

DAWNTHIEF

ALSO BY JAMES BARCLAY

Chronicles of The Raven

NOONSHADE

NIGHTCHILD

DAWNTHIEF

CHRONICLES OF THE RAVEN

JAMES BARCLAY



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FOR TARA,
WHO ALWAYS BELIEVED
WHEN SOMETIMES EVEN I DID NOT



NORTH BAY

Sunara's Teeth

TERENETSA

PARVE

Barvate Valley

Eye Lake

LEIONU

Sky Lake

Baran Mountains

Southern Forest

SOUTHERN OCEANS

WESMEN HEARTLANDS (Uncharted)

Arch-Temple of the Wretches

Coir Wastes

Sethe River

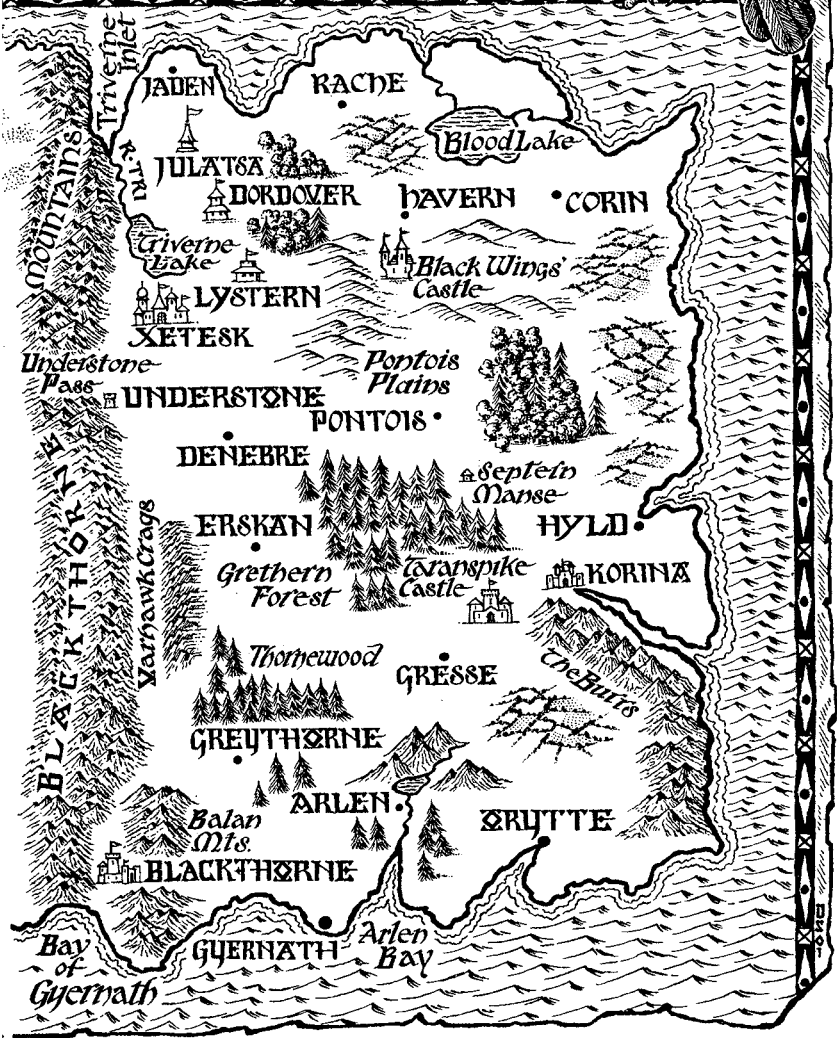
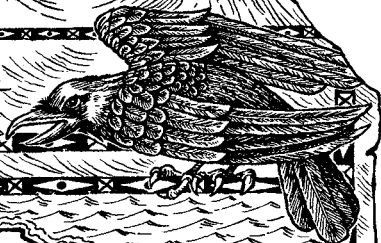


BALIA





THE NORTHERN CONTINENT



BLACKTHORNE MOUNTAINS

Trivine Inlet

Yarnawk Crags

JADEN

RACHE

Blood Lake

JULATSA

DORDOVER

HAVERN

CORIN

Giverne Lake

Black Wings' Castle

LYSTERN

XETESK

Understone Pass

UNDERSTONE

Pontois Plains

PONTOIS

DENEBRE

Septin Manse

ERSKAN

HYLD

Grethern Forest

Toranspike Castle

KORINZA

Thornwood

GRESSE

TOEBURS

GREUTHORNE

ARLEN

ORUTTE

Balan Mts

BLACKTHORNE

Bay of Gyernath

GUERNATH

Arlen Bay

CAST LIST

THE RAVEN

Hirad Coldheart BARBARIAN WARRIOR
Ras WARRIOR
Richmond WARRIOR
Talan WARRIOR
Sirendor Larn WARRIOR
The Unknown Warrior WARRIOR
Ilkar JULATSAN MAGE

XETSEK

COLLEGE OF MAGIC

Styliann LORD OF THE MOUNT
Denser SENIOR MAGE
Selyn MAGE SPY
Nyer MENTOR TO DENSOR
Laryon RESEARCH MASTER
Sol A PROTECTOR

DORDOVER

COLLEGE OF MAGIC

Erienne LORD MAGE
Alun HUSBAND OF ERIENNE
Thraun WARRIOR
Jandyr ELVEN BOWMAN
Will Begman THIEF
Vuldarog TOWER LORD

LYSTERN

COLLEGE OF MAGIC

Heryst LORD OF ELDER MAGE
Ry Darrick GENERAL OF THE ARMIES

JULATSA

COLLEGE OF MAGIC

Barras CHIEF NEGOTIATOR

BARONS, LORDS, AND SOLDIERS

Blackthorne SOUTHERN BARON
Gresse SOUTH EASTERN BARON
Tessaya WESMEN LORD
Travers A CAPTAIN

PROLOGUE

The hand over her mouth stifled her screams as she awoke. Beside her in the bed, Alun was still. A face, shadowed by night, leaned into hers. She could make out his lean features and hard eyes. The hand pressed harder as her eyes bored into his.

“If you cast, your boys will die. If you struggle, your boys will die. If you don’t cooperate, your boys will die. Your husband will remain as witness that we can take your kind from anywhere—even from the heart of a College City. Think on that while you sleep and curb your anger when you awake. We have a great deal to talk about.”

The thoughts crashed through her mind in time with the hammering of her heart. Her foolish determination to live a quiet life outside of the security of the College walls had put in jeopardy everything she loved. The man had mentioned her boys, her beautiful twin sons in whom she had so much faith and nurtured such great power. So young, so innocent. Her body quailed as she fought against the thought of what men such as these might do. They had no compassion. They saw what they believed to be evil and had vowed to destroy it. They didn’t see the purity and the magic of what she was creating and their blindness made them so dangerous.

Voices struck notes of caution in her mind. The Masters of the College, who had sympathised with her desire for family life but had warned against the complacency of comfort in times when people could be open in their animosity toward the College and all for which it stood. Hers was an experiment, the Masters had reminded her; it was not a simple desire to settle down. Her children were children of the College, they had said, and their development was critical research.

But, as usual, she had had her way. After all, they were *her* sons and Alun had no wish to live in the College. She cursed herself for her stubborn stupidity and for her overconfidence in her ability to keep them all safe. Tears of frustration and anger welled up but they, like the voices of the Masters in her head, were echoes of warnings that were ignored too long and were heeded too late.

The man’s other hand came across her vision. It was clutching a cloth which he pressed against her nose and mouth. The drug took swift effect and her struggle was that of an animal caught in a trap as the dogs close in. Futile, desperate, short. Brophane. The last thought through her mind was how ill she would feel when she opened her eyes.

CHAPTER 1

Blue light seared across the late afternoon sky, flaring against the broken low grey cloud and throwing the sheer opening of Taranspike Pass into sharp relief. A heavy explosion sounded. Men screamed.

The Raven made a calm assessment of the situation, looking out from the castle which controlled the pass, across the courtyard and on to the battlefield from their vantage point high up on the keep.

The left-hand end of the defensive line had been shattered. Bodies, burning and broken, were scattered across scorched grass and the enemy redoubled their efforts all along the battle front. They surged.

“Damn it,” said The Unknown Warrior. “Trouble.” He raised a clenched fist above his head, spread his fingers then whirled his arm in a wide circle. Instantly, the flagmen in the turrets signalled the order. Five cavalymen and a mage galloped out of a side gate.

“There. Look.” Hiram pointed toward the devastated line. Perhaps fifteen men were running through the gap, ignoring the battle as they rushed toward the castle walls. “Are we in?” he asked.

“We’re in,” said The Unknown.

“About time.” Hiram smiled.

“Raven!” roared The Unknown. “Raven with me!” He swept his two-handed sword from the scabbard leaning against the ramparts and charged over to the steps, chest plate catching the dying rays of the sun, his massive frame moving with a speed and agility that remained a fatal surprise to many and his shaven head bobbing on his bull neck as he started down at a dead run.

The stairs led down from the ramparts along the inside of the wall before joining the roof of the keep. From there the way to the courtyard was through either one of the two turrets and down their spiral stairways.

The Unknown led the six leather- and chain-clad warriors and one mage who made up The Raven to the left-hand turret, threw the door open, barked the guard aside and took the stairs two at a time, leaning into the outside wall to steady himself.

Halfway down, a second, bigger explosion sounded, shaking the castle foundations.

“They’re through the courtyard wall,” said Hiram.

“Almost there,” said The Unknown. The door at the base of the turret was open and Hiram doubted whether The Unknown would have paused had it been closed, such was his speed. The Raven sprinted out into the waning

amber sunlight and headed for the left-hand corner of the courtyard where dust from the explosion filled the air.

From the fog of the dust, and picking their way through the rubble they'd created, came the enemy. The warriors, leather armoured and cloth masked, spread into the courtyard. Behind them, Hiram could see another making his way through the debris, seemingly at leisure. He too was wearing shining leather armour but also a black cloak that billowed behind him. A pipe smoked gently in his mouth and, if Hiram's eyes didn't deceive him, he was stroking a cat whose head poked out from the neck of the cloak.

Behind him, he heard Ilkar, the elven mage from Julatsa, curse and spit: "Xetesk." Hiram paused in his stride and glanced back. Ilkar waved him on.

"Get on and fight," said the elf, his tall, athletically slim frame tense, his flat-oval hazel eyes narrowed beneath short dark hair. "I'll keep an eye on him."

The enemy fighting men began to move to The Raven's left at an even pace, trotting toward the bare rock wall along the base of which grain, tool and firewood sheds ran from outer defences to keep.

The Unknown Warrior immediately changed direction, cutting off the new approach. Hiram frowned, unable to take his eyes from the solitary black-cloaked figure behind the swordsmen.

The sounds of battle from outside the wall began to fade as Hiram focused on the task ahead. Seeing them, the enemy, who outnumbered The Raven by almost three to one, moved to intercept. Five warriors were ahead of the main group, running on, swords held high, shouts ringing from the walls as they came, confident in their numerical superiority.

"Form up!" shouted The Unknown, and The Raven switched seamlessly into their fighting line as they advanced. As always, The Unknown himself took the centre of a slight-angled and uneven chevron. To his left ranged Talan, Ras and Richmond and to his right, Sirendor and Hiram. Behind them, Ilkar prepared the defensive shield.

The Unknown tapped the point of his two-handed blade rhythmically on the ground with each pace and Hiram, searching for recognition in the eyes of their adversaries, bared his teeth as he found it, noting the ghost of a break in their stride.

"Shield up," said Ilkar. It sent a shiver through Hiram even now, ten years on. And the reality was that he couldn't actually feel anything. But it was there; a net of security from magical attack, a momentary shimmering in the air. The Unknown ceased tapping his sword point, and a beat later, The Raven joined battle.

The Unknown brought his sword up in a right-to-left arc, making a nonsense of his opponent's defence. The man's blade was knocked aside and his

face split from chin to forehead, blood spraying up from The Unknown's weapon as it exited.

The man was hurled backward, crashing into two of his colleagues, not even raising a scream as he died.

To the right, Sirendor caught a blow on his kite shield before sweeping his sword through the enemy's ribcage and Hirad evaded a clumsy overhead with ease, swaying right then jabbing two-handed into the neck of his opponent. Others were hesitant to fill the gap. The barbarian fighting man grinned and stepped forward, beckoning them on with a hand.

To The Unknown's left, the going was less straightforward. Ras and Talan were trading blows with competent shield-bearing warriors while Richmond, distracted, was on the defensive, his quick, fluid strikes causing his enemy great difficulty nonetheless.

"Spellcaster moving. Our left," he said. He parried a blow to his midriff and shoved his opponent back.

"I have him," said Ilkar, his voice distant with the effort of maintaining the shield. "He's casting."

"Leave him to Ilkar," ordered The Unknown. His blade thudded against the shield of an enemy. The man staggered.

"Still moving left," said Richmond.

"Leave him." The big man slashed open the stomach of the man in front of him as Talan, immediately adjacent, finished his first victim, taking a cut on his arm.

The enemy mage barked a command word. Heat scorched the air and in the moment's ensuing silence, both sides paused, falling back half a pace.

"Ward!" yelled the mage, and buildings along the back wall exploded, clouding the air with splinters and hurling broken planks to spin and tumble across the courtyard.

Chaos.

Half a plank thumped into Hirad's standing foot. His balance gone, he sprawled forward, trying to turn on to his back even as he fell. To his left, The Unknown took the force of the explosion on his broad back with barely a flinch. Thundering his blade through waist high, he cut the man in front of him clear through to the spine.

"Shield down!" shouted Ilkar. The shock of the detonation had pitched him to the dirt, breaking his concentration. He was up on his feet immediately. "I'll take the mage."

"I've got him." Richmond, who had all but fallen into his opponent's arms, recovered the quicker of the two and rammed his sword into the man's midriff. He turned from the battle.

“Stay in line!” roared The Unknown. “Richmond, stay in line!”

Hirad was staring straight into the eyes of the man who was about to kill him. Hardly believing his luck, the man swung his sword toward the helpless barbarian but the blow never reached its target. Instead, it clattered against a kite shield. Legs straddled Hirad, and Sirendor’s sword uppercut into the man’s neck. Sirendor stooped and helped Hirad clear.

The half dozen paces Richmond took away from the line before he realised his error were fatal. Ras, engaged with one man, was not aware that his left flank was totally exposed. Seizing his chance, the second enemy stepped quickly around his companion and buried his sword in the Raven warrior’s side.

Ras grunted and collapsed, clutching at the wound as blood soaked through his armour, falling against Talan’s legs with enough force to unbalance his friend. Talan just about defended one strike but was in no position to avoid the next.

“Shit!” rasped The Unknown. He set his blade horizontally across Talan’s path, fielding two blows aimed at the struggling warrior, and kicked out straight with his right foot, connecting with his opponent’s lower abdomen.

Richmond crashed back into the battle. At the same time, Talan recovered to stand across the stricken Raven man, skewering another enemy through the chest and wrenching his blade free, the man’s screams turning to gurgles as he drowned in his own blood.

And behind the battle, Ilkar could only watch as the Xetesk mage, running toward the wall he’d exposed by destroying the wooden buildings, paused, turned to him, smiled, said one word and disappeared on his next pace forward.

Ilkar gritted his teeth and switched his attention back to the fight. Ras was lying curled and motionless. The Unknown hacked down another man, and to his right, Sirendor and Hirad killed with practised efficiency. Only Richmond’s blade flailed, the whole set of his body giving away his feelings. Ilkar strode forward, forming the mana shape for a holding spell. It was enough. The remains of the enemy unit saw him, disengaged and ran back the way they had come.

“Forget them,” said The Unknown as Hirad made to chase the fleeing enemy. The barbarian stopped and watched them go, hearing the jeers of the castle garrison help them on their way. Elsewhere, cheers rose from the ramparts as horns sounded retreat across the battle ground.

For The Raven, though, victory was hollow.

A pool of silence spread across the courtyard from where they stood, and as it reached out, others fell quiet, turning to see what few had ever seen.

When Hiram looked around, all but Ilkar were crouched by Ras. Hiram joined them.

He opened his mouth to ask the question but swallowed his words hard. Ras, his hands still clamped to the horrible wound in his side, was not breathing.

“All day sitting around and now this,” said Hiram. “We’re never taking a reserve force job again.”

“I don’t think this is the time or the place for this discussion,” said The Unknown softly. He was aware of a crowd beginning to gather.

“Why not?” Hiram rose, arm muscles bunching beneath his heavy padded leather armour, his braided russet hair bouncing as he jerked to his feet. He jammed his sword back into its scabbard. “How much more evidence do we bloody well need? If you spend a day up on the ramparts you aren’t sharp enough when it comes to the fight.”

“There’s a few here that wouldn’t agree with you,” snapped The Unknown, gesturing at the slain enemy.

“We’ve lost three men in ten years, all of them in contracts we shouldn’t have taken on. We should be hired to fight, not to sit around watching others do it.”

“This was a good money contract,” said Ilkar.

“Do you think Ras cares?” shouted Hiram.

“I—” began Ilkar. He put a hand to his head, his eyes losing focus. He squeezed The Unknown’s shoulder.

“This discussion and the Vigil will have to wait. The mage is still in here,” he said. The Raven were on their feet in a moment, each man ready.

“Where?” growled Hiram. “He’s a dead man.”

“I can’t see him,” said Ilkar. “He’s under a CloakedWalk. He’s close by, though. I can sense the mana shape.”

“Great,” said Sirendor. “Sitting targets.” His grip tightened on the hilt of his blade.

“We’re all right. He’ll have to lose the Cloak before he casts again. I just want to know what he’s doing here.” Ilkar’s face was set, his frown deep.

Hiram switched his gaze up to the keep and round the ramparts. A closing of the cloud hastened the setting of the sun and the fading light washed grey across the castle. A light rain had begun to fall. All activity had ceased and a hundred eyes stared at The Raven and at the body they encircled. Taranspike Castle was quiet, and even as victorious soldiers walked back into the courtyard, their voices caught and faded when they saw the scene.

The Raven’s circle moved gradually outward, with Ilkar separate from it, always with one eye on the newly exposed wall.

“How could he miss us with that spell?” asked Talan, indicating the debris of wood and grain scattered about them. “He was practically standing on top of us.”

“He couldn’t,” replied Ilkar. “That’s why I’m—”

The mage was by the wall. He had blinked into view with both his hands on it. They probed briefly and a section of the wall moved back and left, revealing a dark passageway. The mage stepped into it and immediately the opening closed.

Ilkar ran to the wall and examined the section minutely, the others crowding around him.

“Open it, then,” said Hirad. The elf turned to stare at the barbarian, his leaf-shaped ears, pointed at the top, pricking in irritation.

“Can you open it?” asked Talan.

Ilkar nodded. “I’ll have to cast, though. I can’t see the pressure points otherwise.” He switched his attention back to the wall and the rest of The Raven gave him space. Closing his eyes, Ilkar spoke a short incantation, moving his hands over the wall in front of him, feeling the mana trails sheath his fingers. Now he placed his fingertips on the stonework, searching. One after another, his fingers stopped moving, finding their marks.

“Got it,” he said. No more than half a minute had passed. The Unknown nodded.

“Good,” he said. “But you—” he indicated the stocky figure of Talan, his short brown hair matted with sweat and the old scar on his left cheek burning bright through his tanned skin—“stay and get that cut seen to, and *you*—” spitting the words at Richmond—“start the Vigil and think on what you’ve done.”

There was a brief silence. Talan considered objecting but the blood dripping from his arm, and his drained face, told of a bad wound. Richmond walked over to Ras, sighting down his long thin nose, tears in his pinched blue eyes. He folded his tall frame to kneel by the body of the Raven warrior, his sword in front of him, its point in the dirt and his hands clasped about the hilt guard. He bowed his head and was motionless, his long blond ponytail playing gently in the breeze. It was he, along with Talan and Ras, who had joined The Raven as an already established and respected trio four years earlier, after the only other battle that had seen the death of a Raven warrior; in this case, two of them.

The Unknown Warrior came to Ilkar’s shoulder.

“Let’s do it,” he said.

“Right,” said Ilkar. He pushed. The wall moved back and left. “It’ll stay open. He must have closed it from the inside.”

There was light at the end of the passageway, wan and flickering. The Unknown trotted into the passage, Hiram and Sirendor right behind him and Ilkar bringing up the rear.

As The Unknown Warrior moved toward the light, a shout of terror, abruptly cut off, was followed by a voice, urgent and loud, and the scrabbling of feet. The Unknown increased his pace.

Rounding a sharp right-hand corner he found himself in a small room, bed to the right, desk opposite and firelight streaming in from a short passage to the left. Slumped by the desk, and in front of an opening, was a middle-aged man dressed in plain blue robes. A long cut on his creased forehead dripped blood into his long-fingered hands and he stared at the splashes, shuddering continuously.

With The Raven in the room behind him, The Unknown knelt by the man.

"Where did he go?" Nothing. Not even recognition he was there. "The mage? In the black cloak?"

"Gods above!" Ilkar elbowed his way to the man. "It's the castle mage." The Unknown nodded. Ilkar picked up the man's face. The blood from his wound trickled over gaunt white features. His eyes flickered everywhere, taking in everything and seeing nothing.

"Seran, it's Ilkar. Do you hear me?" The eyes steadied for a second. It was enough. "Seran, where did the Xeteskian go? We want him." Seran managed to look half over his shoulder to the opening. He tried to speak but nothing came out except the letter "d" stuttered over and over.

"Hold on," said Sirendor. "Shouldn't that wall let back on to—"

"Come on," said The Unknown. "We're losing him the longer we wait."

"Right," said Hiram. He led The Raven through the opening, down a short corridor and into a small, bare chamber. In the dim light from Seran's study, he could see a door facing him.

He moved to the door and pulled it open on to another, longer passage, the end of which was illuminated by a flickering glow. He glanced behind him.

"Come on," he said, and broke into a run down the passage. As he approached the end, he could see a large fire burning in a grate set into the wall opposite. Sprinting into the chamber, he glanced quickly left and right. There was a pair of doors in the right-hand wall perhaps twenty feet away, set either side of a second, unlit fireplace. One of them was swinging slowly shut.

"There!" he pointed and changed direction, not waiting to see if any were following. His prey was close.

Hiram skidded to a stop before the door and wrenched it open, stepping back to look before dashing in. It was a small antechamber, set with massive

arched double doors opposite. They carried a crest, half on each side. The walls were covered in runic language; braziers lit the scene. Hiram ignored it all: one of the big doors was just ajar and a glittering light came from inside. The barbarian smiled.

“Come to Daddy,” he breathed as he ran through the gap and into the chamber beyond.

“Hiram, wait!” shouted Sirendor as he, Ilkar and The Unknown raced into the larger chamber.

“Get after that idiot, Sirendor,” ordered The Unknown. “Time to take stock, I think.”

Above the fire hung a round metal plate, fully three feet across. On it was embossed the head and talons of a dragon. The mouth was wide, dripping fire, and the claws open and grasping. Otherwise, the room was bare of ornament. The Unknown moved toward it, half an eye on Sirendor as the warrior hurried toward the door through which Hiram had chased. He stopped suddenly, glanced behind him and frowned.

“What is it?” asked Ilkar.

“This isn’t right,” said The Unknown. “Unless I’ve gone badly wrong, this ought to be the kitchens and that end of this room—” he pointed right to the two doors flanking the unlit fire—“should be in the courtyard.”

“Well, we must be under it,” said Ilkar.

“We haven’t gone down,” said The Unknown. “What do you think?” But Ilkar wasn’t paying attention to him any more. He was staring at the crest over the fire, his face paling.

“That symbol. I know it.” Ilkar walked over to the fire, The Unknown trailing him.

“What is it?”

“It’s the Dragonene crest. Heard of it?”

“A few rumours.” The Unknown shrugged. “So what?”

“And you say we should be standing in the courtyard?”

“Well, yes, I think so but . . . ?”

Ilkar swallowed hard. “Gods, we’d better not have done what I think we’ve done.”

It was the size of the hall he entered that first slowed Hiram’s advance, and the heat that assailed him the moment he was inside. Next it was the odour, very strong, of wood and oil. Pervasive and with a sharp quality. And finally, the huge pair of eyes regarding him from the opposite side of the room that brought him to a complete standstill.



“Gods, Hirad, calm down!” Sirendor yanked open the door to the right of the fireplace and ran inside, seeing the crested double doors in front of him. He pulled up sharply, the dark-cloaked mage appearing suddenly before him. He raised his sword reflexively and took a pace backward, realising the mage’s abrupt appearance was caused by the dispersal of a CloakedWalk spell. Probably in his late thirties, the mage would normally have been handsome beneath his tousled black hair and unkempt short beard, but now he looked pale and frightened. He held out his hands, palms outward.

“Please,” he whispered. “I couldn’t stop him, but I can stop you.”

“You’re responsible for the death of one of The Raven—”

“And I don’t want another one to die, believe me. The barbarian—”

“Where is he?” demanded Sirendor.

“Don’t raise your voice. Look, he’s in trouble,” said the mage. There was movement in his cloak. A cat’s head appeared briefly at its neck then disappeared once more. “You’re Sirendor, aren’t you? Sirendor Larn.” Sirendor, standing still once again, nodded. The mage continued. “And I am Denser. Look, I know what you’re feeling but we can help each other right now and, believe me, your friend needs help.”

“What kind of trouble is he in?” Sirendor’s voice was low too. He didn’t know why, but something about the mage’s attitude worried him. He should kill the man where he stood but he was obviously scared by something other than the prospect of death at a Raven warrior’s hand.

“Bad. Very bad. See for yourself.” He put a finger to his lips and beckoned Sirendor to him. The warrior moved forward, never taking his eyes from the mage nor the slightly shifting bulge on one side of his cloak. Denser motioned Sirendor to look through the doors.

“Great Gods above!” He made a move to go in but the mage restrained him with a hand on the shoulder. Sirendor turned sharply.

“Take your hand off me. Right now.” The mage did.

“You can’t help him by rushing in.”

“Well, what can we do?” hissed Sirendor.

“I’m not sure.” Denser shrugged. “I might be able to do something. You might as well get your friends. They won’t find anything out there and they could prove useful in here.”

Sirendor paused in the act of heading for the door. “Nothing stupid, you understand? If he dies because of you . . .”

Denser nodded. “I’ll wait.”

“See that you do.” Sirendor left the antechamber at a sprint, not realising he was about to confirm all of Ilkar’s fears.

Hirad would have run, only he’d come too far into the room, and anyway, he didn’t think his legs would support him, they were shaking that badly. He just stood and stared.

The Dragon’s head was resting on its front claws and the first coherent thought that entered Hirad’s mind was that from the bottom of its lower jaw to the top of its head, it was getting on for as tall as he was. The mouth itself must have been more than three feet across, the whole muzzle probably five in depth. Those eyes sat atop, and at the base of, the muzzle. They were close set, rimmed with thick horn, and the pupils were narrow black slits, ringed in a startling blue. A pronounced ridge of bone ran away over the Dragon’s head toward its spine, and Hirad could see the mound of its body behind it, huge and shining.

As he watched, it carefully unfurled its wings and the reason for the size of the room became all too obvious. With their roots at the top of the torso, above the front limbs, the wings stretched to what must have been forty feet on either side, and flapped lazily. With the balance afforded by them, the Dragon picked its head from the floor and stood upright.

Even with its slender, bone-edged neck arched so its eyes never left Hirad, it towered sixty feet into the hall. Its tail curled away to the left and was thicker than a man’s body even at its tip. Stretched out, the Dragon would surely have been well in excess of one hundred and twenty feet in length, but now it rested on two massive rear limbs, each foot carrying a quartet of claws bigger than the barbarian’s head. And it was gold, all over—skin glistening in the firelight and sparkling on the walls.

Hirad could hear its breathing, slow and deep. It opened its mouth wide, revealing long rows of fangs, and saliva dripped to the floor to evaporate on contact.

It raised a forelimb, single hooked claw extended. Hirad took an involuntary pace backward. He swallowed hard, sweat suddenly covering his body. He was quaking from head to foot.

“Fuck me,” he breathed.

Hirad had always believed that he’d die with his sword in his hand but, in the moments before the huge claw dismembered him, it seemed such a futile gesture. A calmness replaced the instant’s fury that had itself so quickly followed his fear, and he sheathed his blade and looked straight into the creature’s eyes.

The blow never came. Instead, the Dragon retracted its claw, unarched

its neck and moved its head down and forward, coming to a stop no more than three paces from Hiram, hot, sour breath firing into his face.

“Interesting,” it said in a voice that echoed through Hiram’s entire being. The barbarian’s legs finally gave way and he sat heavily on the tiled floor. His mouth was wide, his jaws were moving but no sound came.

“Now,” said the Dragon. “Let us talk about a few things.”