike a friend. Then it came to the last beast, even then was there no surrender. It just leapt forward, reaching out with his claws at Barrin Iylin, trying to take one last soul with it into death. Iylin's sword wouldn't be ready in time, and so he scurried back desperately, trying to move out of range. The ern came with him. Backward Iylin scabbled, and tripped, but the ern leapt toward him.

And the blade of Lord Draffor came down, a blade with a decent edge, and caught the ern's arm. The beast spiraled away, his arm sliced nearly in two, but could not regain his balance. Draffor's sword found the beast's chest, and the battle was over.

Lord Draffor reached out a hand to Iylin, saying, "Return to your wife, my friend."

Barrin took the hand and stood, only in time to see a boy, no more than eleven in years, running up from the village. "Master Iylin," he called, no matter how many times Barrin had told the child not to call him Master. "Master Iylin! Come quickly. Your son has been born."

Chapter 4

The village of Lanshire was established before the Death Wars, though it was impossible to tell how long before that, since few, if any at all, books remained from before that ancient age. But it was clear that Lanshire was around during the Wars, since the history texts mention more than one battle near that very location.

Even then it was a small town, hardly known to even the people in the area, and remained so for thousands of years, never shrinking nor growing more than half or half again what it was at the time of the Wars. Despite its location on the coast, the rocky ground made it unattractive to most farmers, and the fishing in either the shallow Tarmine River or the sea was mediocre at best. Even so, many generations had called it home, and many more would likely in the future.

It was historic in another regard, in that it was one of only a score or so towns that had remained a part of the Kingdom of Aeresan since the Death Wars. Aeresan claimed to have been the only kingdom before the Wars, an empire that controlled the entire world, but the truth of such matters had been lost over the years. Nevertheless, after those battles came to their ends, the kingdom was born anew, and it covered most of the continent. Since then, it had been sliced apart in other wars, and reassembled somewhat, only to lose other pieces and gain others still over four thousand years. Yet Lanshire resided in the Barony of Saparen, and Saparen seemed eternally connected with Aeresan Kingdom, though it lay hundreds of miles south of the King's palace, for that land had never once been separated from the throne, no matter what King was sitting upon that throne.

Yes, Saparen had stood loyally in times of good and ill, weathered the trying years of bad kings and immoral wars, and defended Aeresan against terrible ern invasions. Its alliance with the crown was unceasing, even when the world seemed to turn against the kingdom. Even when the Prophets ruled the continent for a time after the brief Tryl Dynasty, when revolution seemed to be upon the lips of every man for a hundred miles around, Saparen stood in defense of the Prophets. It was the only Barony to take such a position. But no less so was she an ally to the Jonat Dynasty, begun by the very man who led the charge against the Mages.

Saparen was called "The Stone of Aeresan" for this reason, though the term was also used in a derogatory manner when referring to the Barony's rather infertile lands. Saparen (and Lanshire as part of Saparen) accepted the title with pride. Her people were hard and untiring, dedicated in all things, whether working their land or in battle.

So the people would say to others, but in truth, the Saparians were just like everyone else. They were tired. They were tired, and hungry, and they were very gradually losing the war against the ern.

Chapter 5

The midwife came through the door just as Barrin approached, her hand up at him in defiance. The minor barricade made by the short woman worked well enough, however, for Iylin came right up the door, but advanced no farther. The midwife was

as big as a thin woman of meager stature might be (that is to say, her presence was made up of more temper than actual physical form), and though she was one of the smallest women in the town, she filled the doorway as much as the largest man.

"Barrin," she said in a hard sympathy, never wavering from her position.

"What happened?" the farmer asked, and the possible answers passed through his mind like a galloping horse, picking up dust and rattling the earth with noise. Something was wrong, but the midwife was choking on her words, and all he could do was fret over the possibilities until she spoke. Why didn't she *speak*?

But then the words came, and Iylin wished they had never been said. Somehow, all those strange possibilities would have been better.

"It's Josette," the woman said, and no more needed to be explained. "We took the child away . . ."

Iylin heard no more, but instead charged passed the woman and into the house. Not even the King's Thanes might have stopped him in that moment, and certainly that woman would not have had the strength. On the far side of the small room sat a simple bed, and upon the bed his wife, pale in death, yet remaining so lovely. Her black hair was still matted with sweat from the birth, her hands gripped the blankets. She wore white on her last day, a ragged gown that had twisted around her in the throes of a coming end. Someone had closed her eyes, and Barrin was glad for it. He didn't think he could look into those emerald eyes again. Part of him wanted to, knowing that it would be his last chance, but he couldn't. All he had to do was reach out and open them, but he could not.

The man collapsed, his scabbard scraping the ground as he fell, creating a harsh and distant noise on the stone and sand. Other sounds were soft and shifting, for the tears had paralyzed Barrin Iylin, and he couldn't even breathe. In those moments, he cursed the *ern*, and Serren, and he pleaded for the gods to send her back. But most of all he cursed himself.

A gasp for air came so heavily that he sounded more like an animal than a man, and yet there was a pain in the sound so utterly human that no other beast might make it. Only a man could understand that sort of despair.

"My son," said a voice from the door, but Iylin didn't look. "My son," said the Priest of Serren as he came inside. He was a little shriveled man, bald and physically weak, and yet was the spiritual representative in the town. Of the Six, only Serren had a Temple in Lanshire, so small was the village.

"Why?" Barrin asked through painful gasps. "Why did she take her?"

"I am sorry, my son," the Priest said, for he had no answer to the question. Not even the old man, who understood that the gods had a purpose in everything, could find meaning in that moment.

There was another silence, just as long and just as deep, for even the Priest was holding his breath. At last there was a break, when the clergyman said, "Look, Barrin.

They bring your son.”

The farmer turned to the doorway, where the midwife stood with the child. The baby was tiny and red, and seemed so like his father in that moment. He was weeping – mourning, perhaps – and his squeal broke Iylin again.

He took his son and cradled him in his arms, gently rocking. “Don’t cry,” he said. “Don’t cry. She is with Serren in the Otherworld now. There are no tears there, and we should not shed them either. Do not weep that she is in her rightful place. Do not weep.”

All the while his own tears were falling upon his son’s face, and he could not convince himself to stop. Serren did have her, didn’t she? Surely Josette was in the upper circles of the Otherworld. Surely that was true!

“I will call him Ayrim,” the father squeaked. In his meager understanding of the old language, he believed that the word *ayrim* meant, *Worthy of sacrifice*. It was a term he had heard in connected with some of the heroes of old, for sometimes only the old language could describe a man fully enough. But he did not yet believe the very name he had given, and he prayed silently that this boy of his would be worth the loss of another, the loss of someone he loved so much. He could not yet see how Ayrim could possibly replace her, but he prayed with all his might that the child would, because Barrin Iylin knew that he could not last a day without Josette. Without Josette, he would not be able to survive at all.

He was wrong about the name Ayrim, for it really meant, *He who sacrifices*. But that turned out to be just as prophetic.

Chapter 6

If such a thing were possible, Barrin had an easier time raising a child alone than he would have if Josette had survived the delivery. If she had, they would have only been two people caring for young Ayrim. As it was, however, most of the women from the town and a third of the men would periodically appear at the house of the poor farmer and help in whatever way that was needed. The farmers of Lanshire were a helpful people anyway, but with Ayrim’s birth were they united in sympathy and charity, and their sacrifice replaced Barrin’s own in the first year without Josette.

The women, in particular, all but ruled over Iylin’s small home, and the widower found himself always fed and generally able to work his fields without worry for the small child. A neighbor’s wife, who had birthed a girl only a week before Ayrim arrived, fed the boy, and another woman, whose children had only recently left home into marriages of their own, took care of cleaning. The others cooked and watched over the child in shifts. Also would the men come by to help with the fields once their own

work was done (and sometimes before). Barrin's land was meager, and with such help was the work done quite quickly, giving the man more time to spend at home. Lord Draffor contributed in his own way as well, forgiving much of Iylin's taxes and debts.

If such a thing was possible, Ayrim was better cared for because of his mother's death than he would have been had she been there. His father was with him more often, and for longer periods, and there was never a shortage of those who wished to care for him.

But such a thing really isn't possible, for no matter how many substitutes were presented to the little boy, his mother was gone. The loss of a parent simply could not be made up by others, no matter how much they toiled. Neither was it possible that the death of his wife could make Barrin's life easier. It only made his life so much more cold.

For Barrin, the first ten months passed slowly. The days were monotonous and numbing. Despite the multitude of people that seemed to hover about the house, he felt alone on his land. No company would cover up that feeling within him, no matter how busy the village tavern was when he was there, or how many would join him in a meal. Even near Ayrim, he was hopelessly lost. He would have traded all the help the town had given at home and on the land for Josette's return. And there were many nights that he prayed to Serren for just that. Hadn't it occurred in the past? Had not Serren given back Halin's lover to him? Didn't the Book of the Living tell that story? And yet the goddess refused to repeat the miracle in this case. Barrin, before, had followed Serren as loyally as even Draffor, and he had been known in the town for his devotion. But the Goddess of the Living had let Josette go callously, and Iylin had begun skipping the morning prayer services and would pray only for Josette's return, nothing else. No other prayer was given with any passion. He might say the words as had been taught to him years before, but other prayer lingered in his heart.

He held Ayrim upon his knee, and the boy, ten months grown, giggled. He had grown much in the time (had it already been so long? To Barrin, it seemed a month and a hundred years simultaneously), and had grown rather fat under the watch of the village's women. The boy was likely the only person in the area that was well fed. Iylin grinned thinly at the thought. He only grinned when around his son. But, even though the father loved his offspring, Ayrim had not yet become what Barrin believed his name to be. He had not yet become worthy of the sacrifice, and every moment that the village women spent in the Iylin house instead of their own was another sacrifice, and Ayrim couldn't even live up to the first one. Somehow, even though he knew it to be a ridiculous demand, Barrin kept expecting Ayrim to contribute something to make all of it worthwhile.

And so the time passed, as it will for the happy and unhappy alike, and the good and wicked. The days might run together, and seem one long day without end, but still the days passed, and so they did with Barrin.

There was a sharp knock at the thin wooden door. Ayrim looked over in curiosity, but his father did not. He merely said, "Come in," hardly even caring who would enter.

It was Lord Draffor himself, as was revealed when the door squeaked open, the sunlight pouring in and revealing the dust that lingered in the air. The noble ducked into the small building, his face pruned up sadly. The farmer did not stand, did not bow, but Draffor would have been more shocked if Barrin had bowed. He always thought of himself as a friend to his subjects, and, though he owned the land that the people worked, the townsmen basically thought of him the same way. In Lanshire, the class differences that were so important in the rest of the kingdom were only barely acknowledged.

"Barrin," the young man said. "How goes it with you?"

"Well enough," the farmer replied. "Thank you. You?"

"I am glad to hear it. Things are well for me too."

Iylin turned to his ruler, curious at the noble's stilted demeanor. Draffor seemed nervous or worried, and he was shuffling his feet oddly. The serf inquired, "My lord, is there something you wished to discuss? Is there trouble?"

"There is, in a way." Draffor licked his lips, and said, quickly, "I received a message this morning from Lord Wyred, from Kert. He has had his scouts follow a few outlaws that have come upon his land. They have murdered several now, but the Thanes are too few in the area to stop them. They seem to be coming south. Toward us."

The widower cringed. Murderers were rarely so organized, but Lord Draffor's tone made this group seem as though they had hundreds in number. And they were coming to Lanshire.

"I have written to Baron Verios," the noble continued, "to request that his Thanes to reinforce use. But the message will be several days before it arrives, and at least five before the Thanes reach us."

"When will the outlaws be here?"

"I don't know."

Barrin thought about what he had heard, and asked, "But you are telling this to me instead of telling the town as a whole. Why?"

Lord Draffor closed his eyes. The response was slow in coming, but eventually he said, "I will tell the town once I leave here, but you needed to know first. I did not say before, but the outlaws are not slaying randomly, but they instead target certain people. They are killing children. Specifically male children born on the eighth day of Osilar a year ago. Serren's Day."

No wonder the noble had come directly to the Iylin household. No wonder Barrin was the first to know about the news. He knew the day of which Draffor spoke. He knew that Serren's Day very well.

It was the day that Ayrin had been born.

Chapter 7

The Holy Texts tell of the gods, and teach that there are seven of them, or, rather, six true gods and the absence of a god. That absence, in time, became so powerful as to be a deity unto itself, and even eventually to become *himself*, for so great has this force become that he has developed a will and voice of his own.

The Six the gods are called, and though they often found conflict amongst each other (to the extent that their attributes are often seen as opposites of one another), they are allies in a great battle against evil of the Absence, which they themselves brought about.

Within the first group, there is first Ignar, who represents fire and justice, but also jealousy and rage. He is depicted as a great large man, with thick cheeks and red in skin, wielding a great sword that only he can lift. His opposite is Flarow, or Water, whose Virtue is her understanding and control of herself, and yet often is she vain, and sometimes complacent, for she cares almost nothing of what others did, and cannot be persuaded to help enforce laws and standards. She is a tall woman tinged of blue, with hair flowing as the sea, and such a face that might make the hardest of men weep. She always carries a mirror, so that she could not only examine her behavior for faults, but also admire herself, for no other could capture her heart.

The second group, which is equal with the first, begins with Tianon, a huge and slow man, massive in his proportions. He represents earth, and seeks knowledge always. And yet he is greedy, and hoards both material things and understanding to himself. He carries a great hammer, with which he created the mountains, and his skin is brown with dirt. His opposite is Whesler, the wind goddess, who is charitable above all, though ignorant, and allows her ignorance to taint her decisions. She is as the mist, wispy and translucent, and there were many tales of her disappearing completely into a wind. She appeared with her hands outstretched or armed with a bow and arrow. Yellow is her chosen color.

The third group, which ranks higher than the first two, actually created the other four deities. These two represent life and death simply. White and black are they, spirit and physical, and they are the most opposite of all the gods.

Serren, the Goddess of the Living, is the most plain of the goddesses, and yet quite lovely. She dresses in white, her blond hair cascading down her back, and her skin is like snow. Often she would seem to glow, and when there is darkness, still will she be seen in light. She is faith incarnate, and more rarely strayed from goodness than did the other gods. If she had a fault, it would have been that her faithfulness has

overcome her, and she relies too heavily on that idea that good would triumph over evil instead of working toward that end. She alone rules the Otherworld, and tends to the souls which there waited for the ending of the Ending Battle.

The God of the Dead is Tarite. His black robes give no hint to his form, so some say that he is muscular, while others say he is frail. His face is not so often covered, however, though none who see him can recall what he looks like, for his face has no inherent personality, but all agree that he is exceedingly ugly. His touch would chill, his eyes would paralyze. His voice would slay, or so the tales of men said. He is the hardest working of the gods, toiling endlessly toward any worthwhile goal, but relies too much on his own workings and not on the other gods.

Lastly, there is the Absence, which exists where no other god has sway. He is darkness that absorbs; he is not death, but utter lack of life. He is terror itself. The gods merely have to move where this presence, which they call Vid, is, and Vid would dissipate. And yet the gods cannot be everywhere at once, and everywhere they were not is Vid. In time, Vid became like a god himself, and yet he seems to be stronger than the Six, for he could undo anything that the gods put into place. He is the Void; he is the Nothing. Vid tempts the weaknesses of the gods, and yet it is the weaknesses of the gods that created the Absence.

So say the Holy Texts.

Chapter 8

Just two days passed, and Tianon's Day turned to Last Day, or, as most had been calling it for many thousands of years, Vid's Day. The day itself was an ill omen, and people from all over the land walked carefully on Vid's Day, even though no religious text at all had claimed that the Absence had any special power on that particular day of the week. Of course, the reasoning behind the superstition was a simple one. The six gods each had a day of the week when his power was at its peak, and then there was Sun Day. Serren was the sun, but Sun Day was not claimed by her; rather it was when all of the gods were worshiped as a whole. Last Day, the eighth day of the week, was left without a patron. The gods intended it as a day of rest for the people, but it had become quite the opposite. The absence of a god was, of course, Vid – the Absence. It stood to reason that Last Day, which had no god attached to it, would necessarily be Vid's.

And so, when the rumors began about a stranger in the town on Last Day, Barrin Iylin could not believe it to be anything but a bad omen.

Word of the man began at the small tavern, when the oldest Drin boy from down the road claimed to have seen a man lingering about the hills, hiding in the shadows of

a copse. Not much was made of it at first, because the Drins were not exactly renowned for their truthfulness. They were halfhearted followers of Ignar, and thought that it was more important to make others do what was right (that is, what the Drins thought was right) than to live a particularly moral life. They were the only worshipers of Ignar in the town, and therefore lacked a local Temple or Priest to give them direction or help them interpret the Texts more clearly than they could on their own.

But then other sightings caused the town to take seriously the rumor. In the fields was lurking a man in brown. His build was large, not fat, but muscular and well nourished. He would appear between stalks of wheat when the wind blew, but disappear, as though he were the wind itself. Next he was seen across town through a window. A poor widow was frightened unconscious at the sight of the man, whose eyes, she said, burned like coals, and he stared at her from outside, still as a statue. Even into the lord's manor, which was guarded day and night, did the man come. Draffor himself saw the brown-cloaked stranger in the library, looking through the town's records. The noble called for the guards, but, turning back to the intruder, found the man had disappeared. The only escape the man could have possibly made was through the window, but surely the window was too narrow for even the smallest of man to climb through. In fact, it was made small for that very purpose, so that invaders of one kind or another could not simply leap through the windows of the manor. Strong Lord Draffor himself nearly fainted, convinced he had seen a ghost. His guards joked that Draffor had finally gone mad.

But the book of records remained open to the page at which the stranger had been looking. It had been the listing of births and deaths from the previous years. Draffor did not need to wonder which column the man had lingered upon.

"Come," he said to his soldiers. "Rouse the rest of the guard. I need everyone ready in ten minutes. For Serren's sake, someone go get Iylin and his son. Bring them here and keep them safe." The manor became ablaze in activity, and yet the men went about their business in cold silence.

Tension infested the town that day, and hung like a humid fog upon everyone. The people could feel it on their skin, could see it when they walked. They knew this day would come, ever since Draffor had read the message from Lord Wyred. They knew that someone could come for Ayrim Iylin. Some had even suggested, in private, that Barrin should be driven out before the enemy arrived. Without that child around, perhaps Lanshire would be spared. But the town was not so easily separated from Ayrim. They had raised him – almost all of them as one. Sending him away was impossible for most. Besides, Draffor would not allow it. He would rather die defending that child than live and send him to his death. Since the word of the lord was law, even if that lord so rarely used such a power, the child remained.

But to die defending him might be exactly what they had to do. Tales of the brigands struck the townsmen with fear, and the fear festered near terror. No one had

been able to stop them, not even the Baron's Thanes. Surely a small village with a few swordsmen and archers could not stand up to them.

The paid guard of Lanshire, which was little more than a handful of farmers who needed a little extra money to pay their taxes, surrounded the manor once Barrin and his young son were inside. They patrolled in wide circles around the building, and they were joined by others from the town. No man, woman, or child was left behind. If someone wasn't fit to fight, he would remain inside with the lord and the Iylins, and the rest made a great wall around the people, determined not to let anyone pass without permission.

Day faded, but the men did not rest. Several kept arrows nocked in their bows, and only two or three sheathed a sword, and only then to eat or drink. Draffor sent stew around to the guards and townsmen on patrol, but they only ate sparingly. They were nervous and afraid, and they would not be able to eat much, no matter how hard they tried. Every little noise, whether the wind shuffling the leaves or a bird singing, caused their hearts to beat uncontrolled. There was a fog coming over the men, one of nervous fear.

Darkness descended, and fires were made to light the area. Suddenly, it wasn't merely sound that caused terror, but the slightest movement of a shadow. The men were breathing shallowly, because the darkness caused them to catch their breath.

And then he appeared in the shifting shadows, revealed as though by Magic on the road that approached the manor. Just at the edge of the fire's light was he, the man in a brown cloak, his arms raised. The men of the town surged toward the front of the building, arrows nocked and swords drawn, and the man stepped forward.

Lord Draffor came out of the manor at the commotion and saw the man once more. A large man was he, strong and imposing. A hood covered his head, but the light of the fire reflected off his eyes, and they truly did seem like coals.

"Stay where you are!" called Draffor.

"You need not fear," said the man, his voice deep, echoing, even in the low lands of Lanshire.

"We will not strike if you stay back," Draffor warned.

The stranger laughed, and the laugh rubbed eerily upon the spines of the men there. Then, without waiting for an order, the bowmen responded with force. Lord Draffor called, "No!" but nothing could be done. The tension had overcome three at once, and when they fired, another five followed in kind. Eight arrows screamed at the man in brown, but he merely lifted up his arms.

And the entire road, with him atop it, rose ten feet upward, and the arrows thunked into the rising soil, disappearing into the dust that had been stirred.

Lord Draffor stepped forward, white in the evening, and called out, "Fire!" but no one responded. The eldritch act had frozen them in place, and not a man moved. So Draffor himself took a bow from one of his men and aimed upward, but all he could see

were the falling remnants of the road raining down upon the people there. Before him, it seemed that the ground had returned to its natural position, but the man in brown was nowhere to be found.

And then the earth jerked again, pushing upward and out and knocking Draffor to his knees. The path to the manor had risen up, and was then separating, and two walls of dirt were pushing outward, away from the door to the building. The men found themselves on either side of this phenomenon, even forced away as the walls went farther. The noble who ruled the town tried desperately to jump back into the inner area, but the wall was too tall and too steep. The path to the manor had been utterly cleared of guards.

And down that path, between the high and moving walls of earth, walked the man in brown. The door was open, and, inside, numerous women, children, and older men watched, helpless and unarmed, as he came. Barrin himself stood frozen, holding tightly to Ayrim. He knew this man came for the child, but he could do nothing. They were all entranced by the man's Magic.

At last he arrived, the man in brown, and he casually removed his hood. Below, the man's face was square, his dirty hair short and matted to his scalp. There was little color in the stranger's skin, and even his lips were pale.

"Barrin Iylin," the man said, his voice menacing, yet not unkind. It was odd, but, despite the man's rough appearance and actions against the soldiers, he did not seem to desire harm upon the boy. "I have come a long way for you."

And then the man stepped forward, his hands outstretched, but only so he could brush the dirt off himself. He said, with a partial smile, "It seems you were expecting someone else. I am not one of the murderers, Barrin. I am Santon Drynor, the Prophet of the Earth."

Chapter 9

The introduction caused an epiphany amongst the people, and suddenly was it obvious to them then how this man had come in the manner that he did. It also became clear to them, just as night follows day, what those outlaws to the north were seeking.

They sought a new Prophet.

There hadn't been word that a Prophet had died, but there rarely was. They generally died privately, usually in bed at the Tower, and the passing of one would be known only by the other Prophets. Those living Prophets would then disperse and look for the new Prophet (or Wizard or Mage, as some people called them), for the world was never without its Chosen, and the death of one meant the birth of another.

The world contained some amount of Magic to be granted by the six gods, and

also Vid, each possessing power over his domain in the heavens. On occasion they would make a gift of a little of that Power to their most devout followers, and in this way could several Priests Invoke a portion of the power, but not too much, for most of the Magic was contained within the Prophets – the selected voices of the gods – and there was only one for each of the gods.

It hadn't always been that way. Before the Death Wars did each god grant minor power to many people, and each person could claim to be chosen of the deity, and therefore speak for the god. Most of the minor Mages followed their gods without question, but some lusted after power and wealth, and they would use their positions to gain such worldly things. So even the speakers for a god would dispute amongst themselves, and the people began to fall away from the Six.

So about the time of the Death Wars, it was decided amongst the Six that, instead of spreading the power of each god thinly amongst many, that only one would be chosen by each god. This one person, this Prophet, would have undisputed power, and there would be no question as to who spoke for the deities. Besides, with only one man given the power, it became easier for the gods to watch over their speakers, and therefore keep them in line better than they had in the past.

But later, centuries after the Wars had died away, they discovered that Vid also had a Prophet, for, though he was truly nothing at all, he too was as a deity, and had the same powers to bestow onto someone. And so a seventh Wizard was discovered.

There was always a Prophet for each god, for once one died, his power would disperse back into the land, from whence it originated, until the next male child was born to the world, usually within minutes, or, at most, hours, of the Prophet's death. The Power would then be transferred to that child, and he would be the next Prophet.

So it was that when a Prophet died, the living Prophets would then set off into the land and seek that newborn Prophet, testing all male children born on the day of the Wizard's death. When found, that child and his parents would be taken to the Tower, where the new Prophet would be trained in Magic and theology, for he would speak for his appointed god, and his hand would become the hand of his deity.

The powers possessed by these Prophets were limited only by each god's own element, but within those elements were nearly limitless. The Prophet of the Flame could command any fire he happened upon, but fire had to be present first, for he could not create it of air or water. Likewise did the Prophet of the Sea control water wherever it was found, but no other element. The Prophet of the Living could Heal as long as the spark of life was present, but once gone, then the corpse entered the domain of the Prophet of the Dead, which he could reanimate as an Undead servant.

The Prophet of the Earth, this Santon Drynor, had complete control over the ground beneath him, and so such wonders as he had performed when attacked were nothing to him, even if they awed and frightened those around him.

Chapter 10

Drynor seemed partially amused (though honestly more annoyed) while Lord Draffor apologized profusely for the incident. By blood alone, Santon should have been kissing Draffor's feet for the privilege of stepping into his manor, even though the local Lord was of low importance in the politics of the nation. But there were ranks based not on the merit of blood alone, and the title of Prophet rose above even the most powerful Kings. Even though Drynor had been born of a begging woman, still did he bow to no one. Lord Draffor knew his place, and he even knelt at one point.

"Oh, stand up, you fool," the Prophet said with disgust. "And stop that whining. I haven't enough time for your apologies."

"But we attacked you," Lord Draffor argued, though he wasn't sure why he was doing so.

"Half the villages I've visited have attacked me," Drynor said. "We are not imbeciles. We have heard of the raids and murders. If there had been time to send word to a town before my visit, I would have and avoided all of this silliness. But we must find the new Prophets before they do, and so I find myself unable to announce my every move. I am traveling as quickly as I can, and I do not always know whether I will turn to the east or the west."

Draffor stopped breathing. Everyone did. There was a silence in the room greater than any Barrin Iylin had ever heard. Finally someone asked, though the shock in the room was so great that no one could identify the speaker, "Did you say 'Prophets'?"

"I did, as in two of them. Flame and Wind both lost Prophets on the same day, and we haven't even found their bodies, much less their successors. We are seeking out two children, and neither of them have yet been located."

"They didn't die at the Tower?" Draffor asked, surprised. "How do you know they are dead?"

"We felt the Magic dispense. It is not difficult for us. But please, I have work to do."

Finding the Wizards was not always an easy task. After all, many children were birthed every day on the continent, and travel was often slow, even for the Prophets and their impressive powers. In fact, they had not found the living Prophet of the Absence, who was called Draughton Xyn, for more than twelve years after his birth. In that instance, someone finally wrote to the Tower about a young man in a small village who could take things apart by his mind alone.

"Let us be done with this," said Santon. "Let me test the child, and I will be on my way."

“What do you need?” asked Barrin, though the possibility that his son might be a Prophet had not yet fully developed within his mind. Surely the odds were too small for such a thing. And yet, there were two Mages who died, and neither new Prophet had been found. Might it be that Ayrim was one? The possibility swirled within his mind like water down a stream, never able to linger in any one place for more than a fleeting moment, but it was beginning to harden.

Drynor sat next to the child’s father and said, “The test is quick, and quite harmless. Your son will not feel a thing. You see, I am able to transfer small amounts of power to others of my kind, and they will take it unto themselves. It does not matter how young the Prophet is; he will accept it. When I give power to the child, he will either refuse it, because he cannot control it, or accept it because he can. If this child accepts it, then he is one of the Prophets, either of the Flame or of the Wind. Once we know that, then there are other tests we may employ to see which of the two he is.”

“Can you do it here?” asked Barrin, curious to see this test performed.

“I can, but I will know the truth more quickly if I am alone. That is, if you would entrust the child to me?”

Iylin nodded, handing the infant over. Ayrim was calm and composed, a perfect child, and Santon Drynor handled him well. He had likely had much practice over the last ten months. The Mage turned to Lord Draffor and said, “Is there a room I can use for a few minutes?”

“Of course,” and the noble led the Wizard down the hall, out of sight from the others there.

There was no talking once Drynor left. Iylin looked down, frightened to know the results. He had, perhaps, sired a new Prophet. He had, perhaps, raised the next Wizard. He felt suddenly unworthy, suddenly out of place, and it was a feeling he recalled quite well, for it was how he had felt from the moment he was wed to Josette. She had been just a poor daughter of a poor farmer, one of certainly better than average appearance, but such was not her best feature. Best about her was her smile, which had a power with which no Wizard could hope to compete. She was always glad, no matter how poor the harvest was or how long the drought. He had always thought of her as Serren in human form. It was wrong to do that, he knew, but he couldn’t help it. He could not help but to spend every waking moment of his life in adoration.

And then Ayrim took her from him, and the remembrance of it was bitter upon the tasting of it.

Barrin did love his son, he truly believed that he did, but he could not yet forgive the boy of that. He could not believe that Ayrim was worthy of the price paid for him.

But suddenly, Ayrim might be a Prophet. There was a real chance here of the boy being thrust into a world unlike any other. Ayrim might be one of the seven most powerful and important people on the planet. And of a good god too, for both Ignar and Whesler were well respected, not like Vid, certainly, but also better liked than

Tarite, for, though powerful, the God of the Dead was shunned for fear. Even being a Prophet of Tarite would be incredible, but all the better were Ignar and Whesler. What would it be like at the Tower? What would it be like to leave the hard soil of Lanshire behind and to be planted in the lush luxury of the center of the Magical world?

And yet, even then (so the thoughts swirled back upon themselves), would Ayrim then be worth it? Would the power and position alone make him worthy of what had been given up for him? Certainly not if all Prophets acted like that Drynor, coming around after dark and scaring everyone without even a hint of an apology! There was no need to have sneaked around town as he had, simply to hide his movements or to avoid large greeting or for whatever reason he had done it.

Barrin Iylin sighed. No, in the end, he knew that power and wealth would be nice, but they did nothing to make someone good. The thought that Ayrim might be a Prophet had tickled his pride for a moment, but the moment was fading. Power and wealth alone would not make Ayrim a man.

"That's my job," Iylin realized out loud, and suddenly felt very unworthy again. The simple truth was this: Ayrim was not yet worth the sacrifice because Barrin had not made him so.

Lord Draffor leapt back into the room, saying, "The Prophet returns."

Chapter 11

Santon Drynor seemed neither pleased nor disappointed when he emerged from the back room, the child in his arms. If anything, the man seemed aggravated, but that was not inconsistent with what they had seen of the Mage that evening. The Mage seemed endlessly annoyed by having to share the world with those less important than himself. As for Ayrim, the boy was asleep, which caused relief in Barrin, who knew by this that the test had not hurt the child.

The Prophet of the Earth approached the father and passed the boy off to him, saying as he did, "He refused the power. The child is not as I am, but is rather like you."

The tension in the room faded into disappointment as the people of Lanshire gave a collective sigh. There was no Wizard born to the little village after all. None could say that it wasn't the result he had expected, for likely thousands of children had been born on the day the Prophets died, and yet the suggestion of the mere possibility had given them great hope. Barrin told himself that he was glad, that the Mages were self-righteous and egotistical, but he did not mean it. He too had hoped for great things.

"Well," said Santon as he breathed deeply. "I thank you for your hospitality and

your time, but I must depart immediately."

He started for the door, but Lord Draffor blocked the way. "The others," said the noble, carefully, "the murderers. They will not come now that the child has been tested?"

The Wizard shrugged. "I don't know," he said.

"But you have tested others," Draffor continued. "Have any of those you have tested been killed after the test?"

"Yes," was the short and emotionless answer, and a cold silence fell over the room.

"How many?"

This reply was longer in coming. Drynor seemed to consider his words carefully, as though he was planning a long discourse on each child he tested and what happened to him afterward, but the reply was certainly not that. It was not much longer than his last statement, but much more difficult to say. "As far as I know, all of them."

The silence was broken by a collective gasp. The people felt frozen where they were, and even though they wished to move, to speak, to run, to wail, they found they could not. They could only stand and listen, and fret over what they heard.

"All of them?" Draffor demanded. "All of them? But why?"

Santon sat in a nearby chair and crossed his leg over his knee. This conversation, he seemed to have decided, would take a while. "Because they fear that we will hide the new Prophets amongst the rejected. Because they will not take a chance, and so they test the children themselves. Because they are murderers, and who can say why murderers do anything? They are, by nature, insane. I do not understand them any better than you do. I do not understand what they seek, and since I do not even understand that, I cannot say why they do anything that they do. It is a mystery to me."

"They test children themselves?" Barrin asked.

"So I have heard."

"But how?"

"I do not know that either. The test requires a Wizard. Not even a Priest Invoking his god can produce the power needed to perform the test."

Lord Draffor spoke again, saying, "So they will come here."

"Likely, yes."

Barrin Iylin stood, pointing at the Mage while holding his son with his other arm. He said, "You could stop them."

"There are too many. I cannot stand against them right now. I would need help."

"Get help! Get your other Wizards."

Drynor looked at the child's father with concern tinged by irritation. "We are

scattered about the land right now. And so is this other group. If we gather to destroy one band, another will find the children and do whatever it is that their dark plan requires.”

“So you will leave us without help to be slaughtered by these rogues?” asked Lord Draffor. “You will leave us without protection?”

“It is not my duty to protect this village. That is your duty, *my lord.*”

Draffor ignored the sarcasm of the last words and said, “You and your Mages brought this down upon us. These aren’t even an invading army. These are people looking for the Magic, which is your domain, not mine.”

“Me leaving here will protect you better than if I remained. If I stay here, I could kill a great many of them, surely. Maybe even an entire band, but others will come. They will come, and I will die with the rest of you, and then they’ll be searching for a third child. But if I go and find the two infant Prophets, the attacks will stop. They will know that we have the children in the Tower, and they will turn their efforts against us there, where we can properly fight them. We can defeat them united at the Tower, but we must find the children first.”

Barrin asked, “But what about my child? Who saves him while you seek to protect others?”

The Prophet sighed heavily and said, “If there were five hundred Prophets, each searching for these two young boys, I would stay. If there were even fifty, I would remain to fight these killers, even if it meant my death. But there aren’t that many, or a half of that. There are only five Prophets left. Five. And the five of us must search the entire world for two young boys now nearly a year old. We could hire people to look, but only we can perform the test, so we still would have to visit every village along the way. I was there when it took six of us more than a decade to find one child. Now we are fewer still, and looking for two. A year I have searched, and I’ve only just begun. I must keep going. I must find those two boys and get them to the Tower before these other men find them.”

There was silence following the speech, so heartfelt it was. And yet the aftertaste was sour, for the Prophet of the Earth stood and walked to the door. Once it was opened, he took one last look inside, to Barrin Iylin, the father of a doomed son.

“I am sorry,” he said. It was perhaps the first time he had truly expressed sympathy for the plight of the men he left behind, and it was certainly the last, for with those words he was gone.

Chapter 12

Legend said that the Tower, before the Wizards decided to rule the kingdoms

themselves (which was itself just shy of four thousand years before Santon Drynor visited the village of Lanshire), had a close relationship with the kings of the various lands. During the Tryl Dynasty, when famines swept the land in the wake of the Death Wars, the Wizards would work together, traveling all over the continent, to help produce food and hold back the ern, who, at that time, were only just taking control of the lands west of the Cerinal Sea. That place across the sea had been, back then, a thriving kingdom, but had since been completely conquered by the pale beasts. Even the names of the towns that once stood there had become lost, and the place had become known as the Forgotten Kingdom.

In return for the help of the Wizards, the Kings facilitated the searches for new Prophets, bringing all the newborn males from the countryside to the castles, where the Prophets would have easy access to them. Because of this practice, the search would commonly only take a month or two.

But then the Mages decided that they could run the kingdoms better than the kings could, and they used their power and influence to raise armies and take over. It was only ten years before those same armies turned on their leaders and ran them back to the Tower. Though they seemed as fools in those years (for even later Mages criticized the Tower's activities of that decade), they were still respected enough to wield at least some influence. They gambled that influence, perhaps in an effort to restore their tarnished image, on an ill-fated offensive against the ern. Instead of winning the war, that battle instead insured that the Forgotten Kingdom would fall. The Prophets became as a joke to many people, as though they were children who could do nothing right.

But even then, Kings found uses for the Wizards, and would often call upon them. And yet were the Prophets never fully trusted again, and the relationship between them and the people became ever more strained as the years passed.

By the time Ayrim Iylin was born, the Tower and the kingdoms were almost utterly separate entities, neither having anything to do with the other. The Mages no longer helped in the fields, and nor did they battle the ern unless they themselves were threatened. Likewise did no king organize any sort of hunt for new Prophets, nor readily surrender information and rumor to the seven Mages. Such was the reason that Santon Drynor had to personally check the birth records of Lanshire, for there were few who would do it for him. He might have asked a Baron or lord, but that noble would have asked for protection in return, and the Prophets hadn't the time for such favors. He might have, as he suggested to Iylin, hired local men to help, but there were too few he could really trust, and no one who could do the tests for him.

Such was the reason that these searches had more recently lasted years instead of months, as it had with Draughton Xyn, twelve years aged when he at last reached the Tower.

Most scholars agreed that the Tower had been, since the time of the elected kings

(or about two and a half millennia in the past), too passive and too cloistered from the rest of the world. The people thought so as well, though they wouldn't use the same words. They would often wonder what, exactly, those Wizards were doing in the Tower.

The answer to that question was research, though they had long forgotten why they researched so diligently.

Chapter 13

A hundred miles to the south, in a town called Finea, a chilly presence swept over the streets; not necessarily a wind, and yet it acted as a wind might. Fires fluttered within their lamps, which were raised nightly at the sides of the roads, and also did the flames within hearths burn low. Clouds covered over the moon, and even by the light of a hundred torches was the town wallowing in cold darkness.

In the manor, the lord shivered, and called for another blanket, but even before it arrived was he asleep again, as were most in the town. No one saw the shadowy figures creep about the outer edges of the city, darting in between buildings and crouching in the shadows. Guards patrolled the streets, but neither did they see until it was too late, for one by one was each drawn into the shadows and dispatched, ever without noise. The lamps fluttered again, and the town had almost been conquered. No one yet knew it, but the battle was almost over.

One soldier, leaning upon a stone building in the northern section, felt a clammy hand on his mouth. He tried to scream, but even if the hand hadn't stopped the sound, the shivers that ran up the man's spine would have. He had become paralyzed by the touch, for the cold hand was almost unearthly, and certainly dark.

"The children," the owner of the hand hissed. "We seek them."

The hand was removed only just long enough for the soldier to say, "Wh-what children?" The words were quivering in his mouth, and were barely audible under the man's fear, but the creature behind him understood.

"You know as well as I what children are sought."

"I know of none," said the man, but the lie was like cotton in his mouth.

"You do," said the creature, and its head tempted the light for a moment. It was enough. Though the thing did not show his face, his bald head was visible for the slightest of moments in silhouette. The guard knew then what had grabbed him. It was an ern.

"Down the street," muttered the soldier, his only thought being to get away as soon as he could. The ern – the *talking* ern, of all things! – had the advantage, and the man would not even be able to draw a weapon, were he even to try. But if he told the

creature what it wanted to know, perhaps then he could survive. Giving up the child brought a taste of bile to his mouth, but he did it anyway. He did it with hardly a hesitation. "Down the street," he pointed. "Second house after the corner."

A man appeared at his side: a human, not an ern. He was shrouded in darkness, but seemed tall and strong. He looked straight ahead into the street, saying nothing. But surely this man would fight the ern. Surely he would! The soldier looked to the man's belt and found a sword hanging there. Did he not see the ern?

"Sire," called the guard, and the man turned, his dagger flashing in the light. It was the last sight the soldier ever saw, and it was more terrifying than the encounter with the ern had been, and not simply because of his coming death. An ern had no choice but to follow Vid, for it was their nature. But a man had to go by choice, as this man had apparently done. The guard's breath stopped a moment before the dagger split his throat, and none can say whether it would have begun again, even given the chance.

"Ern!" someone called from the next block. "Ern!" he called again. They had been discovered. The assassin and his monstrous ally looked to each other then hurried down the street, toward the building the guard had pointed out before his death.

The city was springing to life as citizens and soldiers came from scattered houses along the dirt path. They knew how to react to ern alerts. At least once each month did they hear that call in the night, and they would rise and take their weapons. There was no longer even excitement or fear in the call, for battle to these men had become like farming or paying taxes. But they should have feared that night, for never so near had the ern been to them. Never so many had entered the town of Finea. Yes, the townsmen rose at the call, but so too did the invaders come from the shadows, human and ern alike, and unite together as an army, and they outnumbered those protecting their home.

The forces split in two sides, as is natural, the people of the town gathering in front of the child's house, and the strangers charging toward it. Arrows were nocked on both sides, and both let fly the weapons, and the darkness favored the ern. Though they had far fewer archers than the people there, for ern were loath to slay from a distance, the shadows misled the human eye. But even those men who launched their arrows soundly, even for them was success snatched away, for their missiles would suddenly writhe in the air, and they would turn away at the last moment, sometimes dropping into the dust. It was as though their arrows had come apart in the night. Even the inanimate objects, it seemed, were overcome with fear.

And as the people let out a collective curse, and each wondered what exactly had happened, the torches and lamps flickered out simultaneously, and the town was swallowed in the darkness.

Chapter 14

The Thane appeared on Lord Draffor's doorstep in the early morning, the red sunlight so bright that it made his crude armor almost shine. He wore a chain vest over a thick leather hide, and upon his head a helm of sorts, so dented that it was only recognizable because it sat upon his head. The man's beard was long, and his skin was caked with mud, and he didn't seem to have had a bath in several weeks, which was not unusual for a traveling Thane, but certainly regrettable to those around him. His blade, which hung from a loop off his belt, was notched by battle, but still it remained strong, and likely would for several years to come. The sign of the wolf upon the blade's hilt was the sign of Baron Verios, ruler of Saparen, and by that did the people of Lanshire know the Thane to be a Sapanian.

The reeve of the manor summoned the lord, and Draffor came to the door, still pulling his tunic over his head. A late night spent organizing patrols had caused him to sleep past sunrise, and still it wasn't enough. The Thane stood stoically, his brown mustache twitching as a fly buzzed about his mouth.

"Greetings," said Draffor, obviously concerned. Thanes rarely came so far east, and most of the time they came with ill news. On the other hand, Draffor had requested the help of the group from Baron Verios, so perhaps this was the aid he sent. Perhaps the soldier had come to help protect Ayrim Iylin and Lanshire. There was a sparkling of hope within Draffor's mind, but it darkened in only moments.

Something in the man's expression told the lord otherwise.

And then, privately inside the manor, the Thane himself told otherwise with his own words.

Half an hour later, the young nobleman was inside Barrin Iylin's home. That child was certainly giving Draffor trouble, and yet the thought of simply handing the boy over had not once entered his mind. People often told him that the lord should have followed Ignar, for a sense of Justice was paramount to him. They might have been, but it was a tradition in Lanshire for the lord to worship Serren, since Serren's was the only Temple in the town, and it had been that way for at least two hundred years. There were plenty of Serrenites who might have handed over Ayrim to Prophet, murderer, or even an ern, but such was not the nature of Lord Draffor.

Barrin didn't like the expression on his ruler's face. "Are they coming?" he asked. They both knew of whom they spoke. There was no need to name their enemy.

The lord nodded, and sat. "A Thane is waiting outside," he said. "He's come with news of Finea. The town was razed three nights ago."

"Three?" asked Iylin. "They could be upon us in less than a day. Sooner if they have horses."

"They don't, or at least so the reports say. But they could be here soon. That's

why I want you to go with him back to the castle.”

Iylin was dumbfounded, and his mouth remained agape for several seconds. “You’re sending me away after all this time?”

Lord Draffor stood. “Barrin,” he said, sighing the word instead of speaking it, “I can no longer protect you. The Baron can. These men are coming toward us. We are most certainly next to be attacked. They might be here tonight, or maybe never, but I’m betting that they will come. Barrin, there were ern with them.”

The word felt heavy once spoken between them. “Ern?” repeated the farmer.

“I don’t understand how, but the two, brigand and ern, are allied together. I will fight them when they come, but I will lose. I’m sending the women and children to Saparen until all this passes. You need to go as well.”

“I will remain. Send Ayrin, but I will fight.”

“And leave him an orphan? There are greater virtues in this life than bravery, Barrin. This is one of them.”

The widowed farmer leaned back, his eyes closed. Why couldn’t Josette be there? She would know what to do. She always did. She was always so calm in the worst of situations. But she was not, and Barrin was all Ayrin had left. That was his answer, he realized, expressed simply in his roaming thoughts. He was all that Ayrin had. He said, “I’ll pack some supplies for the trip.”

Iylin grabbed some clean clothes as Lord Draffor nodded and went back to the door. He pulled it open, only to see a notched sword raised to his face. The Thane curled his lip and said, “Give me the child.”

“Go, Barrin!” called out Draffor, understanding only just enough to realize that the Thane had betrayed them, and that he would kill them all given the chance. The lord did the last thing the Thane expected – he charged. A simple and sudden push upon the sword’s flat moved the weapon out of the way, and the noble was upon the warrior. Iylin looked wide-eyed at the event, then turned to look farther outside, where an armed gathering, made up of ern and men alike, were advancing upon the building. His hand became taunt around the clothing in his arms, but still he only stared, confused as to what was happening.

The farmer started forward to help his lord, but backed away suddenly. Draffor had the Thane’s arm pinned, but was struggling. And then, suddenly, he let go, and the surprise threw the Baron’s man off-balance, and the sword slipped from his hand. Draffor reached for the blade, and though struck by the man’s armored hand from behind, grabbed onto the hilt. The Thane rose up, but Lord Draffor drove the weapon into his chest.

He turned to Iylin and repeated, “Go! Go to the Baron. His soldier might have betrayed us here, but he never would. Put yourself in no one’s hands but his. Go!”

The dark forces were coming upon the landowner, yet so were the men from the town. They had heard the battle and had come with weapons ready. But Barrin

wouldn't see how the battle turned out. He darted back into his house and through the back window, out away from the town and toward the fields. The wheat was only weeks from being harvested, and so it stood tall that Autumn, despite the seemingly ever-present drought, and Iylin ducked with his child into the high stalks. Ayrim began to cry, and Barrin couldn't help but curse. What he expected of the child in such a frantic moment, he couldn't say, but he needed to escape, and the loud wails would not likely help him.

He cut through the fields, ever hearing sounds like thunder and whistling around him, though whether the wind or the enemy, he did not know. There was a swishing, a rustling about the area, dancing within his ears. One moment he was convinced it was Serren, and another, the ern. Lastly (and he thought this one most likely), he thought he heard Tarite. The God of the Dead did not truly come to collect passed spirits, for that was Serren's duty, but in that field, the black-clothed deity seemed more appropriate. He had no time to consider how years of religious teaching could be overcome in a moment of fear, and he was not one to seriously consider such topics anyway, but Tarite was foremost in his mind, and he shivered.

The farmer sprinted parallel to the town, pushing his way through the crops like a knife through bread, and leaving just as noticeable a trail. Behind him he heard a sound, and there was no mistaking it this time. He dived to the side as a mounted ern came at him, galloping over where the man had just been. Iylin rolled over and climbed to his feet, ever clutching his terrified and screaming child to his chest, and the horse was turning back around. He only caught sight of the enemy when the wind turned the stalks a certain way, but it was enough.

Why did I leave my sword behind? he wondered, but could not go back. He would have to get to Saparen Castle unarmed. He turned radically in a different direction, the noises he and his son making as clear a trail as the physical one left by bent stalks of wheat.

The ern followed, his stead much quicker than Barrin was upon his feet. For a while they danced in the fields, the horse coming upon Iylin just before the man turned another direction, giving Barrin just a few more seconds to escape. Ayrim was wailing, and the cries were like a beacon for the pale beast behind them. But still Barrin ran, and he ran until his lungs burned with every breath, and until his legs screamed just as loudly as his son did, so great was the pain. There did not seem a way out of the dance, save the most distasteful way imaginable, but he would seek another way until his last breath.

And then Barrin had an idea, and he almost stopped running at the epiphany. It was dangerous, to be sure, but no more so than the situation already was. If it didn't work, though, he would never forgive himself. If it didn't work – but it had to. He couldn't outrun the horse, or outmaneuver it for long. He had to defeat this ern, or die trying.

He laid Ayrim upon the ground, the boy still crying as loudly as his little lungs would let him. With tearful well-wishes, the father retreated, disappearing into the stalks only a step away. The shadows and field engulfed him, and only the bent plants gave a hint as to where he went.

The ern approached upon the horse, its sword brandished. At first, it was hurrying toward the sound, but then stopped. The father was nowhere to be seen. Only the child remained. The ern chuckled as he saw the boy. Did the man think he would be spared by this offering?

But then Barrin was upon the creature, leaping from the concealing crops and into the cold, damp skin of the ern. The two fell from over the horse, and the spooked animal leapt forward and out of the way. Together the ern and man collided with the soil, and the combatants grunted at the jolt. The ern pushed upward, throwing its powerful hands into Iylin's chest, but the farmer struck downward with his fist, and the latter prevailed. The ern collapsed backward a moment, stunned, and it was then that Barrin realized that the ern had dropped its sword.

Draffor was able to do this against a Thane, thought the farmer as he lunged forward toward the weapon, the thought giving him strength. But the ern went for it as well, and, intertwined, the two caught each other just before the rusty hilt, and the skirmish began anew. The ern, though seemingly frail, had great strength, and it threw its entire body into its enemy, and both rolled backward, but this time with Iylin on the bottom. The ern threw two punches, connecting soundly with each, and the human's nose splattered blood.

The monster scurried away then, and, for a moment, the dazed Barrin thought he had forced the ern to retreat, but then he remembered the sword that waited only a few paces off. He leapt to his feet just in time to see the ern's hand close over the iron hilt, and the farmer went at his pale enemy with full speed. The ern turned with a dark grin, but Iylin was already upon it, and the sword in its hand mattered none. Together, once again, they fell, but this time the sword became so twisted in the fray that it tasted flesh, and the ern impaled itself upon the weapon.

Barrin wasn't yet sure that it was over. He rose to a kneeling position, and waited for the ern to get up again. It didn't. Slowly, he reached down and placed his hand on the sword's hilt, and with a jerk the weapon came loose, and still the abomination did not stir.

And then, though the sound had been continuous throughout the battle, Iylin heard his son's cry as though for the first time. He wiped off the blade and returned to where he left the child. On the way he wondered if the scared horse hadn't stepped on him, or, in the battle, they had accidentally rolled over him. But neither had happened. The boy was still there, safe, at least for the moment.

The widower picked up his son and set off again, and this time it was he who followed tracks. The ern's horse probably hadn't gone far, for it was an animal trained

for battle, even if it was trained by the evil ern, and so the man found the trail through the wheat and chased after the beast. Sure enough, he found the horse only a few score yards away, waiting for its master. Its master wouldn't return, but Barrin would make good use of a good steed. He mounted bareback, as the ern had ridden, and they set off again, galloping generally westward through the fields of grain, toward the Castle of Saparen.

Chapter 15

For a full day did Barrin ride, resting only when the horse threatened to collapse in exhaustion. He did not eat nor sleep, but galloped with a singular purpose: to reach the castle before the outlaws and ern caught up with him. Fortunately, the horse was strong, seemed willing enough, and pushed for long periods when a lesser horse would have fallen to the side. Yes, the ern's animal was strong, and well behaved, for even with only one hand upon the reins did Barrin have full control over the horse. With his other hand, Barrin cradled the child as best he could. A lesser animal would have dropped them both, but this horse kept the journey relatively comfortable. Perhaps the ern were better at training beasts than people had assumed.

So they went, over the low valleys of the Saparian Barony, southwest along the bank of the thin Tarmine River, which giggled on its trip from the lake that lay beside the castle and toward the sea, which was exactly the opposite direction that the travelers rode. The land in that area was so near to the level of the stream that, under heavy rain, the water would almost immediately overflow and flood the entire area. But too much water was not often feared in that land, and the low ground provided easy irrigation.

On the other hand, so shallow was the river that it occasionally dried up completely in a drought. More people worried about that than the floods. There was evidence to the south of a much wider riverbed that had once been, but the river had rerouted itself at some point and become a stream along the way. In the time of Barrin's ride, it seemed that the stream would sooner become a dry gully than a river once again.

Because of the water, several fields sat near to the river, and though trees crowded against the stream itself, few other vegetation in the area was natural. As far as Iylin could see along the narrow dirt road that bordered the Tarmine were crops, set into neat rows that ran perpendicular to the river, and therefore the road itself.

It shouldn't have even been called a road, and, in truth, it did not have an official name, except that the people of Lanshire referred to it as "the Way to Saparen." What was called a dirt road was really a path worn by travelers so that a dirt path had been

formed. But few went the way to Saparen from the northeast, since only a few scattered villages were there, each about the size of Lanshire. A better road came from the south, and an even better one, built by the throne, came from the north.

But it was on that little path, the Way to Saparen, that Barrin Iylin rode that day. There was no breeze, and the sky was cloudless, but the early Autumn air was cool enough, and Barrin was as comfortable as he could be, having ridden upon a horse the entire night.

The farmer kicked the horse, trying to get a little more speed, but the animal neighed in protest, finally worn out by the hard journey. "Fine," said Barrin, pulling on the reins. "We can rest for a few minutes."

He dismounted, his sleeping son cradled in his arm, while the horse walked down to the stream for a drink. Iylin thought it a good idea, so got one himself, only after the dirty horse was done, and a little upstream from where the animal had been. An ern had sat upon it, after all, so he couldn't be too careful. Even riding on the now tainted horse was a risk, if the tales in taverns were to be believed, but it was a necessary one. He wasn't sure what might happen to him, sitting where an ern had sat before him, but he was rather certain that there was some curse involved.

The water was cool and refreshing, and he got Ayrim to drink a little. The boy was waking gradually and calmly. It amazed the father that his son had slept on such a trip. He envied the boy for that. Barrin himself didn't imagine that he would get much rest over the next day. There was still some distance to go before he would be able to relax.

They sat under the shade of a great oak that sat partially in the water, its branches hanging over the road and river both, and providing shade for passerbys such as these two: father and son.

"I wonder what happened to them," Barrin said, thinking on the little village. There weren't too many of the raiders, but enough. He thought of Lord Draffor's bravery, and tried to pray for the man's safety, but found that his prayers were dry and unmoving. They had fought for him, so how could he then pretend holiness and pray for them? He could have just handed over the child and saved them all. No, he couldn't have done that. Not even Lord Draffor could do that, and Ayrim wasn't even his boy.

"More sacrifice for you," said the elder, looking at his son, who was being entertained by a butterfly that had lit upon a blade of grass. "Are you worth it?"

"Jost!" cried out the boy abruptly, and Barrin's mouth dropped in surprise. The child had spoken! Even in such a time was his heart warmed at the word, but then he thought about what Ayrim had said, and wondered how he knew the name.

"Josette," repeated the father, his tone melancholy. "I suppose I do speak of her enough for that to be your first word. It should have been 'ma.' But then, neither of us can help that now."

He brought his son close to him, embracing him as tightly as he dared with such a fragile boy. After a moment, he said, "I'm not doing very well with you, am I? I'm trying, Ayrim, I am trying."

When they had rested long enough, Barrin remounted the horse, his son cradled once more in his arm, and they were once again on the road. They had ridden far in a day, and if they were able to keep the pace, Barrin knew that they would reach the gate of Saparen by sundown.

What he didn't know was that five ern were but a mile behind him.

Chapter 16

The river sat lower into the land the farther west Barrin rode, and sharp but shallow declines, dipping perhaps a foot to the water's surface, lined the banks. The trees were scarcer in that area, but the fields more prominent, for there was the ground softer than it was nearer to Lanshire, and Barrin knew that he was drawing close to Saparen. An hour or so more, and he would arrive. The sun was sinking before him, and her tip had already touched the horizon, no more to be seen until Ignar could carry her across the underside of the world from the west back to the east, and then to hurl her back across. It was his daily race, for he would leap from cloud to cloud in pursuit of the sun, which was, of course, Serren, arriving in the evening in time to catch her and carry her upon his massive back to the eastern dawn. Barrin wasn't sure what Ignar did on cloudless days, but deities had their ways, and a simple farmer need not know all of them.

The road before Iylin narrowed, and harvested fields, which had been sitting empty beside him for the previous several miles, waiting for the planting season, changed abruptly to thick brown wheat, not yet cut. Barrin frowned. He much preferred the open fields, where he could see around him for some distance. The wheat fields only left visible a narrow tunnel along the river, and the rest remained hidden.

Ayrim gurgled slightly, and his father looked down. "Not long now," he said, and pressed the horse a little faster, partially because of anticipation, partially of anxiety.

His anxiety was not unfounded. The wheat beside him seemed to part with a sudden rustle, and out came an ern, mounted upon a great black steed and a blade in hand. Barrin's own brown horse bucked and neighed, and Iylin ducked down, wrapping his free hand around the animal's neck. The ern did not attack, but even if he had, the sudden movements of its foe would have caused the sword to swing too wide. But it held back, waiting for a better opportunity.

The horse backed away and settled, and when Barrin looked forward again, he

saw two more ern there, each horsed, and a quick look back, had he taken it, would have revealed yet another pair. But he didn't look back. He hadn't the time. His horse kicked once more, but Iylin controlled the animal, and urged it forward. The ern moved as well, squeezing the human within the circle, but, charging into an immediate gallop, Barrin's horse rushed forward, then turned suddenly around, cut between two of the ern and into the fields.

The monsters each took a swipe at the coming farmer, but Barrin ducked low on the horse's back, and the swords cut nothing but air. Iylin turned the horse back onto the road, trying to use the path for speed, since Ayrim's renewed wails would forbid them from simply hiding. Barrin might have beaten one in combat, but not this many of them at once. Ern were not typically very skilled with weapons, but they were strong, and they knew how to work together in a fight. He would have to outrun them.

And so he was upon the road again, and the horse ran as though it knew that its life depended on speed. The ern were behind him, and with each glance back he saw their thunderous pursuit. They rode as a group, their swords raised and ready, and the blades shown brightly red in the dusk. Faster, Barrin urged the horse, driving his heels into the animal's sides. Two of the ern turned off the trail, back into the hidden fields, and Iylin cringed. He couldn't know where they would emerge, so his only hope was to stay ahead of them.

Further upon the dirt trail did the abominations pursue, and the land became as a blur to Barrin. He wasn't sure it was from the speed or simply weariness, but he was no longer certain where he was or how far he had to ride. He would eventually reach the bridge before the castle, and the bridge would be guarded, but how long would that take? Was he a mile away, or ten? The difference might be between life and death. Neither he nor his horse would be able to travel much farther, and falling short of Saparen would prove deadly.

And then disaster struck. Without warning or explanation, the road beneath the farmer and his horse began to crumble and fall away, creating a chasm just a step before him. The steed stumbled, but caught itself and kept running. *Thank the gods*, thought Barrin. The worst thing that could happen at that moment would be for the horse to break a leg.

But what had happened? The human risked a look back, but he was going too fast to really get a good look at what had caused the hole in the road. Had it always been there, and had he simply noticed it too late? No, for in another few steps he saw the path before him tear apart, forming an ever-widening gully before him. The horse didn't hesitate a moment, but leapt over the torn earth and kept going. Barrin's heart began to pound ever more, and terror gripped him so tightly that he could not breathe.

Did the ern have Earth Magic? Such a thing was impossible, for ern could not Invoke, and yet what else could explain it? There was some dark art at play there, and he didn't understand it.

His thoughts distracted him too much, and he didn't notice until it was almost too late as a massive horse stepped into his path from the fields. One of them had overcome him! The ern upon it was as a ghost, but once again Barrin ducked out of the way, and the horse leapt into the river on instinct. The splash sprayed mist over the rider for a long moment, and the world was lost to him, and yet the animal seemed to know where it was going, if no one else did, and it galloped faithfully forward, just out of reach of the coming ern. Once again had the prey avoided his hunters, but both times had been little more than luck, and luck tended to dissipate after a time.

And suddenly, the river seemed to dissolve below him and run dry. Great holes formed in the muddy ground between the smooth rocks of the stream. Even the air around Barrin seemed to thin, and his breaths had become heavy.

No, this wasn't Earth Magic, he realized.

It was the Magic of the Absence.

Only the Absence could tear apart Earth, Wind, and Water. Only the Absence had such control over all the domains of the Gods.

"Go!" rasped Barrin as he wedged Ayrim between his body and arms so he could hold the reins with both hands. The horse needed little encouragement. It too knew the cost of slowing in that moment. It climbed the opposite bank and sprinted forward again, panting all the way. Likewise did the ern come, all five on the opposite side the stream, each keeping pace against the two Iylins. Barrin watched them for a while, but then turned his eyes again forward.

There was the bridge!

Even the horse seemed encouraged, and it lowered its head and ran for the stone structure, spending his last energy reserve on this final charge. The ern saw it too, and three of them crossed the river to get behind the fleeing farmer. Just a few yards back they were, hardly farther than a sword can reach.

There were two archers upon the bridge, and they saw the horsemen coming. It was easy to see that someone was being pursued, but it was only after the horses grew nearer that they saw it was ern that chased the lone human. Their arrows were nocked only a moment later, and they waited for a clear shot. As the dark foes approached, each archer let loose of his missile, one a moment after the other. The Baron's archers were trained well; the sound of running horses drowned out the twin thumps of arrows striking flesh.

The two on the far side were ones to fall, each struck in the chest by an arrow, but Barrin knew that he himself prevented the other three from being slain, for he rode within the line of fire. He saw the archers train their arrows at the ern, but they held back their attack for fear that they would slay the very man they sought to save.

And still the ern were catching up.

Barrin Iylin decided that some sort of desperate maneuver was needed, and so he turned his horse suddenly to the left, away from the river. It was all the archers needed.

One of the ern got both arrows – one in the shoulder and another in the throat – and the beast fell dead upon the cool grass. There were only two remaining.

Saparen was built less than a quarter mile from the bridge, high on the hill that sat against the Tarrit Lake. Barrin could see the wooden walls of the castle even then, and he began the long climb up the hill toward the gate. The ern followed closely, and though Iylin's turn had given him a little more distance, the enemy was making up for the lost time.

Though they had no horses to follow, there was opportunity for the archers to attack once more, and they did, firing their arrows up the hill and toward the ern. The first slipped into the grass beneath the horse and was trampled, but the second struck an ern in the back. Even if it didn't kill the thing, it stopped it, for the ern tumbled into the grass, and its horse turned away from the pursuit.

One remained, and Barrin rode hard toward that gate, seeing and thinking about nothing else. The wailing of his young son could not be heeded, and little could he do even if he wanted to. They had to get to safety, and then he would tend to the child.

The hill leveled off, and Barrin was merely a couple of score yards from the gate. Spearmen stood at the entrance, and they readied themselves when came the two members of the chase. "Help!" cried Barrin, but still he rode. There was little need for the cry, for anyone could see what was happening. The ern was upon him, and it swung its sword across in a wild slash. Iylin felt the wind of the weapon upon his neck, but it didn't connect. The ern kicked his horse faster, and soon it was within range. Again it raised its sword, preparing to at last slay the farmer.

Iylin ducked down desperately as his horse crossed the line of spearmen. They let him by unharmed, but against the ern they charged. Three spears impaled the beast, suspending it in the air just before the gate, even as its horse crossed the gate and continued its pursuit into the town.

Chapter 17

The Holy Texts, in The Book of the Living, tell of a message sent by Vid to the gods. In those days, the land was united under the gods, and they controlled everything. There was much happiness and wealth, and those were enjoyed by all men, and they were content. Yet there was a new presence upon the world, called the Absence, and Vid had emerged from the Absence, and he became the Absence, though the gods could never find him, as he was always where the gods were not.

But Vid sent a messenger to the gods, and in his missive did he threaten to destroy what the gods had built. The Six laughed, but in time, they found their people growing more distant from their creators. Vid had gone amongst the people and

influenced them to hide their activities from the gods, and in doing so would they enter the Absence. "Simply take what you wish," said Vid to them, "so long as you do it whilst the gods look elsewhere. Slay your enemies, and steal from them, for the Six will never know, and you will be happier."

And many of the people were influenced, and they began to steal and lie and murder. Since there were no kingdoms then (for the Six ruled directly), many escaped from punishment, for the gods did not see them.

The gods went unto the people to unite them once again, but it was too late. The people questioned what the gods had ever done for them, for Vid was giving them wonderful gifts to better their lives, and the gods would only give rules. They cursed the deities for enslaving them, while Vid sought to free them, for this is what the Absence taught.

The murders and deceptions spread, and soon great wars were being waged, and even from their home in the western mountains could the gods hear Vid's laughter. He had surely torn apart the paradise that the gods had created.

Once again did the six deities go amongst the people, and again they plead for peace, and yet they would not be heard, and they returned to their home in the heavens defeated.

At last, the goddess Serren went unto a field where a great battle was being fought, and there she stood between two advancing armies, and would not be moved. For a while the armies waited, hoping that she would get bored and leave them alone, but she would not. At last the armies grew weary of waiting, and they advanced against each other, no matter if Serren was there or not. They fired their arrows at one another, but Serren took the arrows unto herself, and a thousand times was she struck. Without a whimper, the goddess fell in pain, and armies came to her in remorse, and there they witnessed her death.

The eyes of the people were opened, and they realized suddenly how good the gods had been to them. The gods did not wish slaves, for no master would destroy himself for a slave, as Serren had done for the people. They went home and stopped their wars, and the worship of the gods was renewed.

But Serren remained in death. Into the Otherworld did the other gods chase her, but she would not leave, for she said that it was right that she should die, for why else might it have happened? For several months they argued with her, and in that time was the world neglected, and it became cold and dark. But it was Tianon that finally coaxed Serren out, for he argued that, yes, it was right for her to die, and such glory was wrought from her death, but it was also right for her to be born once more, for why else would she have the power to leave the Otherworld? Both death and life could exist together for her.

And such was the reason that the Goddess of Life would take the souls of the dead into the Otherworld, and for her to make that place her own, and a thousand

thousand times has she crossed into the Otherworld since that first time, and returned each time also. But it is also the reason that she has made the Otherworld a mere waiting place, for she knows that there will come a time when the gods have the power to bring the people out again.

And so Serren agreed to return after her death, and the gods came out of the Otherworld together. Upon their return, they revitalized the land, which had grown cold and desolate in their long absence. Yet they did not want the people to forget their newfound faith, and so they continue to plunge the world into Winter every year as a reminder of Serren's sacrifice.

So say the Holy Texts.

Chapter 18

Remnants of a stone castle could be found within Saparen, and yet none living, not even the dragons, could remember when that stone structure stood intact. The ancient wall and keep had been built in a forgotten past, and had, over the centuries, been worn away by war and time until it became a loose line of toppled stones and the empty shell of a tower. The newer wall was wooden, but sturdy enough, and the keep, though stone, was considerably smaller than the ruined one had been. The modern engineers simply did not know how to make a sturdy stone wall or large building any longer. They could do it with smaller structures, but building something too large would just guarantee that it would topple over time. That art seemed to have been forever lost, though several still sought to revive it, including the King.

Yet small parts could still be used, and were by Baron Dravor Verios. That hollowed shell that had once been a tower remained by Lake Tarrit, and inside that shell did the archers watch the body of water, for the ern had boats, and would use them to get near to Saparen if the lake were left unguarded.

In addition to the ruined tower, the bridge had also been left over from the lost past, for it was small enough for the stone masons in the age of the Trosalan family's rule to repair adequately. They no longer understood how to create a stone bridge over a great river, but a small one over a small stream such as the Tarmine was within their understanding, and so they had kept it standing over several thousands of years.

What remained of the town was mostly built of wood, even the Temples and barracks. Part of an ancient temple remained on the north side of the town, but any hint as to which god had been worshiped there had been weathered away. Priests of each faith sometimes claimed it, but in taunts and jokes only, for none had strong enough evidence to actually believe one thing or another about the building.

Barrin Iylin glanced over the town briefly before he dismounted, but only

enough to get a vague impression of the gate area. His legs were so sore and weary that they buckled when the pressure was placed upon them, and the farmer slipped to his knees. Ayrim was crying, and the sounds attracted the attention of even those who did not witness the dramatic chase and escape a few moments before. "Hush, now," said Barrin, rocking his son. "It's over. We have made it."

Thanes were around him quickly, as well as the spearmen from the gate and a few of the archers. The Baron's army was large compared to others in the area, and equally divided amongst the three classes, though only the Thanes left the castle at times of peace. Yet many were there on that day, and they huddled around the farmer, amazed at what they had just seen.

"Take the horse, give it food and water and rest," said one of the Thanes to a spearman. The soldier did as he was ordered, and the steed went along happily enough, as though he too knew that his journey was over. The Thane, a hard man of great stature, knelt beside Barrin. His wild blond hair was long, but tied back, and his beard was cut close to his cheeks. His face was lined, but not of age, but experience, which does not necessarily coexist, though often does. As for age, he might have been thirty in years, or maybe a score only, but it was difficult to tell. He put his hand upon Iylin compassionately, and he said, "The ern are not easily outrun. It was good that you came here. My name is Gerill Hyte. Do you need Healing? Two Priests of Serren have we here, and both skilled in Invocation."

"No," Barrin coughed. "But my son, he might have been injured."

Again the Thane turned away, saying, "Request help of the Serrenites." And then to Iylin he continued, "We will take you into Whesler's Den. The people at the Whispering Wind will give you a room cheaply, or for labor, if you brought no coin."

"I have money enough," Barrin said as he stood. He had not been to Saparen often, but had made the journey enough to know what inns charged for a night's rest, and he had that much in coin, if little more. Gerill Hyte helped the farmer walk, and together they moved down the street into the Market, which was an open courtyard filled by the tents of traders and merchants. It was the most crowded area of the town, sitting at the peak of Saparen's hill, but spacious enough, and the two were able to cross without incident.

Though the market was technically outside any of the six city dens, it was generally considered part of Tianon's domain, not only because the tall Temple of the Earth God overlooked the square, but also because the deity's underlying greed. That was tradition only, for truly no den had jurisdiction over the market, and Tianon's area laid northeast. Within that den were the barracks for the spearmen and archers, even though warriors tended to be Ignists rather than Tianans.

The two turned left into the western burrow, which was claimed by Whesler. The people of the den were the most generous, and beggars crowded the streets to take advantage of that characteristic. To the south stood the keep, the stone structure, inside

an empty yard that took up nearly a fourth of the town. Beside the ancient stone temple and the market, it was the only area that none of the six faiths could not rightfully claim, though the Baron himself devoutly followed Ignar.

The dens had not been planned, of course, but the followers of the six gods built their Temples in different areas of the town. As it happened, the faithful of a church tended to build their own homes near their temple, while the lazy who had already made their homes in an area decided to follow the nearest god to them. So the dens were eventually formed, almost six separate cities inside the one, for the personalities and customs differed greatly between the faiths. Over time, the Priests began to wield more influence over their individual dens, and the distinctions became more formalized than ever. You could live in a den without belonging to that faith, but you would have to come before the Priests before opening a shop there, and you would find it difficult to convince them to allow you to use the space when one of their own parishioners could have it.

Which is why, though the inn was certainly not the closest to the gate, Gerill Hyte took Barrin Iylin to the Whispering Wind. The people of Whesler were by far the most generous, and they might even refuse payment for the room after hearing what the farmer had been through in the coming to Saparen.

Thus did Gerill help the farmer into the large building. The common room was crowded and jovial, for it was dawning on the early evening, and most tradesmen had retired for the night, leaving work behind for a pint of ale and a song. But the innkeeper, a bald man, his face red with laughter, saw the Thane and greeted him at the door.

"Welcome, Master Hyte," said the man.

"Greetings," said the Thane, his eyes shifting about the patrons. "You've got a packed house tonight. I hope you have room for a man who just saved himself and his son from ern? They have chased him right into our gates."

"Ern?" said the man, almost disappointed that he had not heard that piece of gossip yet. "Yes, of course, I have the room. Take the first on the left."

"I thank you," said the Thane. "A Priest of Serren will come behind us. Will you direct him to the room?"

"I will."

With that, Gerill led Barrin up the stairs and into the small room. There was only enough room for the bed and a couple of chairs, but it was enough. Iylin, quite weary, laid his son onto the bed and then sat down wearily to rest. Ayrim seemed just as tired, for he was asleep quickly. Hyte sat, looking upon the simple farmer.

"You came upon The Road to Saparen," said Gerill, and Barrin nodded in response. "Did you, by chance, pass Lanshire?"

Iylin didn't open his eyes, but said, "I am, in fact, from Lanshire."

The Thane looked down. "I thought as much. You are Iylin, are you not?"

That got the farmer's attention. He sat up, concerned, his hand darting to the hilt of his sword. How did this Thane know of him, a lowly serf who hadn't been to Saparen five times in his life?

Gerill didn't need the answer, but frowned when he saw that he had made Barrin nervous. "Peace, friend. I mean you no harm. We got a message from Lanshire by pigeon. We know about the attack."

"But some survived to send the message?"

"Many did survive, but also did a very many died."

"Lord Draffor?"

"He lives. He was badly wounded in the fight, but he will survive and be strong. Your Serrenite Priest, I have been told, tends to him, though the letter said little else."

Barrin relaxed and sat again. "I am glad to hear it. What of my neighbors?"

"No others were mentioned one way or another. We'll find out more in time."

Barrin sighed. "If you know of me," he said, "then you know why the ern chased me."

"We do," said the Thane, glancing to the child.

"What will you do with me?"

Gerill shrugged. "That is for the Baron to decide. But worry not, Iylin. He has helped others like your son. He will likely help you."

"Lord Draffor said as much." But as he said the words, he shivered, remembering the Thane that had come to Lanshire. But he did not mention the man, for he did not know whether he could trust Gerill HYTE or not.

"When you are strong enough, we will go to the Baron."

"Yes."

The Priest came, a man in his late twenties, nearly a dozen of which spent in the service of Serren. He was handsome enough, with dark hair and a well-rounded face, but Barrin didn't really pay attention. He was too tired.

The clergyman, whose name was Rignslin, examined Ayrim, but reported, "I see nothing wrong with the child that a little sleep will not cure."

"I am glad," said Barrin, and the Priest took his leave. But the Thane remained with them until both Barrin and Ayrim were fast asleep, and still he remained, watching over those who had fallen quite by chance under his charge.

Chapter 19

The field that surrounded the keep was guarded heavily, with patrols constantly upon the surrounding streets and circling the stone building itself. The only road leading through the yard to the building had two spearmen ever guarding at its source

near the center of the town, and only by permission of the Baron or his family or of the Thanes could someone even walk upon that road. Even so, there was a certain peacefulness about the place, perhaps because that field had the largest (or perhaps only) patch of grass within the city walls. It was quieter than the rest of the town, and there seemed no hurry in that place.

Barrin Iylin, the morning following his ride, found himself approaching the castle on that very path leading to the keep. For the first time in days was he without Ayrim, for some of the women in Whesler's Den were taking care of him that day, but by Barrin's side was the Thane Gerill HYTE. The young farmer wouldn't have left Ayrim had it not been for the guards sent by the Baron to vouch for the child's safety (and everyone in the Whispering Wind vouched for the guards), but that assurance had come, and so he was without his son that morning.

The stone building before him, though large compared to the other structures in town, was considered quite small for a city the size of Saparen. Other castles had much larger keeps, though they were made mostly of wood and clay. It was the mere fact that Saparen had a stone keep that made the building so impressive. Its form was strict, and the rugged stone made the keep seem older than it was. The main section, only two stories in height, was square in the front, with thin windows at the second floor, and a wooden door, reinforced with an iron frame, as the only entrance. Archers waited atop the keep, for it was one of the highest points in the southern area of the town (though some of the inns and Temples were higher still), even if the land there descended rapidly into the lake. From the main section of the keep came two smaller wings, and from the flat peak did the roof slant into them. These sections did have slitted windows about its only floor.

Before the doors was another pair of guards, and they opened the entrance as HYTE approached. Inside, a short and dim hallway emptied into the dining hall. To the very roof did this room reach, with lamps suspended from the ceiling and a wooden balcony that encircled the room. Stairs on both sides of the room reached that second floor, and from there could a person leave through doors on three of the walls (the front wall being the only one without an exit). So too did the lower floor have three exits besides the front door, but they were nearly hidden by the shadows from the balconies. Before the walls were wooden pillars supporting the second story, and before them were long tables on each side. The path that led to the Baron's dais, therefore, was clear.

Few were in the room on that day. A spearman was at every door, and two flanked the Baron, who sat upon his chair majestically. Baron Dravor Verios was a young man, in his prime physically. His hair flared red, much as his deity's did, and his beard was groomed and cut short. He was a barrel of a man, built well, but thick. He wore a white shirt, black breeches, and a red cape – simple for a man of his position, but such was Baron Verios. He was considered by some to be overzealous, and

sometimes quick to anger, but no one could support a claim that the man was greedy.

Beside him, in a lesser chair, was his young wife, sixteen in years, and burdened by their first child. She was a slight figure, frail enough that childbirth could be a great risk to her and the infant. If Verios was red by his fire, then she was white of ice, and she was generally considered to be a quiet and rather dull person. Also there was present the jester, and though thin, not much more could be deciphered of his appearance, since his face was covered with paint, and also the reeve, who seemed as young as the Baroness, for his beard was fuzz upon his face, and his skin soft and unblemished.

"Iylin," said the Baron, his voice booming. "Forgive me, friend, I know not your first name."

The farmer bowed, and with his head down, he replied, "Barrin, sire."

"Barrin, rise, please," said Dravor.

The jester giggled. "Baron, did he say? I thought you were the Baron here."

"No," corrected the peasant timidly as he stood. "Barrin, like a field might be under a drought, though I am told my name is spelled differently than that word too. I cannot read much myself."

The jester wrinkled his nose, and said no more.

The nobleman nodded at the explanation and said, "I was pleased to hear that you had arrived. The note from Lord Draffor came before you, though not by much. They had quite a battle, but many of the ern left the town to search for you, and he did not know if you had escaped. It worries me that ern had appeared with the outlaws. I did not yet know of that alliance."

"It concerned us as well," said Barrin, his voice soft and quivering.

"What did you say?" asked Verios, though not with anger. The farmer had spoken too softly to be heard by anyone in the room. Iylin repeated himself, and the Baron nodded. "I have word that their forces are gathering again. I do not think it safe that you return to Lanshire."

"No, I suppose not, sire."

"You seem worried. Is it because of the Thane with them?"

The peasant stopped breathing. Verios' reputation was one of an extremely Just man, and only that reputation had persuaded Barrin to go to Saparen after the Thane attacked Lanshire. But still he had been worried that the warrior had not been a rebel, but rather acting under orders, as silly as the suggestion might be.

A quick look at the Baron's face might have told the farmer how silly a suggestion it was, but instead Iylin looked down, and he said, "You heard of that."

"We did, Barrin. I assure you that the Thane was not working under my orders. In fact, he wasn't even a Thane, for a month ago I removed him from his position. I should have imprisoned him, but we had no cause at the time. We suspected much, but I do not jail on suspicions. It was perhaps a mistake in this case, and I am sorry for it."

Relief washed over Iylin and he looked up to meet his Baron's gaze. The man was smiling warmly, as though he truly cared about this subject.

The Baron continued, saying, "He was a brute of a man and not much of a warrior. A drunk too. We should be thankful for that also, for a man of subtlety would have drawn you away from the town before attacking. The gods were with you, Barrin. But that was not all, was it?"

The farmer held his breath, but the nobleman seemed to want an answer, so he said, "Those ern. I would swear that they invoked the Absence."

"Impossible. Ern cannot Invoke, and few men can even Invoke the Absence. But you were weary, perhaps you did not see clearly, or perhaps someone else was there."

"I do not think so."

The nobleman put his chin in his hand and grunted. With a nod, he seemed to accept Barrin's assertion and replied, "Then I will look into it. We will find the truth in time. But let me ask you, Barrin: What will you do now that you have reached our city? Will you stay, or depart?"

Again the answer was slow in coming, and it was not a direct answer to the question, but Barrin said, "I worry for my son, and I do not know what will be the safest path for him."

"Do you worry that I will ask you to leave the walls for the safety of my city?"

Iylin nodded slightly.

The Baron did as well. "What do you know of me, Barrin?"

"Only what I hear."

"What have you heard?"

Barrin thought the question over. He replied at last, saying, "Lord Draffor has told me that you are a Just man, a strong man."

"I have my faults," the Baron admitted, "but I have my Virtues as well. I know that Lanshire has no Temple to Ignar, so you might not understand the Ignists well. Surely there are one or two around Lanshire, but I image that they are young in their faith, and perhaps do not understand the ways of our god that well." Barrin thought of the Drins, and decided that the Baron was likely right. Dravor Verios continued, "We are often too quick to act, so anxious for Justice that we flare about us, sometimes aimlessly. But, Barrin, what we do is done for Justice, even when we make mistakes."

He stood and approached, and Iylin recoiled a moment, but the look in Dravor's eyes was not malevolent. He placed a heavy hand on the farmer's shoulder and said, "No matter the consequences, I will never surrender a man to an ern. No matter if this entire city fell upon my head for it. No matter the consequences, I would never give a child over to murderers. I would sooner the world burn than to see that happen."

It's over, Barrin thought.

Chapter 20

A week was Barrin Iylin inside Saparen already, and in most of that time did he and Ayrim share the home of Master Gerill Hyte in the Ignar Den, which was said to be the central section of the city, but which also stretched to the western edge of the town, where the ancient Temple stood. Gerill was not an Ignist, but instead was a Flaran, but the barracks of the Thaners (for those who could not afford their own home within the walls of Saparen) was in Ignar's Den, and Hyte preferred to be near his friends than farther south in Flarow's section.

On their first day in the house, the Thane's servant, a middle-aged woman named Jeslin, all but snatched Ayrim away from Barrin. She loved the child at first sight, and was sorry every time the boy was away from her, even if it was only a moment. Jeslin, as she admitted to Iylin during the week, had wanted a child of her own, and yet found many years before that she was barren. She and her husband therefore lived childless, and yet not without real affection for one another. He had died in an ern attack five years back, so Jeslin moved away from the farmlands and into Saparen, where Hyte hired her as a servant. Ayrim's presence was like a realized dream for her, having a baby in the house, and she wanted the young boy with her at all times. "Gerill 'isself," she muttered more than once to the visitor, "won't ne'er marry, no matter how hard I try t' convince 'im. 'Ee needs some li'l ones 'round, I say."

Barrin himself wished to pay for his boarding with silver or labor, but Gerill would not accept. As Jeslin said, the Thane "is devoted t' Flarow, an' yet there is much ah Whesler 'n 'im. An' ah course, no Thane can be wi'out Ignar's fire 'n 'is blood."

Iylin would not simply sit inactive in this time. He would help with the cleaning or repairs when Gerill left for patrols, and he could tell that the Thane, though he did not say so, was pleased with the effort.

The man from Lanshire was, by the end of the week, rather comfortable with the city. At first it tempted to overwhelm him, for each of the six dens was, individually, considerably larger than Lanshire. Whesler's section was in particularly frightening, for the beggars and the mad gathered there because of the nature of the Wheslerans. So there the streets were dirty and crowded, and sickly men were ever after Barrin for a gold piece or a meal. Tianon's section, on the other hand, was quite well maintained, and the buildings there were large and often braced by stone. While most libraries of the city were located inside Temples, Tianon's stood apart, a grand building filled with histories, poetry, and philosophies.

Tarite's Den on the northwest side was rather empty and haunting, but his followers were few, and so it was also the least populated. Oddly, the graveyard behind the God of the Dead's Temple was by far the smallest of any in Saparen. But then, even though a man's physical body falls into the arms of Tarite in death (and his

soul into Serren's), ceremony dictates that he is buried at the Temple he attended to in life, and so the few and scattered followers of the deity could not fill Death's graves as quickly as could the worshipers of the other gods.

Thus did Barrin learn his way about the city, and learned which roads to avoid because of thieves or superstition, and which inns had the best bards and jugglers. He also found the Temple of Serren on the north side, right beside the gate, and found the people there not unlike the people of Lanshire. The Temple was wooden and squat, built wide, though short, to accommodate the followers of the popular goddess. Iylin went to Mass daily once he found the Temple, and one day he ran into the Priest Rignslin Josite, the studious man who had examined Ayrim on the day of the ern chase. The farmer thanked the Priest, and spoke to him for several minutes, and he found Rignslin a kind and caring person. The Priest had a way of calming someone with just a word, and there was a trust in him that was quite engaging.

Yes, by the end of the week, Iylin has well acquainted with Saparen, and considered finding a farm nearby once everything was over. It would be a fine place to live, he decided.

But "everything" was far from over, and rumors of ern began to float about the city. They had been seen often in the area, and seemed to be growing in number. Even Gerill was growing wary, and he avoided any conversation about the beasts.

By the end of that first week, the population of the town had swollen greatly, and Barrin inherently understood what was happening, though little understanding of the ways of the world was needed to decipher this particular puzzle. The people about the country were coming for the protection of the city. They had seen something or heard something and were scared away from their own homes. The number of spearmen at the gate was doubled, as were the archers upon the wall. Barrin didn't need to know much about battle tactics and defense to understand that either. The ern were in the area, and they were very likely coming.

A week it had been in Saparen before Barrin Iylin asked Gerill about it directly. "Are the ern preparing an attack?"

Gerill nodded, but said nothing.

"How long?"

"Any day now."

"How many are there against us?"

The Thane looked up, his eyes providing the answer as clearly as his words did. "I don't know. Several hundred ern, at least a few score men."

Iylin sat down at the words. Saparen only had a few hundred in its army. That number alone seemed great, and yet so small in comparison to what was coming.

"They are coming for Ayrim?"

"Yes," was the undisguised reply. "Ayrim and a few of the other children who have found refuge here. He is not the only one, but he is one of them. They have sent a

message demanding the surrender of the boys. The Baron, of course, will not give them up."

"It would be, perhaps, best for the city if he did."

"No, it would not. On this point I agree fully with the Baron. It would be better for everyone here to perish than to give into the ern. Such is a fate worse than death."

"Cowardice is sometimes said of Flarow."

"Sometimes."

"It does not exist in you."

Gerill grunted. "I have my sins, but I hope that I do not have that one."

"You should have been an Ignist for your bravery."

"Perhaps you should have as well. But you are right. Flarow's Den might oppose us in this, but the others will support us, I believe, and we will fight."

"What can we do to prevent the war?"

"We have sent word to the King, explaining the situation. He will send reinforcements as soon as he is able. Otherwise, we have recalled the Thanes, and we must hold the town until the King arrives."

Barrin swallowed hard. He expressed his fears, saying, "The King's castle is a week away even on the fastest horse. Two weeks or greater for an army on foot."

Gerill nodded heavily.

Chapter 21

After the Death Wars abated, the new King of Aeresan began the line of Arinsore Kings, and they ruled for more than a century. Since so much knowledge was lost in the Wars, the Arinsores were the first Kings that any history text recalled. In those ancient times, the ern were very rarely seen except in the far west, and even there they were few in number. The second Arinsore King, Sarn, perhaps realizing that the beasts might prove to be a problem for the continent over the next four millennia, led his armies to the mountains and deserts across the Sea of Cernal to help the western kingdom to wipe out the dirty beasts.

And yet, when they arrived, they found that the ern were growing in number faster than anyone, even Sarn, whom history regarded as the first man to recognize the true threat that the ern posed, could have imagined.

The King left the castle in this endeavor in his second year as King. After another year in battle against the ern, he was slain. It took another year before others found his body and brought the word back to the east.

Since that time, the ern had been moving slowly, but steadily, across the land. In time, they took complete control over the country across the Cernal Sea, a land whose

name had long been lost, so was afterward called the Forgotten Kingdom. Also did the ern take a strip of land that ran from the sea toward the east, lying south of the Tower, which the people called the Ern Highway, for it was through that corridor that their forces marched ever east in lust over the kingdoms of men.

Upon the Teriam River, which stretched from the bay of the same name in the south to the White Hills north, was formed the Last Stand, three castles – Asylin, Morylin, and Satyrin – built so near to each other that the trip from the first of the three cities to the last would not take a horseman a week. It was there that the greatest defense against the ern was created, and the castles were ever at war, for they sat upon the very path of the ern, and the only bridges to cross the river stood at the castles. Because they blocked the Ern Highway, those fortresses fought against the ern more than even cities farther west, such as Sedan, which sat upon the coast of the Cerinal Sea, so near to the Forgotten Kingdom.

To the east of the Last Stand were crowded most of the men in the world, and they faced the ern least of all, so well did the defenses of the Last Stand hold. Minor attacks from small bands were common enough, but never before had the ern been able to form such an army in the east as the one that were preparing to descend upon Saparen. And yet, in the Summer of the year 8705, the ern had accomplished what had been thought impossible.

Master Gerill Hyte had been right – several from Flarow’s Den came to the Baron with concerns over the coming battle. Surrender the few children and save the many, they suggested, knowing that such an Ignist as Verios would never concede. They looked to the logical Tianans for support, but none was coming. The followers of the Earth God knew well enough that the ern did not negotiate peace. History had taught that lesson very well. No, they knew that war was coming, and they would support the Baron.

So too did the people of Ignar’s Den wish to help. They found whatever weapons they could, whether swords, bows, or merely shovels, and asked for positions at the wall. They wished to stand with their neighbors.

Of Serren’s followers, most prayed and waited. The will of the gods would be done, they understood, and nothing they could do would change it. Many from other dens suggested that the gods were willing them to fight, but the Serrenites simply smiled and replied that if they were meant to fight, they could not stop themselves.

Which was exactly why most military leaders loathed Serrenites.

Tarite’s few worshipers, on the other hand, believed that they would have to make their own fate, and they took up arms with the soldiers. And that was exactly why military leaders wished more people would follow Tarite.

Not all of the Baron’s supporters would take up arms. Tianans generally worked out strategy rather than took weapons unto themselves, and Wheslerans were prepared to give all they had in support of the warriors, but few readily volunteered to stand up

and fight. But if the ern were able to breach the walls, few would have a choice. They would fight, or they would die.

As for Barrin Iylin, he found truth in what Gerill had said about his bravery. Others of the faith of Serren might stand and wait for destiny to happen, but he would not. He had discarded the tainted ern blade he had used to escape Lanshire, but he asked Gerill for another, and the sword was readily given. He would stand with the Ignists when the ern came. He could do nothing else, for all these men were ready to die for his son.

Chapter 22

As was common for most ern attacks, the charge came first at night, and there was no reserve held back for later reinforcements, or a portion set aside to flank the enemy, but they came quickly and as one. They were heard long before they were seen in the darkness of the plain, and their feral noises at first dissolved into the night sounds, only faintly present over the crickets. It was enough for Saparen's guard, however, for they recognized what they heard. The Thanes and soldiers were roused and ordered into position, and so too did Barrin Iylin, along with hundreds of other peasants, arm himself and stand alongside the Baron's men.

The taunts and yells of the ern, by then, dominated the evening. They were coming from the southeast – the weakest point in the castle's defenses. Only by the southeast would the coming army not have to cross water, either lake or river. Only from there could they charge in without obstacle, save only the city walls themselves.

The ern carried no torches, and yet light could be seen within their numbers. There were men there as well, the Saparians upon the wall realized, just as there had been in Lanshire. Some dark alliance had brought the forces together. The very thought made Iylin ill. He was used to ern attacks. There was nothing surprising about bloodlust amongst ern. But why humans had allied themselves with the most evil creature the world had yet produced, Barrin could not imagine. The very thought was blasphemous.

The very thought was inhuman.

At first sight, the archers fired, and the battle had begun. Saparen had two major advantages over the ern. First was the town itself, for the enemy would have no wall for protection, while Saparen's walls would hold back the ern for some time. Second was the archers. Though the ern did have ranged weapons, the creatures found their use distasteful, and shied away from them. Ern wanted to smell the blood, to see the dead closely, to feel the blade as it pierced skin. To them, that was the real pleasure in war. They would charge the wall rather than fire against it, and while that charge was

underway, the men had the upper hand.

And so the first wave of arrows was unanswered except for the few screams as the missiles were rained down upon the enemy. "Again," ordered the army commanders, and another storm came upon the ern, and more of their number fell. This time there was response, and black arrows were fired against Saparen, though, predictably, they were few in number. Still, out of the darkness they came, and they were spotted too late, for the archers had not taken cover. Down from the narrow catwalk upon the wall did soldiers fall, and their blood splattered against those who waited inside, feeling as a warm rain at first, though there came a dawning horror as those within realized what had fallen upon their faces.

The ern came hard, and by the time the third attack from the archers had been laid, there was a great *thump* upon the wooden walls. The ern had arrived, and their misleadingly thin bodies were being thrown upon the defenses. The sound had its desired effect, for there came from within the town a great gasp and fear. Terror was as great a weapon in war as a sword or bow, and it was the one weapon the ern mastered above all others. The hands of archers quaked, and arrows were misled. The spears and swords of soldiers quivered, and they would not be as effective. Amongst the spearmen there were tears and wails, and the sounds seemed as dark as the night. It was the sound of the Absence, and fear grew, for where there was Vid to aid the ern, there was no god to help the men.

There seemed a moment of peace then, but silence boiled into the awful sounds of war and death. The archers kept up their attacks, but they were suddenly joined by the spearmen and Thaners, desperately trying to keep the ern from climbing up the walls. Both sides surged toward the wooden barrier that parted them, each hoping to hold position while pushing its foe back. At best it was a stalemate, for both sides held well enough, and pale and red blood alike flowed darkly in the night.

The gate rattled in the darkness, bouncing inward for a brief moment. Barrin Iylin found that he had been holding his breath as he looked upon the entrance of the town by the light of faint torches and lamps. It was the weakest point of the wall, and archers and Thaners alike flanked it in great numbers to reinforce the position. Yet the archers were firing, and the Thaners hacking downward with their swords, and still the wall rocked under the weight of the coming horde.

From where Barrin stood, inside the curtain, all he could see were allies. But they were falling quickly, collapsing inward, their faces and bodies mauled and ugly, and the corpses were already lying about as though the siege had already taken days. The farmer licked his lips, desperate to do something, to know what was happening. How many amongst the enemy had fallen? How many were left? Based on the way the wall was moving, he thought a great many of them had to be still alive. It was terrible – the shaking of the wooden walls and the squealing that it made.

And then it happened. One of the ern successfully crossed over the wall, and

inward it charged, hoping to make a hole in the line of warriors there. It seemed to simply appear on the wallwalk, its axe wet of human blood. The army moved in upon it, but that slight breach in the defenses had been enough, and several of the beasts were climbing over the wooden barrier. The town surged in response.

Barrin found himself joining the charge, found himself yelling in Justice or revenge, though he could not tell which in that moment. But upon the wall he came, along with several score others, filling in the gaps where others had fallen. He felt warm blood on his face, heard the stinging of swords and axes, but he would not be held back. Forward he pushed, through his own allies, until he was on the ladder that led upon the wall. Above him the Thanes were holding back the ern, keeping them from that same ladder, but many had ascended.

Some of the beasts had leapt into the town from the catwalk, and there they flailed about desperately, knowing that they would soon be overcome. Overcome they were, but at a heavy price, and several men were there slain. Their bodies fell amongst the others, and the streets were red under the flickering torches in the night.

Forward again, and Barrin Iylin was upon the wall, hacking over the side at the coming ern. Some carried ladders to get high enough to fight, but others used their claws or climbed over their fallen brethren. They cackled and hissed as they came, their tongues wagging in bloodlust. They came with such ferocity that Barrin wished to recoil, and yet forced himself forward. He leaned over the edge and hacked almost aimlessly. The farmer struck one ern with every three blows, and soon his blade was wet like so many others.

From his position there, he saw over the sea of monsters that advanced against him. The white heads seemed without bodies there, floating in toward the castle eerily. Also were there humans, yes, but they lingered at the back of the army. They could not add to the terror that gripped Iylin in that moment. They had come for him. Or, actually, for his son and a handful of others, but the relationship was near enough for the fear to become personal. All that force for little children. What did they want with the new Prophets? What would drive them to attack Saparen for the remote possibility of finding one of the Mages?

A sudden surge in the enemy lines brought Barrin's roaming thoughts back to the battle, for this was not a movement he expected. The ern by the gate were backing away. And yet it did not seem like a retreat, for still they yelled for blood. Still they drooled at the thought of battle. But this small section had moved, and not in a direction consistent with their strategy so far.

And Iylin watched as, without force against it, the gate simply collapsed. There was no cause for it, for the ern had not damaged the doors that much. It was more that the wood simply fell apart.

Someone beside Barrin witnessed the event as well, and he had a name for what had happened. He said, "Magic!"

Chapter 23

Barrin found himself standing straight, exposed, as he stared blankly at the fallen gate, and yet he could not force himself to duck down. He tried to move, but he was frozen by the terror of the coming white sea. Black arrows spit against the wall below him – *thunk, thunk, thunk* – and Iylin at last retreated down below the shallow battlements, the sound ripping him from his nightmare, as though the truth of the moment wasn't nightmarish enough. The attack had been close, and yet they would grow nearer still, for the ern were spilling through the open gate as the humans rushed forth to block the breach.

Ern were relentless warriors, and even without adequate ranged weapons, they still posed a terrible threat to Saparen. With the wall intact, the outcome had been questionable, but the wall had fallen under a Magic thought impossible. They had Invoked the Absence, Barrin knew. They had Invoked Vid. It might have been Earth Magic, of course, or even Wind, that tore apart the wall, but the farmer knew the truth, for he had faced it before. It was the Absence that opened the breach, just as the Absence tears apart everything it can grasp. And yes, the Absence had power over bows and swords and catapults as well.

The beast was almost upon him before Iylin even realized it had climbed the wall. Upon the wallwalk it came, axe bared, and Barrin lifted his sword only just in time. He could feel the presence of iron against his cheek as he tried to push the blade away, but the ern was strong. It chuckled, its rotted teeth dark in its mouth.

Thunk, the arrow struck, and the axe withdrew. The missile had been fired from within the town, though Barrin would never know who let it loose. In war, it was often random attacks that saved lives, so he didn't even know if the arrow was meant to rescue him or if it had been chance. It had struck the beast in the leg – not a serious wound, but it would be enough. The ern pulled back his axe in pain, and Barrin was no longer distracted. He stepped forward, driving his sword into the ern's chest. The resistance was great, but so was Iylin's strength, and the latter won over. With a jerk the blade came loose, and the farmer turned back to the bailey, where the enemy was making progress into the city.

It was the darkest part of the night, but fires were flaring up in the town as the ern gained territory. They razed what they encountered, and well-placed torches became infernos inside the city. Many in the inner army had reinforced the wall earlier in the battle, and so a weaker force protected the bailey at this time, and they had no hope to hold the gate. Instead, they backed away another block, beside the barracks, and set up a defense there, using overturned carts and barrels as a new wall.

But in this was the army split, for the soldiers upon the original wall did not have the same opportunity to escape, and they were left stranded in ern territory. Their higher position was an advantage, but not enough of one, and the enemy was advancing upon them from both sides.

The creatures came upon the soldiers beside the barracks, but the human archers were holding the position well. They fired into the crowd without direction, but as quickly as possible, and in nearly every shot was a foe struck. The bodies were piled high beside the gate, and the reflection of the fires danced in the standing blood.

And yet they came, and at the front of their forces walked a man in robes of black. As he reached up, part of the new wall of stacked boards and bodies fell apart, dissolving into the air, and once again were the humans vulnerable. A wave of black arrows followed through the breach, and men fell into the muck of the early morning, a scream or whimper as their final sound, and there was no more.

But the man's motions did not go unnoticed, and as he turned to use his Magic again, an arrow cut through his chest. Yet another took his place, and destroyed more of the wall before being cut down.

By this time, the Saparians understood well enough. They did not know how it was done, but Magic was being used against them. But to Invoke whatever they were Invoking, they had to move in certain ways, and that gave them away. A raised hand, one unarmed, would catch the eye of an archer or spearman, and the focus of battle would be turned against that one enemy, an enemy with the power of Vid.

Word of the motions had spread even to the walls, where Barrin was desperately trying to hold his position. From every direction came the ern, and even some of the humans had at last reached the castle. The farmer stood crowded with others, protecting each other so that no one man would have to defend all positions. They stood back to back along the battlements, and Barrin hacked and jabbed at ern coming from within the bailey. He had lost count of how many deaths or wounds he had caused, but no matter what that number was, it wasn't yet enough. Still more came, and they would keep coming until Saparen was destroyed.

And yet they heard the tales of the Magic-users, the Invokers, and Barrin sighed heavily. It was both good and bad news to him at once, for, though they had found a way to stop these followers of the Absence, he also learned that there were more than one. How many might be out there? How many could rip apart the town with merely a motion?

And how had so many gained such control over Magic?

The thought was as a premonition, for as it came, the wall tilted and fell under the weight of ern and Magic, and Barrin and his allies fell into the bailey, collapsing upon one another as they went. Iylin found himself on the bottom of the pile, and he was smashed between the ground and the other humans. The pain covered him like a heavy rain, leaving no part of him dry, and blood spilled across his back and head,

partially from his own body, and partially from the veins of others.

Several of the Invokers had been slain, but there was no way to tell how many were left. They came as both humans and ern, but they seemed more prevalent in the humans, and so every man that came against the wall was shown special attention from the defenders. Still, the wall was torn apart more quickly than the people of Saparen could reconstruct it, and again the forces fell back. Not a man stood that day without a wound, especially Baron Verios, who had been in the fray from the start. Half of the Den of Serren and half of Tianon's were alight, but none could be spared to fight the fires, no matter how far they spread. They had to save their own lives first, and the city later.

None heard the galloping of horses upon the fields to the north, nor the horns that blew. When the hoofs clattered upon the stone bridge, hurriedly south, no man of Saparen was witness. But the ern did see well enough, and they fell even as they turned.

The next horn blow was clearer, and much more near, and even Barrin Iylin, desperately crawling out of a mass grave, could hear it, though he didn't know what it meant. His left arm might not have been broken, but it felt like it. Likewise could he not move one of his legs. Only weakly could he maintain his grip upon his sword, and yet he came, determined not lie underneath a mound of bodies. These men fought for his son, and he would stand with them until his last breath was spent. With a huff he climbed from the tomb an inch at a time.

At last he was free, and upon his wounded leg did he put weight. The pain almost destroyed him, but he bit his lip until he drew blood and kept going. Standing he was after a while, leaning on his sword.

Another horn was blown, and it was just outside the walls this time. Barrin lifted his sword as the ern army came back upon him. They had overtaken the wall and were making their way farther into the city, but they returned as they saw Barrin there. Wounded men always tempted the beasts, for it was the blood they desired, and not the honor. The farmer lifted his sword with what strength remained, and the first ern stupidly impaled himself upon it.

From somewhere, he heard the words, "The King's Thanes! The ern are in retreat!" but the words were not understandable by the weakening man. He pulled his sword away and swung wildly at the next enemy, though the beast backed away in time. The next desperate attack connected, and though it did not slay, it wounded enough to turn the ern back. Another took its place, but each moment seemed to bring strength to the young farmer fighting for his son's life. With a thrust the ern was dispatched, and another victim's blood soaked the earth.

The ern fell away, but such only gave an opening for the next attack, and a black arrow embedded itself into Barrin's belly.

The farmer stumbled from the sheer weight of the attack, but again he stepped

forward, not feeling the pain quite yet. Another ern came, and another ern fell, but then the wound caught the man up into itself, and he became rigid as the pain spread over him like a flash of darkness.

“The King’s men come!” someone yelled, but Barrin heard nothing. He collapsed into the mud, and more of his blood was mixed into the great soup that had been made by the Battle of the Osilar Young. His face was done, even though he was still awake, so he did not see King Regis Trosalan leading his famed horsemen through the broken gate. He did not see the gilded flag of the purple lion enter Saparen, or the Thanes, their armor gleaming in the rising sun, cut through the line of ern.

The fighting would continue for another two hours, but it was in that moment that the battle was won. The ern had been turned away.

Chapter 24

Master Gerill Hyte had never before seen such a battle. It was not that he was too young, for not even the older Thanes had faced the like. Hyte had never before felt such fear, but he had also never before fought so hard. Forty-three ern fell under his blade, and another six humans, at least one of which was an Invoker. But the numbers didn’t matter to him in the end, and those forty-nine would have been worthless had Saparen fallen. But Saparen had not been taken, and Baron Dravor Verios lived. So did Ayrim Iylin and Jeslin. So did Barrin Iylin.

Barely, and perhaps not for long.

The keep had not been reached by the enemy. It was far from the gate, and the ern had not even taken the central square. The fires, however, nearly destroyed both Serren’s and Tianon’s Dens, and damaged Whesler’s and Tarite’s, and some of the flames still raged, even into the next day. Ignar’s Den, oddly, seemed to repel the fire, and it was there that Jeslin was holed up with Ayrim during the battle, and it was there that she now cared for the child and his father.

But Gerill was at the castle with Baron Verios, what remained of Saparen’s Thanes, and also the King and his Thanes. King Trosalan was as young as Baron Verios, but considerably taller. He towered over even his own warriors, and his presence was intimidating, even in the less perilous times. He was nicknamed the Warlord, not so much for his prowess on the battlefield as for his appearance, for his was the face of a hardened warrior. A scar ran over his cheek and down into his rugged beard, which hung long, like his hair. His eyes were cold grey, emotionless. His form befitted a warrior and nothing else, for this man was hardened through and through. His parents, more inclined to the noble life of luxury, had forced upon him the name Regis, but he much preferred Warlord. He ruled more often from the field, with his

Thanes, than from the throne. He was, of course, an Ignist. It was, in fact, expected of a King to follow Ignar, for the throne was to mete out Justice and provide protection, and those were the virtues of Ignar.

"We did not expect you for weeks," said Verios, still breathless from the fight. "I am glad we were mistaken."

"Word of the ern did not go unnoticed by the throne, Dravor," said the Warlord, admiring the small keep. "Two weeks ago my scouts brought word to Aeresan of the massing of forces in your barony. I do not simply leave my kingdom to be overrun by the beasts."

"Never before has such an army crossed the Last Stand."

The King nodded. "I am aware of that fact. The throne of Fahlin has become weak. They have taken army division from the Last Stand and moved them to the southwest, far south of the Ern Highway. They no longer feel it necessary to maintain the Last Stand, since nothing of their kingdom stands east of it. I have reinforced Morylin, but the other two castles are not under my control, and a one-legged table will not stand. The three castles must likewise be connected, else the barrier dissolves."

"So more of the ern will find their way through?" wondered the Baron.

"No," the King said. "I am taking my men to the Teriam River. We will invest into the Last Stand even if Fahlin will not. It is our best defense, the one place we know the ern must pass in order to go east. We cannot lose it."

"Without Satyrin or Asylin?"

King Regis Trosalan shook his head. "The castles are what makes the Last Stand. We must have access to them, whether Fahlin wants us to or not."

The Baron closed his eyes. "It may be a mistake to make an enemy of our neighbors now."

"I will do what I need to in order to keep my throne intact. Even if it means moving against my neighbors to do it. Fahlin truly belongs to me anyway. This world belongs to me; Aeresan ruled it all at the start, until the Wizards lost it all in their foolishness."

"That was four thousand years ago."

"Still, this was all under the Aeresan throne once. It remains ours, as far as I am concerned."

"It is your decision to make, and what remains of my armies are yours to command."

Trosalan refused, saying, "You'll need them to help rebuild. I would not take from you what you cannot give."

"I thank you."

"Tell me of these Invokers you claim to have seen."

Baron Verios snorted. "Everyone saw it. Men and even ern, though mostly men, used Magic in the night. There is no other explanation. And yet, the Priests of this

town, most of them at the last, came together to Invoke their own gods, and the result was typically minor. A fire here, or a break in the soil there. But one of these things invoking the Absence could outdo all of the Priests combined."

"That is the Absence," shrugged the King. "It takes all of the six powers together to counter it."

"But Absence Invocation should be the hardest for that very reason. They are calling upon a Nothing for power, not a god. These men and ern went beyond Invocation. We have seen Invocation, and we have seen Magic, and this was more the latter than the former. They had a power I have never before seen in someone who was not a Wizard. I do not wish to see it again."

"We beat them today," was the liege's reply. "We'll beat them again. Now, my men and I need sleep."

"Of course."

The people in the room bowed as the King left into one of the keep's wings, and then the crowd dispersed. The barracks would be shared that evening by the King's men as well as Saparen's, and Gerill would have offered to house a Thane or two had he not already had houseguests. But he decided that sleep was a wonderful idea, and he started back to his home. There were many repairs to be done, but they would have to wait. The town was too weary to rebuild quite yet. Tomorrow it would begin in earnest, but this was an evening for celebration, for mourning, and for rest.

Chapter 25

"How is he?" Gerill asked of Jeslin when he returned. Barrin was laid in the back room, but the servant was waiting in the entry. Her head was in her hands, and her pose unfeminine, but the Thane took no offense. They were weary and wounded, and a woman's manner of sitting seemed of little concern in such times.

"A 'Ealer stopped by," she said, fighting tears. "Nothin' can be done."

"But no one from Serren's Temple has tried," he said. "There is still hope."

"Nay, there ain't," the servant retorted angrily, trying to bring reason unto her master. "Yeh know better than I that ah Invoker o' Life cannot be o' real use 'n th' aftermath o' ah battle."

It was true. A Priest might invoke enough to Heal two or three, but after such a conflict as had just occurred, the power of the Serrenites would be spread too thin. At most each one could Heal four before exhaustion took him, but hundreds were wounded.

"Sides," said Jeslin. "Only Father Josite's left. Th' High Priest died 'n th' fire."

Gerill sat down, his body sudden very heavy. "So Barrin will die?"

The hushed answer came slowly. "Ee will."

He had come to Saparen for protection, but had died as its defender. Hyte grunted at the thought. There was something noble in that, and something very sad as well. "I have been told that he fought very well," the Thane said, trying to distract himself. "He was one of the last ones left on the wall. He . . ." but no more words would come. The hardened warrior, veteran of several score battles, wept. He had come to like Barrin Iylin. He had come to like the farmer a great deal.

"Where is Ayrim?" Master Hyte finally got out.

"'N there wi' 'im."

"What will happen to him?"

"Th' Whesler Den got ah pretty good orphanage. We can send 'im there."

It would not be easy for the boy, Gerill knew. The battle had left many orphans, and few would find homes again. Ayrim would likely remain in the overcrowded home until he became a man, and then he would be let loose upon the streets with no money and no belongings, unless he could apprentice somewhere. Unless someone would take him.

Someone like me, Gerill decided. Even though she hadn't said anything yet, Hyte knew that Jeslin had already made the decision without him. Jeslin usually got her way in such things, even if she didn't ask. She only made the alternative seem too unattractive to accept. But in this case, there would be no debate. Ayrim would remain with them.

In the other room, Ayrim lay asleep upon Barrin's chest. The slight weight pained the father, but brought him more joy than it did hurt. He didn't really feel much anymore. He knew he was dying, and he knew that once the boy was taken away, he wouldn't see his son again. And so he watched Ayrim sleep, a small child for his age, and already to have seen such pain. He would grow up without a parent, without knowing what so many people went through so that he might live.

Barrin thought back upon the last year, back upon his wife's pale corpse, lying in the bed they had shared for two years, a bed that had been cold every night afterward. He thought of Lord Draffor's battle with the Thane, his eyes pleading for the Iylins to escape. Back upon riding with his son, and Ayrim's first word. The ern came to his mind suddenly, and the Absence Magic, and he shivered. But there was also Gerill Hyte, the Thane, and Baron Dravor Verios, who would not give in against the ern. There was also Jeslin, who toiled day and night to provide a little comfort for the two. And then Barrin saw himself, as though from another pair of eyes, and he watched as he stood upon a falling wall, as he accepted an arrow into his stomach.

And it was all worth it.

For the first time, Barrin looked upon his son and knew that Ayrim was worth it. The coldness was overcoming him, and yet he smiled. He would not be there to mold the child into a man. He would not be there to teach his son toil and faith, and to tell

him stories and discipline him when he did wrong. He would not be there, and nor would Josette, and yet they had both given their lives so that this little child might simply have a chance to live.

And Ayrim was worth the sacrifice.

And so the smile remained on Barrin Iylin's face when the darkness consumed him.

The End
Book I of
THE EIGHTH POWER

Coming in May 2013 . . .

the Eighth Power

Book II

The Book of the Earth

Several years ago, the city of Saparen fought off an ern attack in order to protect a few children who had done nothing to have earned the wrath of the ern except that they were born on a particular day – a day that made them possible heirs to the power of the Prophets.

Ayrim Iylin, though proven to not be a Prophet, has grown up under the guidance of the Priests and the Thanes, all of whom are on constant guard against the ern. He seeks as normal a life as he can manage – from learning the art of farming, faith, and warfare. But now the ern are using a different and more subtle approach – sneaking into the town as stealthy murderers instead of attacking directly as an invading army. To make things worse, it appears that someone is letting them in.

For the first time, Ayrim must step out of the shadow of the Baron's protection to face his enemies directly. To protect himself, he must at last join the battle.

The Eighth Power continues as the search for the two new Prophets continues, the war between Aeresan and Fahlin rages, and the power of the Void begins to consume the land.

Keep checking for new books,
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About the Author

Paul Lytle lives and works in Houston, where he lives with his wife, Josie, and is eagerly anticipating the birth of his first son, which (at the time of this writing) will be any day now. He can be found online at <http://www.paullytle.com> or on Twitter as @Calvinistnerd. He also writes for and edits the online magazine Primum Mobile at <http://www.primum-mobile.net>.

Appendix A - The Dynasties of Aeresan

Before the Death Wars, there was a kingdom whose name is long forgotten, but that the Castle of Aeresan housed its king is well-documented. After the Death Wars, Aeresan became the central city to a new Kingdom, and that Kingdom was, in turn named after the castle. The Kingdom of Aeresan has existed since the Wars, though to varying degrees of strength and size. During those four thousand years, many different families or groups ruled the kingdom.

4700?-4725?: Death Wars

4725?-4835?: Arinsore Dynasty. Aeresan remained a small kingdom, but one relatively at peace, for they were far from the rising ern threat to the east. The reason for their fall is unknown. A notable ruler from this family was Sarn, the second in the line of Arinsore Kings.

4835?-4860?: Tryl Dynasty. A great famine swept over Aeresan (and the entire continent), but the Tryl family kept control by blaming the Prophets for their problems. The Prophets actually did become the cause for the family when they invaded Aeresan and took control of the castle.

4860?-4871: Rule of the Wizards. A very oppressive rule, especially in the ways of religion. Overthrown by revolution, and the people never really trusted the Prophets again. Construction on the Last Stand was begun.

4871-6117: Jonat Dynasty. Though long-lived and well-respected, the Jonat family ruled with force, and their wars in the wake of the disaster of the Prophets' rule caused more than half of the continent to fall under Aeresan control. The Tower was built in these years, and the Last Stand was finished. A Prophet was born into the royal family, and the King used that Mage in his wars, only to pretend to have been oblivious to the boy's talents once the people found out. Taxes grew increasingly higher until many of the lords ceased their support of the throne. The family fell soon after.

6117-6357: Elected Kings. The lords decided to run the kingdom by an elected council, but that council began voting on kings to rule until death, when another king would be chosen. In 6357, Rylan Kamuna was chosen, and though the pretense of an elected monarch lasted until his death, it was then that the next Dynasty began.

6357-6858: Kamuna Dynasty. At his death, Rylan illegally declared his son king, but most people had liked the first Kamuna, and so no one protested very loudly.

The latter kings were not as successful as Rylan, however, and much land was lost in these years. The dynasty ended in war with a neighboring kingdom, when the king, still without heir, died in battle.

6858-6915: Various. War between the Barons for the throne gave Aeresan too many kings to list, and few who lived long enough to be worth the effort. The people found their taxes changing monthly, or sometimes weekly, and laws changed almost as quickly. Order was restored by Baron Trosalan, whose army gathered much support simply for stability's sake.

6915-present: Trosalan Dynasty. The longest lived of the ruling families, the Trosalans are also considered the best, though several of the kings within have been failures. Still, for almost two thousand years Aeresan has grown and found some degree of prosperity.

Appendix B - The Post-Wars Calendar

Before the Death Wars, the world used a twelve-month calendar, each month consisting of thirty days, save only a couple of months late in the year, one taking thirty-one days, and the other twenty-nine. The calendar held eight days, six named after the Gods, and then two generic days, the first being Sun Day, a Holy Day recognized by nearly all religions, springing from the tradition on the Six, where Sun Day is a day of worship for all gods as one, and Last Day, which is a day of rest.

The Death Wars did not destroy the calendar, for evidence of its months and days linger still, but in the wake of such destruction was it not important any longer. Only scholars really kept track of the years anyway, for the people cared more about the seasons, whether it be time to reap or so, than the years. The days of the week remained, for even those who did not follow the Six generally observed Last Day as a time to rest, and Sun Day as a day to worship.

For over a century there was no set calendar to unite the kingdoms. Each country had its own way of counting the years, for a King was likely to declare his ascension to the throne as Year 1, or some great battle as the start of the calendar, but even these year numbers were not strictly adhered to, and even the King's court in various lands would get confused on the year.

The months were worse, for they changed in name almost every year. A new ruler would declare new month names, normally after himself and other respectable Kings, but he would, sometimes on a yearly basis, add days to his own month. Sometimes he would take those days from the months of others, and sometimes he would just invent them. There was the case of one King in the Arinsore family whose own month consisted of one-hundred and seventy or more days. Unfortunately, none

of those days were subtracted from the other months, and so the year, that time, began in Spring, went through the next Spring and into a second Summer.

All of which just confused the issue further.

Near the beginning of the Jonat Dynasty, Tianist monks began an intensive study of the calendar, and discovered that, by the reckoning of the pre-Wars world, they were in the middle of the year 4896. To simplify matters all over the world, they planned to return the people to that calendar, but the Kings were hesitant. They had their own months, with their own names upon them, and had no interest in changing everything just for monks.

And so the Tianist decided that it was more important to establish a unified calendar than revive the old one completely, and so they went to the powerful Kings, which were six in number, and declared that they would name a month after each of them. And since this calendar would be permanent, a new King would not simply take the names of these men off at a later date.

This appealed greatly to the Kings, who unanimously agreed to use the calendar. The other six months would be named for a great Prophet from each of the six Gods.

The year began with Morilyr, and though Morilyr was known to be a King, it is forgotten what kingdom he ruled, only that it was north of what became Norser. Trel was named for Trel Jonat of Aeresan, and Farselar was a King in Fahl, which eventually became Fahlin. Of the Summer months, Mar ruled, according to legend, Ilespin, which is noted for its heat and humidity, but there is no historical record of what he ruled, and more than likely the rumor was begun because of the month Mar's tendency to be humid. Apir lead a kingdom called Laringar, which would be conquered only three years later by Fahl. Jenta was a tribal leader who had united the mountain people, and though it was no kingdom, but rather a loose alliance between families, his power was enough that he was added to the calendar.

The three months of Autumn and those of Winter were named for Prophets. Sepilar was the Tianist who supervised the construction of the Tower, while Osilar created the fountains inside the walls with his Flaran powers. They were the latest Prophets on the list, for Eith and Tunar, the next two, held their positions very soon after the Death Wars, and what they had done to make them worthy of such an honor is long forgotten. One was a Prophet of Serren, and the other or Ignar, though even that is only known because the other four Gods are represented by other names, and so these two must represent the others. Caras was a Prophet of the Whesler who began construction of an academy in Teddyn, a Castle in Fahl. Both the castle and the school were razed in 5705. Lastly, the Tarist Falinar was a Prophet who sacrificed himself to hold an army of ern away from a settlement on the west bank of Fahl. He lasted so long against them that the women and children had enough time to get away, but the men were slain when they went to reinforce the Mage.

Since the year ran 360 days, and the week was eight days, the calendar fit evenly

within the weeks, and therefore would the first day of Morilyr, which was the first day of Spring and the first day of the year, always fall on a Sun Day. Mar first, which began the hot Summer months, fell upon Ignar's Day, for the flame was the symbol of the season; Sepilar first, the start of a cooler Autumn, was represented by the sea, and was always on Flarow's Day. Finally Tarite's Day, Death's Day, began Winter on the first day of Tunar.

The calendar is maintained for no other reason than that the Tianist monks like it. Since they are the primary record-keepers of the world, nearly all histories use the months and years described here. But still only scholars really have need of such a calendar, for the peasants still mark passing time by the seasons rather than numbered days.

Appendix C - A Glossary of Names and Places

AERESAN (AIR-ih-sahn): The easternmost kingdom in the known world, also the castle that controls the kingdom.

ASYLIN (AS-ih-lihn): One of the three castles of the Last Stand.

Ayrim Iylin: see Iylin, Ayrim.

CERINAL SEA (SEHR-ih-nahl): The western sea that divides the human lands and the ern lands.

Draffor (DRAHF-for): Current Lord of Lanshire, Aeresan.

DRINS (drihns): A family in Lanshire, Ignists.

Drynor, Santon (DRY-nor, SAN-ton): Current Prophet of the Earth.

Ern: Evil creatures thought to have been created by the Absence. They seem human except for their pale skin, lack of hair, and sharp claws and teeth.

Eysentgath, Larras (EYES-ihn-gahth, LARE-rehs): Current Prophet of the Wind.

Fahlin (FAH-lihn): A nation on the southern side of the continent, west of Aeresan. Its citizens are Fahlians (FAH-lee-ihns).

FINEA (fih-NAY-ah): A city in the Saparen Barony of Aeresan.

Flarow (FLAH-row): The Goddess of the Sea, created by Tarite before the world began. She is depicted as a blue woman with flowing hair carrying a mirror. Her Virtue is her strong Moral Sense, her Vice Vanity. Ignar is her opposite. Her followers are known as Flarans (FLARE-ihns), and are recognized for their constant self-examination.

GARRENMORE (GAIR-ihn-more): A castle in Aeresan.

Gerill Hyte: see Hyte, Gerill.

Halin (HALE-ihn): A figure in mythology who went into the Otherworld to plead from

Serren the life of his lover, a wish that was granted.

Hyte, Gerill (HITE, JARE-ihl): A Thane of Saparen, Aeresan, teaches swordplay. A Flaran.

Ignar (IHG-NAHR): The God of the Flame, created by Serren before the world began. He is depicted as a large and red man carrying the Sword of Justice. His Virtue is Justice, his Vice Extremism. Flarow is his opposite. His followers are known as Ignists (IHG-NIHSTS), and are recognized for their sense of Righteous anger.

Iylin, Ayrim (eye-IHL-ihn, EYE-rihm): Born of Barrin and Josette Iylin in Lanshire, Aeresan, on 8 Osilar 8704. His name means "Someone who sacrifices."

Iylin, Barrin (eye-IHL-ihn, BARE-ihn): A farmer from Lanshire, Aeresan. Husband of Josette Iylin, father of Ayrim Iylin. A Serrenite.

Iylin, Josette (eye-IHL-ihn, JOE-SEHT): Wife of Barrin Iylin, mother of Ayrim Iylin.

Jeslin (JES-lihn): A servant of Gerill Hyte.

Josite, Rignslin (JOE-SITE, RINES-lihn): A Priest of Serren at the Temple in Saparen, Aeresan.

KERT (kurt): A city in the Saparen Barony of Aeresan.

LANSHIRE (LAN-shur): A village in the Saparen Barony of Aeresan.

LAST STAND, THE: A series of three castles on the Teriam River, built so close together as to control all traffic over the river.

MORYLIN (MORE-ih-lihn): One of the three castles of the Last Stand.

MUTE: The nickname given to a shrouded figure, seemingly aligned with the ern.

Rignslin Josite: see Josite, Rignslin.

SAPAREN (SAH-pah-rihn): A castle in Aeresan, also the barony surrounding the castle. People from Saparen are "Saparians" (sah-PAIR-ee-ihns).

SARN: The second King in the Arinsore dynasty, killed in an early battle against the ern.

SATYRIN (SAHT-ih-rihn): One of the three castles of the Last Stand.

Serren (SAIR-rihn): The Goddess of the Living and Spiritual elements, she was neither born nor created, but always was. She is depicted as a common woman with light hair and skin, or as the sun itself. Her Virtue is Faith, her Vice Complacency. Tarite is her opposite. Her followers are known as Serrenites (SAIR-ihn-ites), and are recognized for their absolute trust in the Six.

Tarite (TAIR-ITE): The God of the Dead and Physical elements, he was neither born nor created, but always was. He is depicted as an ugly man, dressed in black, with a hood commonly over his face, or as the moon itself. Her Virtue is Self-Reliance, his Vice Skepticism. Serren is his opposite. His followers are known as Tarist (TAIR-ihsts), and are recognized for their work ethic.

TARRIT LAKE (TAIR-ihst): A lake that borders Saparen.

TERIAM RIVER (TAIR-ee-um): The river that divides Aeresan and Fahlin, upon which is the Last Stand castles.

Tianon (TEE-ah-nahn): The God of the Earth, created by Tarite before the world began.

He is depicted as a huge and slow man or dark skin with either a hammer or a book. His Virtue is Knowledge, his Vice Greed. Whesler is his opposite. His followers are known as Tianans (TEE-ah-nahns), and are recognized for their desire to learn.

Trosalan, Regis (TROS-ah-lin, REE-jis): Current King of Aeresan. An Ignist.

Tsantle, Baret (SANT'l, BARE-eh): Current Prophet of the Flame.

Verios, Dravor (VARE-ee-ose, DRAHV-or): Current Baron over Saparen, Aeresan. An Ignist.

Vid (VIHD): The Absence. Created by an absence of the Gods. He is everywhere the Six are not, and works against them to destroy the world.

Whesler (WHEEZ-lehr): The Goddess of the Wind, created by Serren before the world began. She is depicted as a wispy figure, unsubstantial in every way. Her hands are either outstretched or carrying a bow. Her Virtue is Charity, her Vice Ignorance. Tianon is her opposite. Her followers are known as Wheslerans (WHEEZ-lehr-ans), and are recognized for their generous spirit.

Wyred (WIE-rehd): Current Lord of Kert, Aeresan.

Xyn, Draughton (ZINE, DRAH-ton): Current Prophet of the Absence.