

# RAVENSOUL

ALSO BY JAMES BARCLAY

*Chronicles of The Raven*

DAWNTHIEF

NOONSHADE

NIGHTCHILD

*Legends of The Raven*

ELFSORROW

SHADOWHEART

DEMONSTORM

**RAVENSOUL**  
LEGENDS OF THE RAVEN  
**JAMES BARCLAY**



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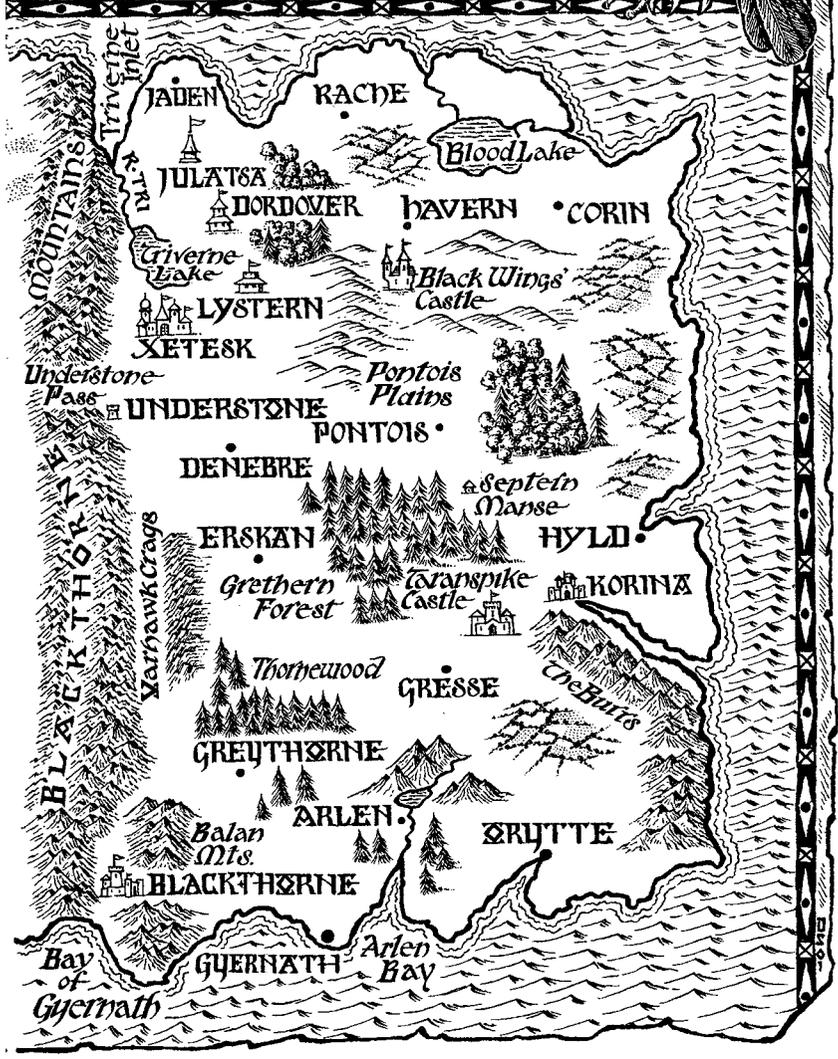
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For Oscar,  
who brings such joy to my life







# CHAPTER 1

**B**lood sprayed across Geskard's chest. He grunted in satisfaction and stepped back out of range. He needn't have bothered. His strike had beaten his mark's defence and bitten deep into the shoulder, carving through leather jerkin and flesh before smashing the collarbone.

The uneven contest was done. Their eyes met. The victor and the unfortunate with too much money on his belt and too little skill with his blade. This city was no place for such imbalances. Never had been.

"You should have given me your purse when I asked you," said Geskard. He smiled, recognising the dismay at approaching death that contoured the man's face. "But I am much obliged you chose to fight."

The man dropped to his knees, his sword falling from his right hand, which then clutched at the wound in his left shoulder. Nothing he could do would staunch the blood. His eyes dimmed and regret was his lingering, final emotion. He slumped forward, face in the dirt.

Geskard took a quick look about him. Again he blessed the chaotic sprawl of streets behind the north edge of Xetes's central marketplace. A man of his profession had surely designed it. In the warm light of early evening, tenements threw shadows across the alleyway. Above him, tatty washing hung on rotting lines. The sounds of the market day winding down rolled gently over him. If anyone had heard the brief exchange, they preferred not to make themselves known.

"Very sensible," said Geskard.

He cleared his throat then cleaned and sheathed his sword, humming tunelessly. He knelt down by the body of the erstwhile merchant who had been just too eager to make one more deal in the day.

"This wasn't the sort of killing you had in mind, was it, my friend?" said Geskard.

One big hand had reached for the man's belt and bound purse, the other for a knife to cut it clear when Geskard shivered and paused. He looked round. A shadow had moved across the light behind him, making a shape like a man tattered by wind. He had seen it quite clearly, though just for a heartbeat.

No one there. He shrugged and returned his attention to his prize. The merchant moved. A tiny twitch but there nonetheless. Geskard started then chuckled.

"Fight in you yet, is there? I'm impressed."

Geskard felt for a pulse at the neck. Nothing. He moved his fingers and

pushed harder. Still nothing. It didn't matter. The man wasn't about to offer any resistance. Geskard looked about him once more. He remained alone. He smiled to himself, shook his head, and reached a third time for the purse.

The merchant abruptly pushed himself up on his hands, coughed, and spat blood onto the hard-packed ground. Geskard scrambled backwards, his heart thumping. He dropped his knife and put his hand to his sword hilt.

"Why aren't you dead?" he asked, backing off a pace.

The man looked at him as if for the first time. Blank dead eyes met Geskard's. The merchant's body rose to stand, a little unsteadily at first. Geskard watched slack-jawed while the man looked himself over, scraped ineffectually at the blood soaking his clothes, and rolled his good shoulder with a cracking sound.

"Hmm. It'll do for now," said the merchant, light entering his eyes. "I can't wait any longer anyway."

"For what?" asked Geskard, not knowing why he had uttered a sound.

"There are people I need to see," said the man.

Geskard was not a man normally prey to fear, but when those dead eyes fixed on his and the sagging mouth tugged into a smile, something let go inside. He could feel his legs shaking, his crotch warm.

"Oh. Dodgy bladder?" said the merchant. "Now then."

Geskard wanted to run. To scream his terror. But he still couldn't place why he was so afraid. The man was a head shorter than him and half as powerful. He posed no threat. And yet, and yet. Geskard drew his sword, watching the merchant stoop to recover his own, the wound in his left shoulder gaping hideously, exposing raw flesh, sinew and bone. Fresh blood ran over his jerkin.

"There is no honour in murder, so we will make this fight again," said the man. "But this time you will find out something new. That you aren't quick enough to beat me."

"You're dead," said Geskard. "I killed you."

He backed away another pace and swallowed on a dry throat. He'd have fled but he'd never run from a fight in his life. His reputation was based on it. So he brought his blade to guard.

"You murdered a man for a few coins, that's true. And now you face me."

"What?" Geskard couldn't suppress the laugh. "I don't have time for this."

He already knew the man's weaknesses and they were many. He crossed the space between them, a two-handed grip on his long sword, and wound up a strike to sever the left arm completely at the shoulder. But the merchant didn't try to defend like before. He merely swayed to one side and had jabbed his sword into Geskard's midriff even before Geskard's blade hit the ground.

Geskard gasped in pain and jerked back to give himself some space. He clutched at his belly. The cut was not deep but it should have been. In front of him, the merchant smiled but the eyes remained so bleak.

“Told you,” said the merchant.

“Don’t dare to toy with me, boy,” said Geskard.

“Hmm,” said the merchant, moving in. He switched his sword between his hands three times. “I’m used to greater reach in my right arm.”

“Grea—” Geskard swallowed. “What is this? A game?”

“No game,” said the merchant.

The sword hilt settled in the man’s left hand. Geskard wasn’t ready. The blade came across him, carving into his right shoulder and thudding into his neck. The pain was exquisite but brief. Warmth, then cold. Geskard felt himself falling.

Auum stared up into the rainforest canopy and let his gaze travel over the dripping foliage. The sun that had emerged from the latest bank of cloud would bless the treetops until the rains returned. A sniff of the air told him that time was already very close.

Everywhere, spears of luminescence bore down through the shadow, sparkling on raindrops and forming pools of bright light that warmed the forest floor. It was a time to drink in the glory of Yniss, God of all creation, Father of the rain forest and all that drew breath there, grew there and died there.

Yet Auum did not kneel to pray. Instead he listened to the sounds of bird, beast, and insect. All muted, fearful. His gaze came to rest on the temple of Varundeneth, the last home of Shorth, God of the dead. The glorious structure sat in a clearing four days travel from the nearest settlement. Deeper inside the rain forest than any other. Hidden so completely from the unwanted eye that only those called, or those blessed like Auum, could ever find it.

A great hand, carved from a single block of marble, grasped at the sky. It sat atop the towering green dome of the temple and was protected by the statues of seated panthers set at each corner of the compass. Fashioned from obsidian, these sentinels had watched for enemies over the long centuries. No storm could etch them, no rain could wash the glint from their eyes. Thirty feet and more they rose, half the height and girth of the Hand of Shorth.

At the base of the dome, the stone doors were open on their wheeled rails and stood against the walls of the temple. Inside, darkness was broken by the flicker of lantern and brazier light. And from within, only silence. This was the time of Shorth, when he rose to bless the living and give succour to the dead; and when Communion between the living and the dead was eased and the pain of loss was lessened.

“So where is everyone? Where is the lament?”

Auum turned. Rebraal, leader of the Al-Arynaar, the army of Yniss, stood nearby with five of his people. Auum’s TaiGethen cell were at his shoulders, both elves quiet and contemplative. Their faces were camouflaged with deep green and black paint.

Rebraal was showing the effects of his efforts to rebuild his people after the wars on Balaia and the scourge of the Elfsorrow that had claimed so many of the elven nation. Tall, powerful, and quick, he was dressed, like the TaiGethen, in greens and browns. About his shoulders, he wore a cloak in the deep blue of the Al-Arynaar calling.

Auum sympathised with every line on Rebraal’s once youthful face, the depth of the dark under his eyes and the vague tremble that occasionally afflicted his voice these days. Auum suffered the same way.

“If there is no call, then no one will come,” he said.

Rebraal stiffened. “How can that be? Choice is not a word entertained by Shorth.”

“Nonetheless, the temple is empty of the summoned. And the wanderers too have found no path here. Call it what you will, the effect remains the same.”

“But what does it mean?”

Auum stared around him again. The rain forest and all its sounds and smells held a haunting quality, almost mysterious. He couldn’t tell how far the strangeness extended into the canopy. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck. He felt uneasy. Not an emotion he had ever experienced before in this place that he knew so well.

“Shorth is silent. The temple carries no lament.” He shook his head. “Elven eyes are turned from the triumph of death. And like Tual’s children, they are afraid. It should never be this way.”

“I don’t understand,” said Rebraal.

A cry torn from the heart of a terrified elf echoed from within the temple. Auum was running before the echo had died.

“Come with me and you will,” he called over his shoulder. “Tai, Al-Arynaar, guard the entrance. No one enters until we return.”

Auum ran hard. The cry had turned into a wail and another voice had joined it, clogged and weeping, pleading. Auum’s heart was pounding. The sounds from within were his darkest fears given voice. Rebraal fell into step behind him. Together they entered the cool of Varundeneth.

A short entrance hall led directly into the centre of the temple, beneath the dome. The vaulted ceiling sat high above them, the light from its multiple coloured windows casting gentle shapes and shadows on the stone-

flagged floor. The walls were covered in murals of great deeds and heroism and of the path from life to death. The welcoming embrace of Shorth was depicted as glowing tendrils outstretched from the darkness of the unknown.

A round grey marble altar sat under the centre of the dome. It was placed on a circular marble platform with white marble rails and posts running around its edge. Two steps led up to a gap in the rail. Auum stopped short of the altar. A figure was slumped face down across it, arms thrown forward, hanging limp over the near edge, covering part of the carving of clasped hands that ran its circumference. The figure was in the grey robes and green sash of the temple priests. There was a slight tremble in her hands. Another priest was trying to swing her legs onto the altar, his grunts of exertion punctuated by sobs.

There was a smell in the air. A scorched smell. Magical, not mineral or wood. Auum held out a hand to stop Rebraal approaching further.

“Ryish,” said Auum quietly. “What are you doing?”

The High Priest of Shorth raised his face to the TaiGethen leader. The rims of his eyes were bright red, bloodshot in the whites. His pupils were tiny despite the gloom.

“What I have seen,” he whispered. “She is dead but she is returning. The mana fires burn our resting place.”

“You may not place the living on the altar of Shorth,” said Auum. “You must remove her.”

Ryish showed no sign that he had either heard or understood. He was a very tall elf, looming over both Rebraal and Auum from his elevated position on the dais. His large, oval face was partly turned away from them now but Auum could not fail to see the confusion written there.

“She will attempt travel again. I must prepare.”

“Ryish.” Auum’s tone was sharp, cutting through the priest’s rambling and startling him. “She will travel nowhere. She is not dead. Remove her from the altar or we will be forced to do it for you.”

Ryish stared at him once again. “Do not let her movement fool you.”

“You are our friend,” said Rebraal. “Trust us. Trust Shorth who will not turn away from you. You are the High Priest of Shorth. What you are doing cannot be allowed.”

“Shorth is already hidden from us,” whispered Ryish. “Before you denounce me, behold my torment.”

The priest stooped, grabbed the woman’s legs, and swung them onto the altar. Before Auum could move to stop the sacrilege, the smell of burning magic flooded the temple. Deep green flames engulfed the altar. The two warrior elves backed away, leaving Ryish bathed in the fire, chanting prayers

and exhorting Shorth to hear him. His skin was beginning to blacken where the burning mana breached his natural defences. His robes were ablaze. Yet he did not flinch nor cry his pain. Ryish's agony ran deeper than fire.

"Hear me, Shorth. Find a path for your daughter. Let her rest; do not—"

The priestess sat bolt upright. Green flame writhed and twisted about her body. Her clothing ignited yet her skin was untouched. Pale and delicate as the morning to which she had awoken. Her eyes opened slowly, revealing orbs black as night, destroyed by mana fire. She turned to face Ryish. Her mouth opened and she uttered a wail that shattered glass in the roof of the dome and shivered through Auum's body like a plunge into an icy pool.

"O Shorth, find a path for your servant. Ease her passing to your embrace."

Ryish's cries boomed into the temple above the priestess's wail. The stench of mana fire, burning cloth, and scorched flesh grew stronger. Smoke billowed up around the beams supporting the dome. The heat compressed the chests of the elves and brought sweat to their brows.

The priestess fell back, body contorting, hands reaching towards the sky. The flames deepened in colour, gained intensity, and then were gone, leaving nothing but a flare in Auum's eyes when he blinked. Still, the priestess trembled. Her mouth closed, opened once more, and a single word was whispered.

Ryish slumped to the floor. Auum and Rebraal ran to his side, Rebraal dragging him into his arms, trying to comfort him.

"Rest, my priest," said the Al-Arynaar. "We will tend to you."

"Nyluun!" shouted Auum. "Healer mage inside now. No one else."

Ryish's burns were extensive but he would live. Though when he turned his eyes to Auum, the TaiGethen wondered if living would be a mercy.

"Now you see," Ryish said, croaking through a cracked throat. "We are lost."

"I don't know what I saw," said Auum.

"There is no path for the dead to travel," said Ryish. "Nowhere for the soul to rest. Shorth deserts us."

Auum glanced at the priestess, whose body was quivering on the altar.

"She is . . . ?"

Ryish was nodding. He grabbed Auum's arm. His fingers, red raw and black from the flames, gripped hard, smearing the TaiGethen's ritual camouflage.

"She cannot walk the rain forest yet she cannot rest with Shorth. Her doom is the doom of any who now die. Neither dead nor alive. No end to pain. Only fear."

Ryish broke down and Rebraal rocked him in his arms as if he were a child in distress.

"Her soul will find rest."

“It will not,” sobbed Ryish. “It cannot stay within her body and it cannot find a path to the embrace of Shorth. It will be cast adrift. Lost for eternity, never to know the Communion with the living, never to feel the strength of the dead.”

“That cannot be,” said Auum. “We cannot exist if we fear to die. There must still be a path to the dead.”

All three were silent for a while. Ryish composed himself and sat up again, nodding his gratitude, wincing his physical pain.

“And what of the dead?” asked Rebraal.

Ryish shook his head. “My mind is a desert, my soul a dry ocean bed, my will a forest blackened and destroyed. I cannot feel them. I cannot speak with them. The heart of Calaius is rotting away.”

Rebraal wanted to ask more but Auum stopped him.

“Ryish, what did she say? What was the word she uttered?”

Ryish took a deep breath and swallowed before he spoke. The word was jagged glass dragged through flesh.

“Garonin.”

Auum and Rebraal shared a glance. Garonin. A word that denied hope.

“I have not saved my people from the Arakhe merely to lose them to this evil,” said Auum. “We must call a Harkening.”

“There is no salvation if they have truly seen our hiding places,” said Ryish. “All we can prepare for is extinction.”

“If there is a way, I will find it. If there is not, then we must seek a new place for our people. A new home.” Auum turned to Rebraal. “Summon the ClawBound.”