

NIGHTCHILD

ALSO BY JAMES BARCLAY

Chronicles of The Raven

DAWNTHIEF

NOONSHADE

NIGHTCHILD

CHRONICLES OF THE RAVEN

JAMES BARCLAY



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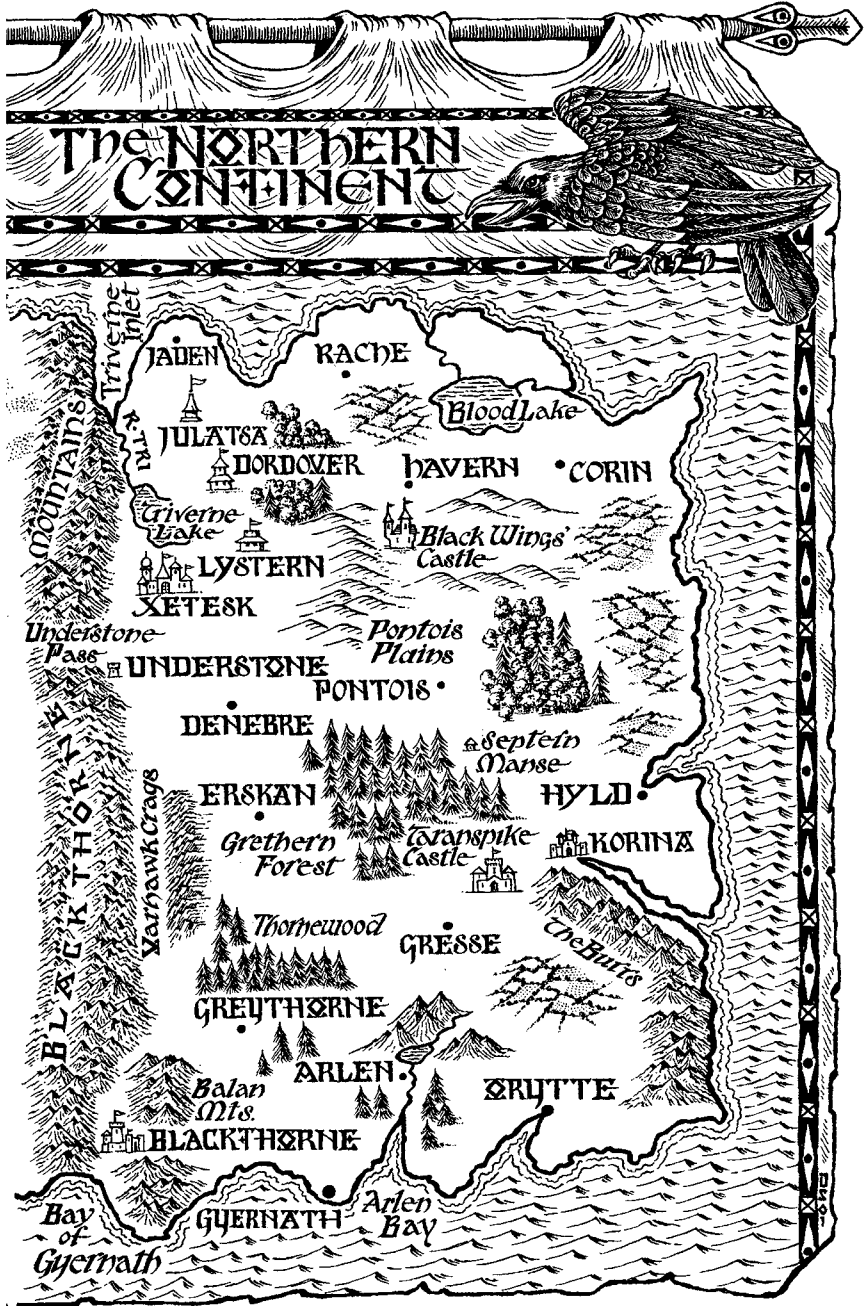
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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
STUART BARTLETT.
A TRULY GREAT FRIEND TO ME, WONDERFUL HUSBAND TO VIV
AND FATHER TO TIM, EMMA, CLAIRE AND NICK.
WE ALL MISS YOU STUART, SO THIS ONE'S FOR YOU.





CAST LIST

THE RAVEN

Hirad Coldheart BARBARIAN WARRIOR

The Unknown Warrior WARRIOR

Ilkar JULATSAN MAGE

Denser XETESKIAN MAGE

Erienne DORDOVAN MAGE

THE COLLEGES

Dystran LORD OF THE MOUNT, XETESK

Vuldarog TOWERLORD, DORDOVER

Heryst LORD ELDER MAGE, LYSTERN

Sytkan LORD MAGE, XETESK

Ry Darrick GENERAL, LYSTERNAN CAVALRY

Aeb A PROTECTOR

Lyanna ERIENNE'S DAUGHTER

THE SOLDIERS SAILORS AND EARLS

Ren'erei GUILD OF DRECH

Tryuun GUILD OF DRECH

Jasto Arlen EARL OF ARLEN

Selik CAPTAIN OF THE BLACK WINGS

Jevin CAPTAIN OF THE CALAIAN SUN

THE AL-DRECHAR

Ephemere

Cleress

Myriell

Aviana

THE KAAAN

Sha-Kaan GREAT KAAAN

Hyn-Kaan

Nos-Kaan

PROLOGUE

Jarrin had fished the waters north of Sunara's Teeth all of his long life. He knew the intricacies of the tides and the petulance of the wind. And he knew the beauty of solitude. His lines and pots were dropped in a sheltered deep-water cove and now was the wonderful wait. It was the time he loved. He lay back along the boards of his eighteen-foot coastal skimmer, its single sail furled against the boom, as it rocked gently in the slight swell.

Jarrin uncorked his water and wine, then chose a thick ham sandwich from his daysack, laying it all on the bench by him as he stared at the glorious, cloud-veined blue sky. On a day like today, no life was better.

He must have dozed off for a while because he awoke with a start, felt the boat shifting strangely beneath him and saw the sun had moved a little to his left. Something was upsetting the perfection of the day and a distant roaring noise irritated his ears.

Jarrin pushed himself up onto his elbows, bent his head and dug a finger into his left ear. He couldn't hear a single bird. Over the years he'd become so accustomed to the harsh calls of gulls circling overhead or following his boat after a good day that they'd become part of the background. Now their silence was unnerving. Animals could sense things.

And now he was fully awake, nothing was quite right. The sky above was beautiful but the air felt like rain was coming. The water below the boat dragged him out to sea though the tide was surely coming in. And that roaring sound seemed to echo off the peaks of Sunara's Teeth, filling the air with an unearthly sound that scared him deep in the pit of his stomach.

Frowning, he sat up above the gunwale, his gaze caught by movement out to sea. He froze.

Approaching impossibly fast was a wall of water, behind which a dark cloud mass blew and thickened. It stretched out of his vision to either side of the cove, a towering blue-grey mountain, white flecked and awesome.

Jarrin just carried on looking. He could have tried to haul up his anchor, raise the sail and run for the shore but it would have been a futile gesture. The wave had to be over one hundred feet high and left no hiding place, just death against the rocky coast.

Jarrin had always sworn he would stare into the face of his killer so he stood up, sang a prayer to the Spirit for his safe passage to the ancestral haven and drank in the magnificent power of nature before it dashed him to oblivion.

CHAPTER 1

The covered carriage rattled along the western edge of Thornewood, heading in the direction of Varhawk Crags on a rutted and overgrown trail. Wheels bounced off stone, wood protested and metal bolts screeched in their stays. The driver urged his pair of horses on, snapping the reins and shouting his encouragement as they dragged their unstable load at a speed that could only have one outcome.

But not just yet.

With every bump in the trail thudding through his lower back, the driver turned to look over his shoulder. Through the cloud of dust the carriage threw up, he could see them closing. Six figures on horseback, eating up the distance, their pace unimpeded by ground that played havoc with wheels.

He'd seen them closing over half the day, his sharp eyes picking them out almost as soon as they had spotted him and begun the chase. At first, he hadn't had to gallop but, as the afternoon had worn on, it had become clear that his pursuers would ride their horses to death to catch him. He wasn't surprised. What they believed to be inside the carriage was worth the lives of far more than a few mares.

He smiled, turned back to the trail and snapped the reins again. Above him, a fine day was clouding as dusk approached and already the light was beginning to fade. He scratched his chin and stared down at his horses. Sweat poured from their flanks and foamed beneath leather straps. Heads bounced as they drove on, eyes wide and ears flat.

"Well done," he said. They had given him all the time he needed.

He glanced back again. They were within a hundred yards. A thud signalled the first arrow to strike the carriage. He breathed deep; it had to be now.

Keeping low, he dropped the reins and launched himself on to the back of the right-hand horse, feeling the heat through his hands and legs, hearing their exertion.

"Steady now," he said. "Steady now."

He patted the horse's neck and drew his dagger. Its edge was keen and with one quick slash, he cut the carriage reins. Another and the leather binding the yoke dropped away. He kicked the horse's flanks and it sprang right, away from the carriage which, with the other horse still attached, slowed dramatically and veered left. He prayed it wouldn't overturn.

Unhitching the single reins from where they were tied around the bridle, he fought briefly for control and leaned close to his mount's neck, putting

quick distance between himself and the carriage. When he heard the shouts behind him, he reined in and turned.

The enemy were at the carriage. Its doors were opened and riders circled it, their voices angry, filled with recrimination. He knew they could see him but he didn't care. They wouldn't catch him now; but more than that, he had taken them away from their quarry. Half a day's ride following an empty carriage. And now they, at least, would never find what they were looking for.

No time for self-congratulation though. These were just six incompetents he had fooled. There were far cleverer enemies still in the hunt and they would not make their intentions so obvious.

Erienne looked down at her daughter, dozing fitfully in her lap, and wondered for the first time whether she had not undertaken a monumental folly. The first day in Thornewood had been easy enough. Lyanna had been high-spirited and they'd sung walking songs as they'd travelled south, and the sun-dappled forest had smelled clean, fresh and friendly. That first night had been a real adventure for Lyanna, sleeping in the open, covered by her mother's cloak and guarded by her alarm wards. And as Lyanna had slept, Erienne had gone further, tuning to the mana spectrum and tasting its chaos, looking for signs that all was not well.

Not that Erienne had considered them in any danger that night. She trusted that the Guild knew what they were doing and would look after them. And though wolves ran in Thornewood, they were not known to take human flesh. And she, as a mage of Dordover, had more defences than many.

But on this second day, the atmosphere had changed. Deeper into the woods, the canopy thickened and they walked in shadow much of the time, their moods lifting only when the sun broke through to lighten the ground at their feet. Their songs and chatter had become sporadic and then ceased altogether. And though Erienne fought to find things to say or point out to her increasingly anxious daughter, she found her efforts fell on deaf ears or died on her lips as she looked into Lyanna's fearful eyes.

And the truth was, she felt it too. She understood, or thought she understood, why they were having to walk alone. But her faith in the Guild was quickly diminishing. She had expected some contact but had had none; and now every twig that cracked and every creak of a tree in the wind made her jump. She strained for the sounds of the birds and used their song to boost Lyanna's spirits. After all, she had lied, if the birds sing, there can be no danger.

Erienne had kept a smile on her face though she knew Lyanna was only half convinced to carry on. Even so, the little girl tired quickly and so they had stopped in the late afternoon, Erienne resting her back against a moss-

covered tree trunk while Lyanna dozed. Poor child. Only five years old and running for her life, if she but knew it.

Erienne stroked Lyanna's long black hair and edged her doll out from where it was making an uncomfortable dent in her cheek. She looked out into the forest. The sound of the breeze through the trees and the shadowy branches waving above them felt somehow malevolent. She imagined the wolf pack closing in and shook her head to disperse the vision. But they *were* being followed. She could feel it. And she couldn't free herself from the thought that it wasn't the Guild.

Her heart was suddenly pounding in her chest and panic gripped her. Shadows flickered in front of her, taking on human form and flitting around the periphery of her vision, always just out of reach. Her mouth was dry. What in all the God's names were they doing here? One woman and a little girl. Pursued by a power too great for them to combat. And they'd put their lives in the hands of total strangers who had surely abandoned them.

Erienne shivered though the afternoon was warm, the motion disturbing Lyanna who woke and looked up at her, eyes searching for comfort but finding none.

"Mummy, why do they just watch? Why don't they help us?"

Erienne was silent until Lyanna repeated the question, adding, "Don't they like us?" She chuckled then and ruffled Lyanna's hair.

"How could anyone not like you? Of course, they like us, my sweet. I think maybe they have to be apart from us to make sure no one bad finds us."

"When will we get there, Mummy?"

"Not long, my darling. Not long. Then you can rest easy. We must be getting closer." But her words sounded hollow to her and the wind through the trees whispered death.

Lyanna looked sternly at her, her chin carrying a slight wobble.

"I don't like it here, Mummy," she said.

Erienne shivered again. "Neither do I, darling. Do you want to find somewhere better?"

Lyanna nodded. "You won't let the bad people get me, will you?"

"Of course not, my sweet."

She helped Lyanna to her feet, shouldered her pack and they moved off, direction south as they had been told. And as they walked, their pace hurried by the phantoms that they felt closing in, Erienne tried to remember how The Unknown Warrior or Thraun would have shaken off pursuers. How they would have covered their tracks, moved carefully over the ground and laid false trails. She even wondered whether she could carry Lyanna within a Cloaked Walk, rendering them both invisible. A tiring and draining exercise that would be.

She smiled grimly. It was a new game for Lyanna and it might just keep her happy but it was a game they were playing for the highest of stakes.

They moved through the forest with no little skill but beneath the canopy elves missed nothing. Ren'erei confessed surprise at their ability, the silence with which they moved and their efforts to leave no trace of their passing. She even respected the route they chose, often moving away from the trail they left, to throw off any who might follow.

And for most pursuers it would have worked. But Ren'erei and Tryuun were born to the forest and detected every nuance of change brought upon it by the passage of humans. A splayed leaf crushed into the mulch; loose bark brushed from the bole of a tree at a telltale height; the pattern of twig splinters lying on the ground. And for these particular people, a shadow at odds with the sun through the canopy, eddies in the air and the altered calls of woodland creatures.

Ren'erei went ahead, Tryuun covering his sister from a flank at a distance of twenty yards. The two elves had followed the signs for a full day, closing steadily but never allowing a hint to their quarry that they were being followed.

She moved in a low crouch, eyes scanning her route, every footfall of her light leather boots sure and silent, her mottled brown and green cloak, jerkin and trousers blending with the sun-dappled forest environs. They were close now. The woodchucks nesting in the roots of the tall pines ahead had sounded a warning call, bark dust floated in the still air close to the forest floor, and in the dried mud underfoot, tufts of grass moved gently, individual stalks recovering from the force of a human foot.

Ren'erei stopped beside the wide trunk of a great old oak, placing one hand on it to feel its energy and holding the other out, flat-palmed, to signal to Tryuun. Without looking, she knew her brother was hidden.

Ten yards ahead of her, local turbulence in the air, signified by the eddying of bracken and low leaves, told of a mage under a CloakedWalk. The mage was moving minutely to avoid becoming visible even momentarily, and again Ren'erei paused to enjoy the skill.

Her fingers all but brushing the ground, Ren'erei crossed the space, identifying the patches of shadow and building a picture of the mage. Tall, slender and athletic but unaware of his or her mortal position. The elf was silent, her movement disturbing nothing, the woodland creatures comfortable with her presence among them.

At the last moment, she slid her knife from its leather sheath, stood tall, grabbed the mage's forehead and bent his skull back, slitting his throat in the

same movement. She let the blood spurt over the vegetation and the man shuddered his last, too confused to attempt to cry out in alarm. The Cloak dropped to reveal black, close-fitting clothes and a shaven head. Ren'erei never looked at their faces when she killed this way. The look in their eyes, the surprise and disbelief, made her feel so guilty.

She laid the body down face first, cleaned and resheathed her knife and signalled Tryuun to move.

There was another out there, Erienne and Lyanna were running scared and the day would soon be done.

Denser sat in the fireside chair in the cold study, an autumnal wind rattling the windows. Leaves blew across the dull grey sky but the chill outside was nothing compared to that inside the Xeteskian mage who sat in Dordover's Tower.

The moment the Dordovan envoy had arrived on horseback to speak with him and ask him to come to the College, he had known circumstances were dire. The dead weight in the pit of his stomach and the dragging at his heart hadn't shifted since but had deepened to a cold anger when he discovered that it had taken them six weeks to agree he should be called.

Initially, he'd been disappointed that Erienne hadn't tried to contact him by Communion but breaks of weeks between touchings weren't uncommon and now, he realised ruefully, sheer distance might be stopping her even making the attempt.

He folded the letter in his hands and pushed it into his lap before looking up at Vuldaroq. The fat Dordovan Tower Lord, dressed in deep blue robes gathered with a white sash, was sweating from the exertion of accompanying Denser to Erienne's rooms. He shifted uncomfortably under the other's stare.

"Six weeks, Vuldaroq. What the hell were you doing all that time?"

Vuldaroq patted a cloth over his forehead and back on to his bald scalp. "Searching. Trying to find them. As we still do. They are Dordovan."

"And also my wife and child, despite our current separation. You had no right to keep her disappearance from me for even one day."

Denser took in the study, its stacks of tied papers, its books and parchments arranged in meticulous fashion on the shelves, its candles and lamp wicks trimmed, a toy rabbit sitting atop a plumped cushion. So completely unlike Erienne, who delighted in untidiness where she worked. She hadn't gone against her will, that was clear. She'd cleaned up and intended to be away for a long time. Maybe for good.

"It is not as simple as that," said Vuldaroq carefully. "There are procedures and processes—"

Denser surged from the chair to stand eye to eye with the Tower Lord.

“Don’t even think of trying that horseshit with me,” he grated. “Your Quorum’s damned pride and politics has kept me away from the search for my daughter and the woman I love for six bloody wasted weeks. They could be absolutely anywhere by now. What exactly have your searches turned up?”

Denser could see the beads of sweat forming on Vuldarog’s red, bulbous face.

“Vague clues. Rumoured sightings. Nothing certain.”

“It’s taken you six weeks to find out ‘nothing certain’? The entire and considerable might of Dordover?” Denser stopped, seeing Vuldarog’s squinted gaze dart momentarily away. He smiled and stepped away a little, half turning, his fingers playing idly with a stack of papers. “She really took you by surprise, didn’t she? All of you.” He gave a short laugh. “You never had any idea that she might leave or where she might go, did you?”

Vuldarog said nothing. Denser nodded.

“So what did you do? Send mages and soldiers to Lystern? Korina? Blackthorne? Even Xetesk perhaps. Then what? Scoured the local woodland, sent word to Gyernath and Jaden?”

“The search area is large,” said Vuldarog carefully.

“And with all your great wisdom, none of you had the wit to know her well enough to consider in which direction she might have headed, did you?” Denser tutted, and tapped his head, enjoying, for a moment, Vuldarog’s embarrassment. “No instinct, was there? And so you sent for me, someone who might know. But you left it so very, very late. Why is that, Vuldarog?”

The Dordovan Tower Lord wiped the cloth over his face and hands before pocketing it.

“Despite your relationship to both Erienne and Lyanna, they were both under the care of Dordover,” said Vuldarog. “We have a certain image to uphold, protocols to observe. We wanted them returned to us with the minimum of apparent . . . fuss.” He spread his hands wide and tried a half smile.

Denser shook his head and moved forward again. Vuldarog took a pace back, struck his leg against the seat of a chair and sat heavily, face reddening anew.

“You expect me to believe that? Your secrecy over Lyanna’s disappearance has nothing to do with risking public embarrassment. No, there’s more. You wanted her back in your College before I even knew she was gone, didn’t you?” Denser leaned over the sweating face, feeling the warm, faintly alcohol-tainted breath spitting quickly over his cheeks. “Why is that, I wonder? Scared she would fetch up at the door of a more capable College?”

Again a slight spreading of the hands from Vuldarog. “Lyanna is a child of utterly unique talents. And those talents must be channelled correctly if they are not to provoke unfortunate consequences.”

“Like the awakening of a true all-College ability, you mean? Hardly unfortunate.” Denser smiled. “If it happens, we should celebrate.”

“Be careful, Denser,” warned Vuldaroq. “Balaia has no place for another Septern. Not now, not ever. The world has changed.”

“Dordover may speak only for itself, not for Balaia. Lyanna can show us the way forward. All of us.”

Vuldaroq snorted. “*Forward*”? A return to the One is a step back, my Xeteskian friend, and one talented child does not herald such a step. One child is powerless.” The old Dordovan bit his lip.

“Only if you stop her realising her potential.” What started as a retort finished as a whisper. Denser paced back, his mouth slack for a moment. “That’s it, isn’t it? By all the Gods falling, Vuldaroq, if one hair on her head is harmed—”

Vuldaroq pushed himself out of the chair. “No one is going to harm her, Denser. Calm yourself. We are Dordovans, not witch hunters.” He moved toward the door. “But do find her and bring her back here, Denser. Soon. Believe me, it is important to all of us.”

“Get out,” muttered Denser.

“Might I remind you that this is my Tower,” snapped Vuldaroq.

“Get out!” shouted Denser. “You have no idea what you are toying with, do you? No idea at all.” Denser sat back down in his chair.

“On the contrary, I think you’ll find we have a very good idea indeed.” Vuldaroq stood for a while before shuffling out. Denser listened to his heavy footsteps receding along the wood-panelled corridor. He unfolded the letter they hadn’t even found, though it was barely hidden in Erienne’s chambers. Denser had known it would be there, addressed to him. And he had known they wouldn’t find it, just as she had. No instinct.

He read the letter again and sighed. Four and a half years it had been since they had all stood together on the fields of Septern Manse, and yet The Raven were the only people he could possibly trust to help him, depleted as they were. Erienne was gone and Thraun presumably still ran with the wolf pack in Thornewood. That left Hirad, with whom he had had a bad falling out a year before and no contact since, Ilkar who was working himself to an early grave in the ruins of Julatsa and, of course, the Big Man.

Denser managed a smile. He was still the lynchpin. And Denser could be in Korina in a little over two days if he flew all the way. A supper at The Rookery and a glass of Blackthorne red with The Unknown Warrior. A pleasant prospect.

He decided he would leave Dordover at first light, and turned to ring for a fire to warm Erienne’s chambers. There was a great deal of work still to do.

Denser's smile faded. The Dordovans would continue their search and he couldn't risk them finding Lyanna first. Not that that was very likely, given the contents of the letter, but he couldn't be certain. And without certainty, his daughter was at risk from the very people Erienne had turned to for help.

But there was something else too. Something serious nagging at him that he couldn't drag from his subconscious. It was to do with the awakening.

A strong gust of wind rattled the windows, almost over before it had come. Denser shrugged, switched his attention to the desk and began leafing carefully through its papers.

Korina was bustling. Trade had been excellent throughout the summer and the seasonal change had brought little diminishment, other than the falling numbers of itinerant travellers and workers, who had begun to take ship for the southern continent, following the heat.

After two years of rumours of more battles, increased taxation and Wesman invasion, following the end of the war, confidence was returning to Korina's once-deserted docks and markets, with every trader seemingly determined to wring out every last ounce of profit. Market days were longer, more ships sailed in and out on every tide, day and night, and the inns, eateries and hostels hadn't seen such a boom since the halcyon days of the Korina Trade Alliance. And of course, out in the Baronial lands, the bickering had begun in earnest again and the mercenary trade was seeing a return to profitable days. But it was a trade without The Raven.

The Rookery, on the edge of Korina's central market, groaned at the seams from early dawn when the breakfast trade began, to late evening when the nightly hog roasts were reduced to so much bone and gristle on their spits.

The Unknown Warrior closed the door on the last of the night's drunks and turned to survey the bar, catching his reflection in one of the small pillar-mounted mirrors. The close-shaven head couldn't hide the spreading grey that matched his eyes, but the jaw was as strong as ever and the powerful physique under the white shirt and dark tan breeches was kept in peak condition by religious exercise. Thirty-eight. He didn't feel it but then he didn't fight any more. For good reason.

The watch had just called the first hour of the new day but it would be another two before he walked through his own front door. He hoped Diera was having a better night with young Jonas. The boy had a touch of colic and spent a good deal of the time grumbling.

He smiled as he moved back toward the bar on which Tomas had placed two steaming buckets of soapy water, cloths and a mop. His happiest times of the day were standing over his newborn son's crib at night and waking

next to Diera with the sun washing through their bedroom window. He righted a stool before slapping his hands on the bar. Tomas appeared from beneath it, a bottle of Southern Isles red-grape spirit and two shot glasses in his hands. He poured them each a measure. Completely bald now he had entered his fiftieth year, Tomas' eyes still sparkled beneath his brow and his tall frame was upright and healthy.

"Here's to another good night," he said, handing The Unknown a glass.

"And to the wisdom of hiring those two extra staff. They've taken a weight off."

The two men, friends for well over twenty years and co-owners of The Rookery for a good dozen, chinked glasses and drank. Just the one shot every night. It was the way and had become a token these last four or so years. Neither man would miss it after an evening's work together any more than they would give up breathing. It was, after all, to enjoy these moments of magnificently ordinary life that The Unknown had fought with The Raven for more than a decade. Shame then, that with the wisdom of hindsight, he knew they weren't enough.

The Unknown rubbed his chin, feeling the day's stubble rasp beneath his hand. He looked toward the door to the back room, painted with the Raven symbol and scarce used now.

"Got an itch, boy?" asked Tomas.

"Yes," replied The Unknown. "But not for what you think."

"Really?" Tomas raised quizzical eyebrows. "I never could see it, you know. You settling down and actually running this place with me forever."

"Never thought I'd live, did you?" The Unknown hefted a bucket and cloth.

"I never doubted it. But you're a traveller, Sol. A warrior. It's in your blood."

The Unknown allowed only Tomas and Diera to use his true name, his Protector name, and even now when they did, it always gave him pause. It meant they were worried about something. And the truth was that he had never settled completely. There was still work to be done in Xetesk, to press for more research into freeing those Protectors that desired it. And aside from that, he had friends to see. Convenient excuses when he needed them and while his reasons still drove him, he couldn't deny that he sometimes tired of the endless routine and yearned to ride out with his sword strapped to his back. It made him feel alive.

It worried him too. What if he never wanted to settle? Surely his desire would fade to something more sedentary in the not too distant future. At least he didn't feel the urge to fight in a front line anymore and there was some comfort in that. And there had been offers. Lots of them.

He smiled at Tomas. "Not any more. I'd rather mop than fight. All you risk is your back."

"So what's the itch?"

"Denser's coming. I can feel it. Same as always."

"Oh. When?" A frown creased Tomas' brow.

The Unknown shrugged. "Soon. Very soon."

Rhob, Tomas' son, appeared through the back door that led to the stables. In the last few years, the excitable youth had grown into a strong, level-headed young man. Glinting green eyes shone from a high-boned face atop which sat short-cropped brown hair. His muscular frame was the product of many years' physical labour around horses, saddles and carts and his good nature was a pure reflection of his father's.

"All in and secure?" asked Tomas.

"Yes indeed," said Rhob, marching across to the bar to grab the other bucket and the large rag-headed mop. "Go on, old man, you get off to bed, let the youngsters fix the place up." His smile was broad, his eyes bright in the lamp light.

The Unknown laughed. "It's a long time since I've been called a youngster."

"It was a relative term," said Rhob.

Tomas wiped the bar top and threw the cloth into the wash bucket. "Well, the old man's going to take his son's advice. See you two around midday."

"Good night, Tomas."

"Night, Father."

"All right," said The Unknown. "I'll take the tables, you the floor and fire."

Just as they were into their stride, they were disturbed by an urgent knocking on the front doors. Rhob glanced up from his swabbing of the hearth. The Unknown blew out his cheeks.

"Reckon I know who this is," he said. "See if there's water for coffee will you, Rhob? And raid the cold store for a plate of bread and cheese."

Rhob propped his mop in the corner and disappeared behind the bar. The Unknown shoved the bolts aside and pulled the door inward. Denser all but fell into his arms.

"Gods, Denser, what the hell have you been doing?"

"Flying," he replied, his eyes wild and sunken deep into his skull, his face white and freezing to the touch. "Can you help me to somewhere warm? I'm a little chilly."

"Hmm." The Unknown supported the shivering Denser into the back room, dragged his chair in front of the unlit fire and dumped the mage into the soft upholstery. The room hadn't changed much. Against shuttered win-

dows, the wooden feasting table and chairs lay shrouded beneath a white cloth. That table had seen celebration and tragedy, and it was a source of sadness that his abiding memory was of Sirendor Larn, Hirad's great friend, lying dead upon it, his body hidden by a sheet.

The Raven's chairs were still arrayed in front of the fire but every day The Unknown moved them so he could practise with his trademark double-handed sword in private. If there was one thing The Unknown's experience had taught him, it was that nothing in Balaian life was ever predictable.

Rhob pushed open the door and came in, carrying with one hand a steaming jug, mugs and a plate of food on a tray. In the other was a shovel, full of glowing embers. The Unknown took both from him with a nod of thanks.

"Don't worry, I'll clear up out front," said Rhob.

"Thank you."

"Is he all right?"

"Just a little cold," said The Unknown but he knew there was more. He had seen pain in Denser's eyes and an exhaustion forced upon him by desperation.

He quickly lit the fire, pressed a mug of coffee into the mage's hands and placed the bread and cheese on a table within arm's reach. He sat in his own chair and waited for Denser to speak.

The Xeteskian looked terrible. Beard untrimmed, black hair wild where it protruded from his skull cap, face pale, bloodshot eyes ringed dark and lips tinged blue. His eyes fidgeted over the room, unable to settle, and he constantly fought to frame words but no sound came. He'd pushed himself to the limit and there was no beyond. Mana stamina was finite, even for mages of Denser's extraordinary ability, and a single miscalculation could prove fatal, particularly under ShadowWings.

The Unknown had felt a tie to Denser ever since his time as the mage's Given during his lost days as a Protector. And looking at Denser now, he found he couldn't stay silent.

"I understand something's driven you to get here as fast as you can but killing yourself isn't going to help. Even you can't cast indefinitely."

Denser nodded and lifted his mug to trembling lips, gasping as the hot liquid scalded his throat.

"I was so close. Didn't want to stop outside the City. We'd have lost another day." His numbed lips stole the clarity from his words. He made to say more but instead coughed violently. The Unknown leaned in and grabbed the mug before he slopped coffee on his hands.

"Take your time, Denser. You're here now. I'll find you a bed when you need it. Be calm."

"Can't be calm," he said. "They're after my girl. Erienne's taken her away."

We've got to find her first or they'll kill her. God's, she's not evil. She's just a little girl. I need The Raven."

The Unknown started. Denser's tumble of words had shaken him every which way. But it was the solution that troubled him almost as much as the problem. The Raven had disbanded. All their lives had moved on. Reformation was unthinkable.

"Think hard, Denser, and slow down. I need to hear this from the start."

Night on the southern slopes of the Balan Mountains, half a day's ride from the largely rebuilt town of Blackthorne. The stars patterned the sky, moon casting wan light, keeping back full dark.

Hirad Coldheart tracked down the steep path, his movement all but silent. It was a path he could traverse blindfold if he had to but this time, speed and stealth were of the essence over the treacherous mud and smooth stone. Hunters were coming again and, like those that had come before, had to be stopped. Yet even if these latest fell as had all the others, Hirad knew that wouldn't put a stop to the stupidity.

Not many dared the task but the numbers were increasing, as was the complexity and technicality of their planning, as information on habits and strike points filtered through Balaia, falling on interested ears. It sickened him but he understood what drove these men and women.

Greed. And the respect that would be afforded those first to bring back the ultimate hunter's prize. The head of a dragon. It was why he couldn't leave the Kaan even if he wanted to. Not that they were particularly vulnerable. But there was always the chance. Humans were nothing if not tenacious and ingenious; and this latest group marked another development.

Hirad still found it hard to conceive of minds that so quickly forgot the debt they owed the Kaan dragons; and it had been The Unknown who had put it in context when delivering word that the first attack was being prepared, after overhearing a drunken boast in The Rookery.

"You shouldn't be surprised, Hirad," he'd said. "Everything will ultimately have its price and there are those who will choose never to believe what the Kaan did for Balaia. And there are those who don't care. They only know the value of a commodity. Honour and respect reap no benefit in gold."

The words had ignited Hirad's fury exactly as The Unknown had intended. It was what kept him sharp and one step ahead of the hunters. They had tried magic, poison, fire and frontal assault in their ignorance. Now they used what had been learned by the deaths and by the watchers. And for the first time, Hirad was worried.

A party of six hunters; three warriors, a mage and two engineers, was

moving carefully and slowly into the foothills below the Choul, where the dragons lived. Their route had taken them away from any population that might have alerted Hiram sooner and they brought with them a crafted ballista, designed to fire steel-tipped wooden stakes.

Their plan was simple, as were all the best laid. Unless Hiram was sorely in error, they planned to launch their attack this night, knowing the Kaan flew to hunt and feed under cover of darkness. The ballista would be positioned under a common flight path and it had the power to wound, and perhaps cripple with a lucky shot.

Hiram wasn't prepared to take the risk so descended to meet them before clearing the Kaan to fly. The hunters had made two mistakes in their plan. They hadn't factored Hiram into their thinking and only one of their number was elven. They had placed themselves at the mercy of the night and would soon discover the night had none.

Hiram watched them through a cleft boulder. They were roughly thirty feet below him and a hundred yards distant. The barbarian was able to track their movement against the dull grey of the landscape by the hooded lantern they carried, the creaking of the ballista's wheels and the hoof-falls of the horses that pulled it.

They were nearing a small open space where, Hiram guessed, they planned to set up the ballista. The slope there was slight and a butt of rock provided an ideal anchor point. Hiram knew what had to be done.

Backing up a short distance, he moved right and down into a shallow ditch that ran parallel to the small plateau. With his eyes at plateau level, he crept along its edge and waited, poised, sword sheathed and both hands free.

The mage led the horses up the incline on the near side, a warrior overseeing their progress on the other. The two engineers walked behind the ballista with the final pair of hunters bringing up the rear.

Hiram could hear the horses breathing hard, their hooves echoing dully through mufflers tied around their feet. The wheels of the ballista creaked and scraped as it approached, despite constant oiling by the engineers, and the odd word of warning and encouragement filtered up the line.

Hiram readied himself. Just before it levelled out, the path became a steep ramp for perhaps twenty yards. It would be slippery after the day's showers. As the hunters approached it, they slowed, the mage out in front, hands on both sets of reins, urging the horses up.

"Keep it moving," came a hiss from below, loud in the still night air.

"Gently does it," said another.

The mage appeared over the lip. Hiram surged on to the plateau and dived for his legs, whipping them away. The mage crashed to the ground.

Hirad was on him before he could shout and hammered a fist into his temple. The mage's head cracked against stone and he lay still.

Racing low around the front of the suddenly skittish horses, he pulled his sword from his scabbard. The warrior on their other side had only half turned at the commotion and was in no state to defend himself. Hirad whipped his blade into the man's side and as he went down screaming, the barbarian leant in close.

"Believe me, you are the lucky one," he rasped. Quieting the horses who had started to back up, he ran back to the ballista and slashed one of the harness ropes. The ballista shifted its weight and the horses moved reflexively to balance it, one whinnying nervously. Below him, four faces looked up in mute shock. Blades were drawn.

"I warned the last who came to tell the next that all they would find here is death. You chose not to listen." He lashed at the other harness rope, splitting it at the second strike. The ballista rolled quickly down the ramp, scattering the hunters and gathering pace as it bounced over rock and tuft. A wheel sprang away and the main body ploughed left to plunge over the edge of the path, tumbling to its noisy destruction in a stand of trees some two hundred feet below.

Below the ramp, the hunters picked themselves to their feet, the engineers looking to the warriors for guidance.

"There's nothing they can do for you now," said Hirad. *It is safe, Great Kaan.*

A shadow rose from the hills behind Hirad and swept down the path. It was enormous and the great beat of its wings fired the wind and from its mouth came a roar of fury. The hunters turned and ran but another shape took to the air over the path below them and a third joined it, herding them back toward Hirad.

The trio of dragons blotted out the stars, great bodies hanging in the sky, their united roars bouncing from the mountains around them, the echoes drawing cries of terror from the hunters now turned hunted. They huddled together, the dragons circling them, lazy beats of their wings flattening bush and grass and blowing dust into the air. Each one was over a hundred feet long, its size and power making a mockery of the pitiful band who had come to kill one. They were helpless and they knew it, staring into mouths that could swallow them whole, and imagining flame so hot it would reduce them to ashes.

"Please, Hirad," mumbled one of the engineers, recognising him and fixing him with wide desperate eyes. "We hear you now."

"Too late," said Hirad. "Too late."

Sha-Kaan powered in, his wings beating down and blowing the hunters from their feet to sprawl beneath the gale. His long neck twisted and arched down, striking with the speed of a snake and snatching up a warrior in his mouth. And then he was gone into the sky, his speed incredible, his agility in the air breathtaking. He was impossibly quick for an animal his size and the hunters left on the ground gaped where they lay, too traumatised now even to think about getting back to their feet.

The man in Sha-Kaan's mouth didn't even cry out before his body was torn in two and spat from the huge maw, scattering blood and flesh. The Great Kaan barked his fury into the night, the sound rumbling away like distant thunder. Nos-Kaan soared high, then dived groundward, the men below his gaping mouth screaming as he fell toward them. With a single beat of his wings, he stalled his speed, the down-draught sending the hunters rolling in the dust, their cries lost in the wind. He looked and struck as Sha had done, his victim crushed in an instant and dropped in front of his comrades.

And finally Hyn-Kaan. The Great Kaan's bark brought him low across the ground, a great dark shape in the starlight, his body scant feet from the rock, his head moving down very slightly to scoop his target into his mouth. He flicked his wings and speared into the heavens, a human wail filtering down, cut off, and followed by the sound of a body hitting rock.

Hirad licked suddenly dry lips. They had said they wanted revenge. And they had said they wanted men to know their power. Yet the elf at his feet was still unconscious and had seen nothing. Lucky for him. Hirad loved the Kaan and theirs was a bond that would not be broken by such violent death. Yet once again, he was reminded of the unbridgeable gulf between man and dragon. They were majesty, men their slaves if they so chose.

Hirad brought his attention back to the lone engineer, alive still and surrounded by the torn carcasses of his friends. He had soiled his breeches, liquid puddling around his boots where he crouched in abject terror of the three dragons circling above him. Sha-Kaan landed and grabbed him in one fore-claw, bringing him close to his jaws. The man wailed and gibbered.

Hirad turned to the mage, uncorked his waterskin and dumped its contents over the elven head. He gasped and choked, groaning his pain. Hirad grabbed his collar and hauled him upright, a dagger at his throat.

"Even think of casting and you'll die. You aren't quick enough to beat me, understand?" The mage nodded. "Good. Now watch and learn."

Sha-Kaan drew the hapless engineer even closer. "Why do you hunt us?" he asked, his breath billowing the man's hair. He tried to reply but no words came, only a choked moan. "Answer me, human." The engineer paddled his

legs helplessly in the air, his hands pressing reflexively against the claws he could never hope to shift.

“The chance to live comfortably forever,” he managed. “I didn’t realise. I meant you no harm. I thought . . .”

Sha-Kaan snorted. “*No harm*. You thought us mindless reptiles. And to kill me or one of my Brood was, what does Hiram call it? Yes, ‘sport.’ Different now, is it? Now you know us able to think?”

The engineer nodded before stammering. “I’ll n-never d-do it again. I swear.”

“No indeed you will not,” said Sha-Kaan. “And I do hope your fortunate companion pays careful attention.”

“My fortun—?” The engineer never got to finish his question. Sha-Kaan gripped the top of his skull with a broad foreclaw and crushed it like ripe fruit, the wet crack echoing from the rock surrounding them.

Hiram felt the mage judder and heard him gasp. His legs weakened but the barbarian kept him upright. Sha-Kaan dropped the twitching corpse and turned his eyes their way, the piercing blue shining cold in the darkness.

“Hiram Coldheart, I leave you to complete the message.” The Great Kaan took flight and led his Brood out to the hunt.

Hiram stood holding the mage, letting the terrified elf take in the slaughter around him. He could feel the man quivering. The smell of urine entered his nostrils and Hiram pushed him away.

“You’re living because I chose you to live,” he said, staring into the elf’s sheet-white face. “And you know the word you are to put around. No one who comes here after the Kaan will succeed in anything but their own quick death. Dragons are not sport and they are more powerful than you can possibly imagine. You understand that, don’t you?”

The mage nodded. “Why me?”

“What’s your name?” demanded Hiram.

“Y-Yeren,” he stammered.

“Julatsan aren’t you?”

Another nod.

“That’s why you. Ilkar is short of mages. You’re going to the College and you’ll put out the word from there. Then you’ll stay there and help him in any way he sees fit. If I hear that you have not, nowhere will be safe for you. Not the pits of hell, not the void. Nowhere. I will find you and I’ll be bringing friends.” Hiram jerked a thumb up into the mountains.

“Now get out of my sight. And don’t stop running until Ilkar says you can. Got it?”

A third nod. Hiram turned and strode away, the sound of running feet bringing a grim smile to his lips.