

the Eighth Power

Book I

The Book of the Living

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Published by Rosland Press

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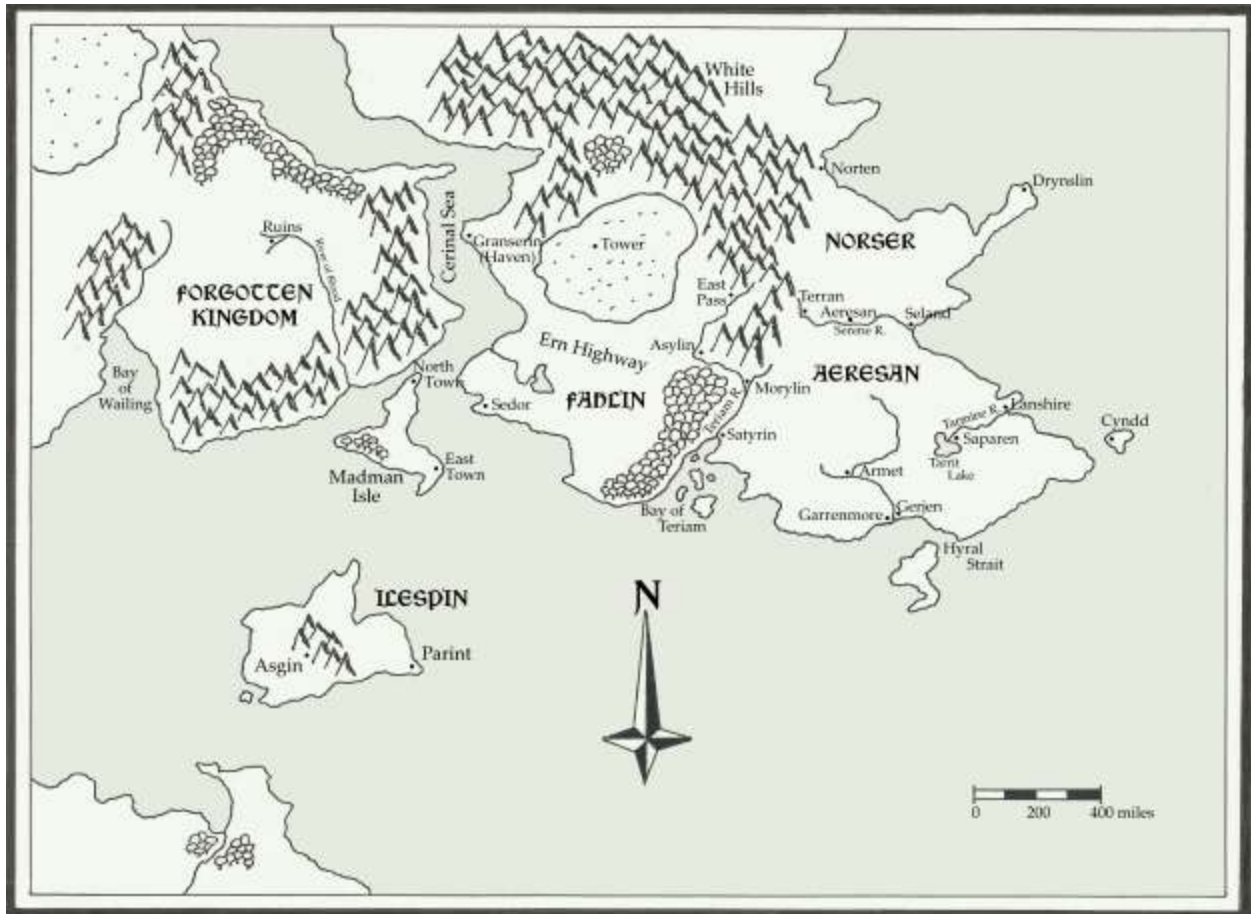
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The Pantheon of the Gods



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

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