

ELFSORROW

ALSO BY JAMES BARCLAY

Chronicles of The Raven

DAWNTHIEF

NOONSHADE

NIGHTCHILD

Legends of The Raven

ELFSORROW

SHADOWHEART

DEMONSTORM

ELFSORROW

LEGENDS OF THE RAVEN 1

JAMES BARCLAY



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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

For Michael, Nancy, and Virginia.
Finer siblings a brother could not wish to have.



BALIA

NORTH BAY

Sunata's Teeth

TERENETSA

Sethe River

Torn Wastes

PARVE

Barvate Valley

Wesmen HEARTLANDS (Uncharted)

Arch-Temple of the Wretches

Eye Lake

LEIONU

N

Sky Lake

Baran Mountains

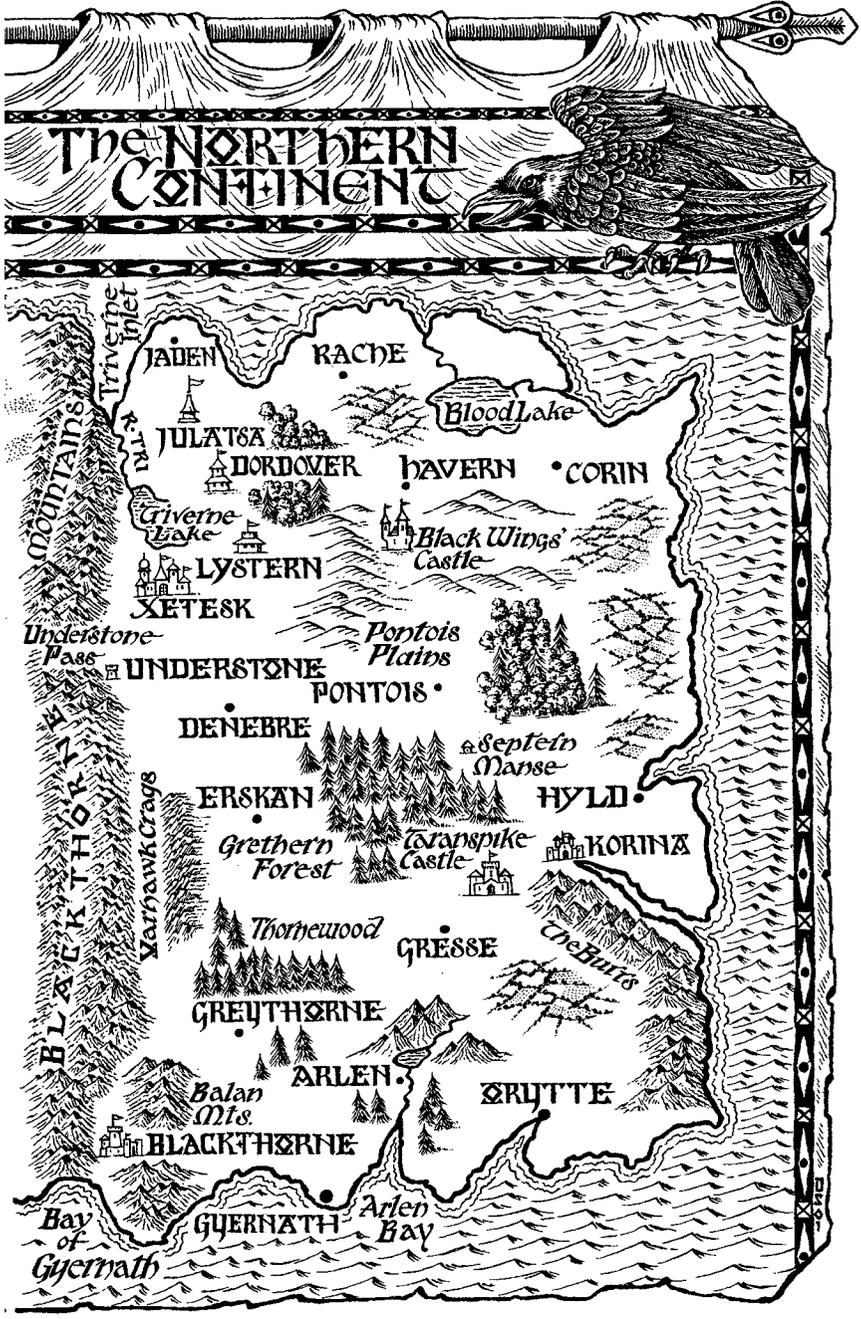
W

E

Southern Forest

S

SOUTHERN OCEANS



THE NORTHERN CONTINENT

JADEN

RACHE

JULATSA

DORDOVER

HAVERN

CORIN

Blood Lake

Triverne Lake

Black Wings' Castle

LYSTERN

XETESK

Pontois Plains

Understone Pass

UNDERSTONE

PONTOIS

DENE BRE

Septen Narise

ERSKAN

HYLD

Grethern Forest

Transpike Castle

KORINÆ

Thornwood

GRÉSSE

Cheburs

GREUTHORNE

ARLEN

ØRUTTE

Balan Mts. BLACKTHORNE

GUERNATH

Arlen Bay

Bay of Gyernath

BLACKTHORNE MOUNTAINS

BLACKTHORNE MOUNTAINS

Yarnhawk Crags

CAST LIST

THE RAVEN

Hirad Coldheart BARBARIAN WARRIOR
The Unknown Warrior WARRIOR
Thraun SHAPECHANGER
Ry Darrick CAVALRY SWORDSMAN
Denser XETESKIAN MAGE
Erienne DORDOVAN MAGE
Ilkar JULATSAN MAGE

THE COLLEGES

Dystran LORD OF THE MOUNT, XETESK
Ranyl CIRCLE SEVEN MASTER MAGE, XETESK
Aeb A PROTECTOR
Vuldarog TOWER LORD, DORDOVER
Heryst LORD ELDER MAGE, LYSTERN
Kayvel MAGE MASTER, LYSTERN
Rusau NEGOTIATOR, LYSTERN
Izack GENERAL, LYSTERNAN CAVALRY

THE ELVES

Myriell AL-DRECHAR
Cleress AL-DRECHAR
Ren'erei GUILD OF DRECH
Rebraal LEADER OF THE AL-ARYNAAR
Mercuun AL-ARYNAAR
Auum LEADER OF THE TAIGETHEN
The ClawBound
Jevin CAPTAIN OF THE CALAIAN SUN
Kayloor A GUIDE
Kild'aar VILLAGE ELDER

Note: The apostrophe in female elven names is an abbreviation. Traditionally, elven females took the name of their family or village as part of their name. Hence Ren'erei would be Ren-al-erei, with the "al" meaning "of the."

BARONS,
SOLDIERS,
AND
BALAIANS

Blackthorne A BARON
Gresse A BARON
Erksan A LORD
Selik CAPTAIN OF THE BLACK WINGS
Devun SELIK'S DEPUTY
Yron A CAPTAIN
Ben-Foran A LIEUTENANT
Erys A MAGE
Stenys A MAGE
Avesb A REFUGEE
Ellin A REFUGEE
Diera WIFE OF THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR

THE KAAAN

Sba-Kaan GREAT KAAAN
Nos-Kaan

CHAPTER 1

The Unknown Warrior reined in on the crest of a rise overlooking the once tranquil lakeside port of Arlen. In the gathering gloom and encroaching mist, battle raged through its streets. Buildings were burning across the town, a heavy pall of smoke thickening the mist. The thud and crack of spells echoed against the mountains to the north, blue-edged for Xetesk, stark orange for Dordover. The shouts of men and the clash of weapons, muted by the mist, reached his ears.

In the last two seasons, he had seen and heard plenty of evidence of deteriorating relations between the two colleges but this was infinitely worse. This was war. He'd hoped to get them out before it started. Even thought his plan could bring peace. But here was proof of that folly.

"And you expect us to ride through all that to the dockside?" Diera was right beside him, her horse nuzzling at his.

He looked over to her and down to Jonas, his baby son, cradled in one huge arm. "I want to know you're both safe. And away from Balaia's the only way."

"Tomas didn't think so," said Diera, wisps of her light hair blowing outside the hood of her cloak.

"Tomas is more stubborn than any man I know," said The Unknown, smiling. How hard he had tried to get Tomas to bring his family too, to leave the Rookery, which they owned together. An inn now ruined by a hurricane. "Except one. He's never left Korina and he's blinded himself to the disease, the rats and the starvation. He thinks it'll get better now spring is here. I don't. I've seen Balaia. And it'll get worse not better. I won't leave you here. I can't."

Diera shivered, and as if sensing her unease from where he lay in the safety of his father's arm, Jonas started to whimper.

"Shh, shh," he said gently, rocking the child. "It's all right."

"It isn't all right," said Diera. "Just look down there. They're killing each other and you want us to ride through it."

"And this is just the start, believe me." He looked deep into her eyes. "Please, Diera. War is here. Nowhere on Balaia will be safe."

She nodded. "How do we get to the docks?"

"On one horse we can ride where ten or more could not but I need you close. Sit in front of me and hold Jonas. I'll keep you from falling. Try not to be afraid."

"Don't ask that," she said. "I'm terrified. You're used to the noise and blood."

“I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

“Better not.” Her expression softened slightly.

“Just remember to do what I ask. It’ll be difficult down there and there’s no time for debate. You must trust me.”

“Always.”

She dismounted and he helped her up in front of him before handing her their baby son. He kicked his big stallion to a gentle trot down the slope toward Arlen.

Riding in from the northeast along a narrow, barely used trail, The Unknown could see the fires of a camp some miles off to the east and a Dordovan column under torchlight heading down the main track into the heart of the port. Xetesk had been in tacit control of Arlen when he put into port two seasons ago and he had no reason to believe anything had changed barring the fact that Dordover was now on open offensive.

Closer to, the sounds of buildings aflame and collapsing, of spells crashing into structure and soldier and the roar of close-quarter fighting were deafening. Jonas was crying and Diera was rigid in the saddle.

“We’ll be all right,” said The Unknown.

“Just get us there, Sol,” she said, trying to comfort their bawling son.

Entering the town on a dark and shadowed street with the din a terrifying press on their ears, The Unknown snapped the reins.

“Hang on,” he said. “It gets tricky from here.”

He heeled his horse’s flanks and the nervous animal sprang forward. In his ears the clash of metal and the shouts of warriors mixed uncomfortably with the wails from his boy. He fought to keep the horse in the middle of the street, galloping headlong for the docks. He aimed to ride down the eastern edge of the town past the Park of the Martyrs and through the Salt Quarter to emerge at the end of the docks where Captain Jevin had the *Calaian Sun* at berth.

But already he could see it would be difficult if not impossible to avoid the conflict around them. To their right, multiple FlameOrbs burned away the mist, their arcs of flight carrying them down to splatter into buildings and onto streets. The flat crack and orange flare of a ManaShield collapsing was succeeded immediately by the screams of those caught abruptly defenceless. Smoke billowed as mana fire gorged on wood and flesh, pouring out of a side street and billowing over rooftops, hemming them in still further.

Ahead of them, shapes ran, disordered and panicked; townfolk trying to flee college blade and spell. There were dozens of them led by an uncertain trio of town militia. They were looking behind them more than ahead and all were weighed down by possessions or tiny human cargo. The Unknown cursed, the horse skittish beneath them and slowing automatically.

“Sit tight.”

The townspeople ran on, all but one heedless of the lone horse as they raced out of town, fear stalking every face below streaks of mud and soot.

“Turn around, the way is blocked!” yelled one of the militia as he closed.

“The docks,” shouted The Unknown. “Best way!”

“No way,” came the reply. “That’s what the bastards are fighting over. Run, it’s your only chance.” And then he was gone.

The Unknown pushed on, Jonas squealing and coughing in turn as the smoke thickened nearer the centre of the fighting. Diera’s face was white and strained.

“Not far now.”

More stragglers came by them as they rode quickly down the street, the park behind them. Ahead, the low warehousing and packed tenements of the Salt Quarter, once heavy with cargo and seafarers, now blazing in countless places and full of war. From the right, men ran in close form across their path, ignoring them. Dead ahead, fire blew up the side of a warehouse. Timbers creaked and collapsed. There was a roar and the renewed clash of weapons. They were on the fighting now.

The Unknown swung the horse left, down a narrow muddied lane between two lowering warehouses. Slightly muted for a moment, the tumult of the fighting was brought suddenly and horribly close. Cantering past a crosspath, The Unknown glanced right. The passage was full of men, blades catching the glare of the fires around them as they charged away toward an unseen enemy.

A heartbeat later, FlameOrbs surged from the gloom and smoke and into the front of the packed line. Fire scorched up walls, tore timbers from roofs, and the impact snatched soldiers from their feet and flung them backward, human firebrands shrieking as they died.

It was too much for The Unknown’s horse. Already scared, the stallion jolted sideways and reared high. Caught by the double move, and already compensating to catch the slipping Diera, The Unknown lost his brief fight for balance. But as he fell left and back, he enclosed his wife and son in his embrace and took the weight of the fall for all of them, rolling across his shoulders.

He grunted, wind knocked from his lungs, pain stabbing through his upper back. The horse bolted back the way they had come. The Unknown carried on rolling, his broad back protecting his family from the wood and dirt firing from the passage. He dragged himself to his feet, bringing Diera with him, swinging her trembling body to face him and seeing Jonas too scared even to cry.

“Are you hurt?” he gasped, forcing air into his lungs, a sheet of pain washing across his rib cage.

Diera shook her head. “What will we do now?” she asked, pressing Jonas’s head into her chest.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’ll protect you.” He stepped back and drew sword and dagger. “Do everything I say without question.”

Diera flinched. His tone was hard, his eyes cold. He knew it worried her but there was no other way if they were to live. He assessed their position. Going on was their only option. Already, survivors were stumbling toward them from the crosspath, bloodied and angry.

“Back away,” said The Unknown, pushing her gently in the right direction. “Don’t run.”

They’d been seen. Four men with swords ready. Brief guilt surged through The Unknown at the position he’d placed his family in. Others might have been ignored as Arlen townfolk, but the shaven head, bull neck and sheer size of The Unknown Warrior made him instantly recognisable. And every Dordovan knew with whom he had fought on Herendeneth. Xetesk.

“Running to join your soul brothers?” sneered one. He was burned across his head but otherwise unhurt. “Just that little bit too far away, aren’t they?”

“I’m just taking my family from here,” said The Unknown. “I’ve no fight with you.”

“You’re Xeteskian.”

“I’m Raven.”

“But they aren’t here.”

“Keep clear, Diera,” said The Unknown.

“Why?”

“And don’t let Jonas see.”

The Unknown tapped his blade once on the ground and ran at the Dordovans. They hesitated fractionally as he knew they would. It was their undoing. His blade sliced clean into the stomach of the first soldier but was blocked by the second. He fielded a wild swing from the third on the broad hilt of his dagger even as he dropped to his haunches, left leg sweeping out to knock the poorly balanced swordsman’s legs from under him.

Bouncing up on his right leg, he stabbed straight forward into the neck of the second, his speed making a nonsense of the man’s defence. Again he was moving as he struck. Left this time, dagger fending off a smart stab to his midriff from the fourth. He turned the strike aside, reversed his dagger and buried it in the soldier’s eye.

Not stopping, he left the blade where it jutted from the dead man’s

skull, gripped his longsword in two hands, spun and chopped down through the shoulder of the last survivor as he tried to get up and defend at the same time, succeeding in neither.

The Unknown knelt to clean his gore-spattered blade on their clothes. He heard shouting close at hand. More Dordovans had witnessed his devastating attack. They were coming left and right, twenty yards distant. An arrow sang past him.

“Dammit.”

He turned as he straightened, sheathing his blades. Diera was staring at him, her face white and eyes wide. She pointed behind him at the quartet of corpses.

“You—” she began.

“Not pretty, is it?” He grabbed her arm and swung her round, starting to run. “We’ve got to go. Now.”

“They’re dead. You killed them all.”

“It’s what I do. You know that. Now come on.”

Almost lifting her from her feet, The Unknown set off down the narrow passageway. The fighting was concentrated to their right around the centre of the dockside, on the other side of the warehouse that loomed dark grey above them. He guessed they had two hundred yards to make it into the heart of the Salt Quarter. It would probably be no safer but they might find friendly blades.

The shouts of pursuit spilled into the passage behind them. A thud by his head and a skipping off a stone at his feet told him the bowmen had almost got their range. He pushed Diera in front of him, still trying to support her terrified stumbling run, Jonas whimpering again under her cloak.

“Keep running if I fall.”

Another shaft whistled past his head, burying itself in the wall just beyond. Diera yelped. Ten yards ahead, a turning.

“Go left.”

He saw her nod. Arrows clattered into the walls behind, another flew overhead. He ducked reflexively, arms coming up to protect Diera. They swung left. The Unknown sensed fighting very close. The passageway ended at a blank wall and went left and right.

“Right, go right,” he said, pushing Diera ever faster. She half stumbled.

“Please,” she said. “Jonas.”

“Move!” he snapped. “Don’t stop.”

She started and ran on, taking the right turn.

Twenty yards and it opened out on to war. The street beyond was ablaze. Men ran everywhere, orders were barked over the deafening roar of battle. Spells fell at random, fire and lightning gouging rents in the ground and

destroying unshielded soldiers. Corpses and the screaming wounded littered the ground.

“Ten yards and stop!” shouted The Unknown. “Take the doorway. Crouch small.”

Not waiting to see her do it, he swung to face the opening, dragging out his sword, its point tapping rhythmically in the mud. Their pursuers were only moments away, their breath and words betraying them. First was a bowman, tearing blindly round the corner, an arrow nocked in his bow. The Unknown shifted his weight forward and drove his sword up between the archer’s legs and out through his rib cage, the power of the blow launching him backward, dead before he hit the ground.

A couple of paces behind came a pair of swordsmen, one slightly in advance, both more wary than their erstwhile companion. The Unknown batted aside the first blade and straight punched the soldier in the face, feeling his nose break and sending him tumbling back. The second, quick and accurate, whipped a deep cut into The Unknown’s left arm.

He swore at the sudden pain and brought his sword back one-handed low across his body, biting into his attacker’s thigh. The man cried out and half fell forward. The Unknown took his chance, lashing out with a foot and catching the soldier on the point of his jaw. His head snapped back with a wet crack. He crumpled.

The Unknown advanced on the other swordsman, who looked at him through bloodied hands, turned and ran away, shouting for help. It would have to be enough. The Raven warrior hurried to Diera.

“Come on.”

“Your arm.” She reached out.

“It’s fine,” he said, glancing at the blood slicking over his hand.

“It’s not.”

“No time for bandages. We’ve got to go. Now.” He leaned in and kissed her. “Stay close to me and you’ll live.”

“We’re going out there?”

“It’s the only way.”

The Unknown knew what he had to do. Sword in right hand, Diera’s trembling hand in his left, he moved quickly to the opening onto the main street, keeping as far into the shadows as he could.

Out on the street it was mayhem. To the left, Xetesk was defending the entrance to a small square but the line was fragmented. Dordovan forces were pouring down the street from the north, their mages bombarding the rear of the line with FlameOrbs and HotRain, filling the sky with orange radiance. Soldiers threw themselves on the wavering Xeteskians, pounding them,

threatening to drive them back and turn their flanks. It had to be one of half a dozen key conflicts in the town but the defence he wanted wasn't there.

"Where are they?"

"Who?"

"You know," said The Unknown. A ForceCone tore out from the Xeteskian line, scattering unshielded Dordovans. There was an opening. "Let's go."

Diera's scream was lost in the storm of noise that assaulted them out in the street. The Unknown lashed to his right, a soldier fell clutching at his entrails. The big warrior hauled his wife and child behind him, running full tilt at the back of the Dordovan assault.

He ignored the voices raised against him as he passed, praying for the confusion of the fight to hide him for just long enough. He glanced down at Diera, so small and fragile, and fear grabbed his heart. That he might not get her through. That she and Jonas might fall under the swords of men who attacked them because of him and him alone. At the same moment, she glanced up, and through her terror, he saw determination. She clutched Jonas tighter under her cloak. The Unknown nodded.

Never letting her go but keeping her just behind him as he dodged through the chaos he hoped would shield them, he pushed men aside, sword hilt connecting roughly with shoulder, face and back.

"Move! Move!"

And they reacted like all conscripts to a voice of authority. For a few priceless heartbeats, a path opened to the fighting line but he knew it couldn't last. One of them turned and recognised him.

"What—?"

The Unknown's sword took out his throat. He tightened his grip on Diera's hand and surged on, soldiers on all sides alerted to the enemy in their midst. He drove his blade through the back of a man too slow to react and kicked him aside, swayed left to dodge a blow from his flank and clashed swords with a third who turned from the fight.

"Open the line!" he roared at the Xeteskians. "Open the line!"

But there were still Dordovans in the way. Just yards from relative safety and he was going to be trapped. He swung Diera round and backed toward the left-hand side of the street.

"Shout if anyone comes behind," he said.

FlameOrbs dropped into the centre of the street, flaring off SpellShields, the fire routed harmlessly into the ground. In the flash of light, The Unknown saw eight or ten Dordovans moving toward him, all wary of his reputation unlike the others before them, but all confident in their advance.

“Sol . . .”

“It’ll be all right,” said The Unknown.

But it wouldn’t. He looked frantically at the line of Xeteskian warriors backed by archers and mages and hemmed in by the Dordovan aggressors.

“Push your right, damn you!” he shouted, not even sure now if they’d seen him at all.

A sword thrust came in. He blocked it easily. He squared up to the overwhelming numbers, letting go of Diera at last and gripping his sword two-handed. He weaved it slowly in front of him, fencing away the first feints. He identified first and second targets and wondered how many he could take with him.

“Take a dagger from my belt. When I fall, run. Hug the wall and try to get through. Find a Protector.”

“I won’t leave you.”

“You’ll do as I say. I got you into this and I’m getting you out.”

He lunged forward, striking left to right, blade weight beating aside a weak defence and nicking through leather. The target fell back; The Unknown did likewise. The rest closed, scant feet from him now but unwilling to attack. They were a disparate group, not under command. Maybe. Just maybe.

Consternation rippled through the Dordovan line to his left. ForceCones flew out from the Xeteskian mages, scattering Dordovans behind the front. Two of his attackers fell. A heavy detonation sounded. The building next to him shook and tottered under an EarthHammer. More ForceCones. Very close. The edge of one caught him a glancing blow and he sprawled. Diera screamed.

The Unknown rolled onto his back. Dordovans ran at him, three at least fast on their feet.

We are come.

Panic spread in the Dordovan line. The trio running at The Unknown faltered then came on again. Halfway to his feet, The Unknown sheared aside a thrust to his chest and jumped back. A second came in but it didn’t get close to its target, stopped by the flat blade of a massive axe.

Protectors sprinted in front of him. He drove to his feet as Diera yelped in surprise. He turned to see her lifted from the ground by one of the Xeteskian elite taking her to safety. He heard a voice by his ear.

“You go too.”

He looked round into the blank mask of a Protector and nodded.

“Thank you.”

“Go.”

A backward glance told him the Protectors were holding the gap. The Unknown nodded again and ran after his wife down to the dockside where the *Calaian Sun* bobbed against the wharf.

With his wife and son safely below deck in their cabin, he came back to the wheel deck to shake hands with Jevin, the ship's captain, but could see instantly that all was not right. There were Protectors and Xeteskian mages everywhere on board and the ship was already under way.

"Thank you for waiting."

"It's what you pay me for," said Jevin curtly.

"What's all this about?" asked The Unknown. "I agreed half a dozen research mages. There must be twenty here."

"Thirty," corrected Jevin. "And a hundred Protectors."

"What?"

"Ask him." Jevin gestured at a tall young mage striding toward the wheel-deck ladder. "I've got a ship to sail."

The Unknown watched the mage quickly scale the ladder and smile as he approached.

"The Unknown Warrior," he said, extending a hand. "I'm glad you got through."

"Sytkan," said The Unknown, ignoring the hand. "Are you going to tell me what this small army is doing on board Jevin's ship?"

Sytkan at least had the good grace to look embarrassed. "It was felt at the highest level that Herendeneth should be secured from Dordovan invasion."

The Unknown cleared his throat and looked back to the dockside. It was ringed with fire but secured. Spell after spell crashed into the shields all around it and, high in the sky, he could just pick out the silhouettes of Xeteskian demon Familiars, watching the perimeter. He shuddered, imagining their maniacal laughs all too easily.

"This was to be a peaceful mission," he said. "You're sharing your findings with the other colleges. Or supposed to be."

Sytkan waved a hand at the ruins of Arlen. "Things change," he said. "The Dordovans wanted something we were not prepared to give."

"Which was?"

"Their mages in the research party."

"And this is the result?" The Unknown shook his head. "Gods burning, was it really worth going to war over?"

"If not this then something else." Sytkan shrugged.

The Unknown slapped the railing. "But this was supposed to help broker peace! What the hell went wrong?"

Sytkan didn't answer.

“Dystran and Vuldaroq,” said The Unknown, answering for him. “You don’t need this, you know—the colleges, that is. There’s already unrest.” He gestured back at Arlen. “This sort of thing will be the death of magic, ultimately.”

Sytkan snorted. “I hardly think so.”

The Unknown rounded on him and pushed his face in very close. “Don’t underestimate Selik and the Black Wings. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a family to attend to and a cut to stitch.”

He nodded at Jevin as he descended the ladder, pain shooting through his left hip and lower back. Now the adrenaline was gone, the liberties he’d taken with his old wound were taking their toll. Before going below, he scanned the deck once more, seeing too many Xetesians on it.

Ilkar wasn’t going to like this. He wasn’t going to like this at all.