

DEMONSTORM

ALSO BY JAMES BARCLAY

Chronicles of The Raven

DAWNTHIEF

NOONSHADE

NIGHTCHILD

Legends of The Raven

ELFSORROW

SHADOWHEART

DEMONSTORM

DEMONSTORM
LEGENDS OF THE RAVEN
JAMES BARCLAY



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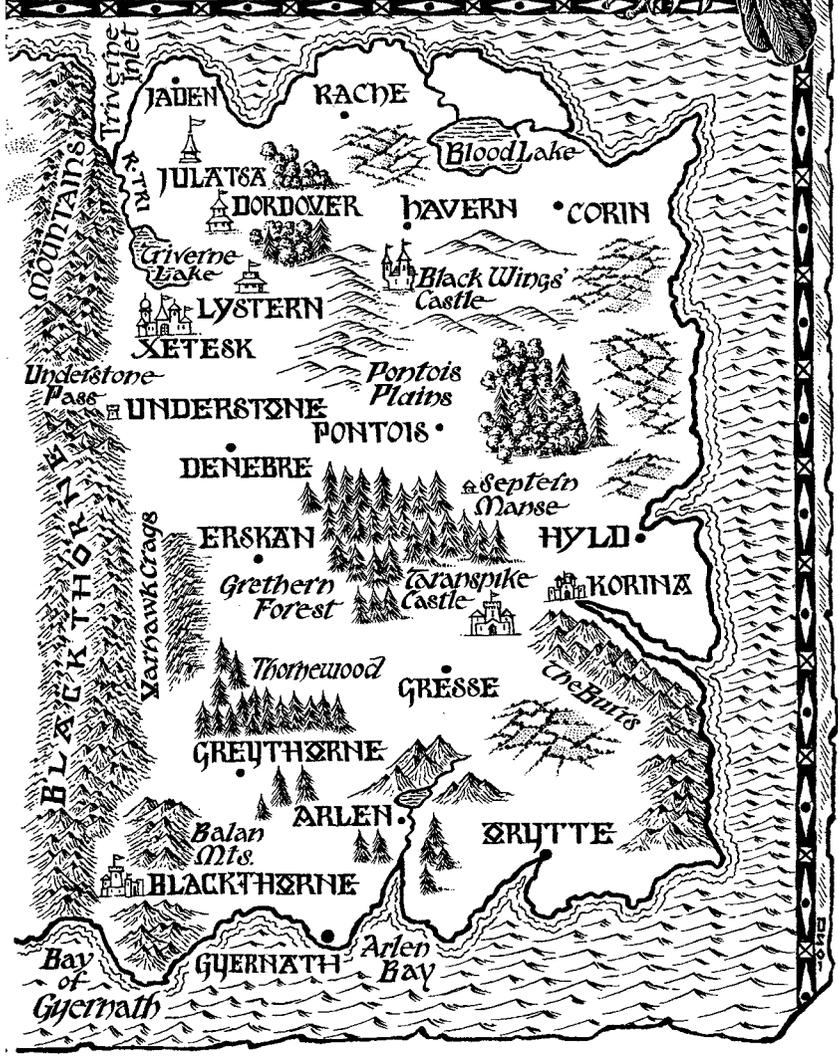
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For Simon Spanton, a great friend and great editor,
and without whom there would have been no Raven.





CAST LIST

THE RAVEN

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

THE COLLEGES

Dystran LORD OF THE MOUNT, XETESK
Sharyr DIMENSIONAL MAGE, XETESK
Suarav CAPTAIN, XETESKIAN COLLEGE GUARD
Chandyr COMMANDER, XETESKIAN ARMIES
Vuldarog TOWER LORD, DORDOVER
Heryst LORD ELDER MAGE, LYSTERN
Pheone HIGH MAGE DESIGNATE, JULATSA

THE ELVES

Cleress GUILD OF DRECH
Rebraal LEADER OF THE AL-ARYNAAR
Auum LEADER OF THE TAIGETHEN
Evunn TAI CELL OF AUUM
Duele TAI CELL OF AUUM
Dila'beth ELVEN MAGE

BALAIANS, WESMEN, DRAGONS, AND DEMONS

Blackthorne A BARON
Ark AN EX-PROTECTOR
Diera WIFE OF THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR
Tessaya LORD OF THE PALEON TRIBES
Riasu LORD KEEPER OF UNDERSTONE PASS
Sba-Kaan GREAT KAAAN
Yasal-Naik GREAT NAIK
Ferouc MASTER STRAIN
Drenoul MASTER STRAIN

CHAPTER 1

“Again!” Tessaya swept his arm down. “Again!”

The Wesmen charged the walls of Xetesk once more, tribal banners snapping in the breeze, voices mingling to a roar. The ladders drove into position, his warriors stormed up their rough rungs. Below them, archers tried to keep the defenders back from the wall. A difficult task over such a distance.

In the deep night shadows of Xetesk’s walls, tribesmen pivoted more ladders. Along a four-hundred-yard stretch of wall they arced up. The best of them just rough cut and bound, the worst little more than shaved trunks of the tallest trees they could find. In earlier attacks, some had not been tall enough. He saw the ladders catching the light of the torches on the battlements before they thudded into place, warriors already swarming up them two abreast.

This time he had his enemy. This time, the Wesmen would break through the defences. He could feel it. In the daylight, many had died. Spells and arrows had ripped into wood and flesh. Burning warriors had tumbled to the ground screaming. Ladders, charred or frozen, had cracked and collapsed in heartbeats.

Yet the tribes had not faltered. Urged on by their lords who could see victory so close they had continued to press. And while hundreds scoured the land for the wood to build more ladders, hundreds more died at the walls doing exactly what had to be done. They exhausted the spell casters.

Tessaya saw the outlines of men running along the battlements to prepare their defence. Below them, holding shields above their heads, came his warriors. It was the fourth attack of the day. The night was just passing its zenith, and the spells no longer deluged them.

In desultory fashion, the odd casting blew away the top of a ladder and the men that scaled it. But that was all. Tessaya had foreseen this moment and had kept back his greatest force. Xetesk no longer had the magical power to stop them. Now it came down to who was the stronger with sword, axe and spear. And that was a battle he knew the Wesmen would win.

He watched for a moment longer. Arrows still peppered the warriors streaming up the ladders. His people still fell in their dozens. He breathed the night air deeply. The smells of ash and fear mingled with the freshness of grass in the breeze. He heard the voices of the Wesmen, their tribal songs echoing from the walls of Xetesk. They were the anthems of strength and victory, swelling in volume with every heartbeat.

He turned to Lord Riasu. The man's small eyes sparkled in the darkness and his heavy-set features had reddened with excitement.

"You can feel it too."

"I can, Lord Tessaya," said Riasu. "We are so close."

"And what is your desire now?"

Riasu nodded in the direction of the walls. More and more Wesmen were higher and higher up the ladders. Arrows alone were not enough and the spells had all but stopped falling. One deep blue flash to their left served as a reminder of the diminished threat.

"My men are on those ladders," he said. "I would join them. Lead them onto the walls."

Tessaya smiled and slapped Riasu hard on the back. "It is a wish I share."

He looked quickly about him. Six other tribal lords stood with them, their warriors, a thousand and more, ready to charge forward. Their shouts of encouragement to those already engaged sounded across the open ground. Beyond them, the fires of the camp burned and the Paleon guard stood watch over the Shamen while they prayed for guidance and strength from the Spirits. Prayers that had surely been answered.

The group of lords was close to him. All wanted just one thing but waited for Tessaya's word. Ten tribes and their lords had been unleashed already. The glory of being the first to make the walls outweighing the risk of death. Three of those lords had joined the Spirits as heroes. Four more would join them shortly. The remaining three were at the walls now.

"It is time," said Tessaya. He unhitched his axe and held it in one hand. "My Lords, let us deal the greatest blow."

He raised his axe high above his head, roared a Paleon war cry and led the charge to the walls. Behind him, the lords invoked their tribal Spirits and came after him, a thousand warriors with them, voices raised to a deafening crescendo.

Tessaya ran. His braided silver-grey hair bounced on his shoulders; his arms and legs pumped hard, the breeze was on his face. He couldn't remember ever feeling more alive. Not even leading the Wesmen out of the shadow of Understone Pass matched this. Then, they had so much still to accomplish and had failed. Now, their goal was within his grasp.

His forgotten youth surged back into his middle-aged veins. His heart thumped life through his body. His mind was clear, his eyes sharp. The Spirits were with him and within him. Nothing could stop him. He laughed aloud and upped his pace.

The darkness deepened in the lee of Xetesk's walls. Seventy feet high, with a slight outward slope. Imposing, menacing and never before breached.

Here, the noise of the fight intensified. Tessaya could hear the thud of bow strings, the creaking of the wood against its bindings and the calls of the Wesmen above him, silhouetted against the flare of torches.

As they had been ordered, the Wesmen, barring those bracing and those about to climb, did not cluster around the ladder bases. They were scattered across the field, waiting the shout to approach. No dense targets for the mages, no easy masses for the archers.

Tessaya ran past the waiting warriors, his name being taken up and spreading across the field quicker than a scrub fire. And by the time he had run through the waiting warriors and had his path cleared to the base of the ladder, all he could hear was the chanting of his name.

He thumped onto the bottom rung, exhorting those around and above him to push harder. Riasu was right behind him, yelling in a tribal dialect Tessaya could barely understand. Not that he had to. The message was clear enough.

Tessaya climbed fast, feeling the timber give beneath his feet and the ladder shake and bow. But the bindings were firm and would hold. Left and right, Wesmen hurried up their ladders. Energy was pouring into the assault now Tessaya had joined. Those in the fight knew they would not fail.

“Keep close to the rungs,” ordered Tessaya. “Don’t give them a target.”

A shame not all of his men heeded that advice. Arrows were still streaming by. One thudded home into the exposed neck of a warrior who risked looking up to see how far he had to go. Screaming, he plunged past Tessaya and bounced dead on the ground below.

“Keep moving!” he shouted.

There was a man right above him. Tessaya unashamedly used him as a shield. He noted how far he had climbed by the closeness of the wall behind the ladder. Not far now.

Another spell flashed across the night sky. To his left, ice howled into flesh and wood, expanding into cracks and splitting bindings and rungs. The ladder shattered, spilling survivors onto the long drop to death. Tessaya cursed. But the roar was intensifying above him and he heard the first glorious sounds of metal on metal, his warriors finally face to face with the Xetesian defenders. A smile cracked across his face.

“Still with me, Riasu?” he called.

“I am, my Lord,” came the slightly breathless reply. “I can smell their fear.”

“Then let’s not delay you seeing it in their eyes,” said Tessaya. “Push!”

Now Tessaya looked up. He was only ten or so feet from the battlements. The arrows had stopped now. His men were climbing faster and he along

with them, desperate to reach the walls before the small bridgehead was closed. One body fell to his right. Sparks flew as weapons collided and the songs of the Wesmen grew still louder, instilling in them all the desire to fight harder. For the tribes, for themselves, and for all those who had died to bring them to this place.

Those above him were still moving too slowly for his liking. Holding his axe outside the right-hand edge of the ladder, he shifted as far as he dared to that side and began to shout warriors from his path.

“Left, go left. Let me through. Go, go!”

He could sense Riasu right in his tracks. Using his left hand to steady himself, Tessaya surged up the rungs, using the ladder’s angle against the wall to give him momentum. The breach was still holding. His men were breasting the walls scant feet from him. He could smell the stone, cold and ancient.

The sounds of the fighting came slightly muted to him. The individual battles. Grunts of exertion, cries of pain and shock. The thud and clash of weapon on leather and chain. The squeal of blades thrust together. The drop of bodies on stone and the scrabbling of feet desperate for purchase and balance.

Right at the head of the ladder, the reason for the slow progress above became clear. One warrior clung fast to the top rung. He had been sick over his hands and his weapon was still sheathed. Tessaya paused by him, swallowing his disgust at the cowardice when he saw the warrior’s age.

“Stand with me, boy,” he said. “Live or die you will know glory.”

The boy gave him a terrified look but nodded minutely.

“Good lad.”

Tessaya grabbed his collar and hauled him up the final step. In the next pace, they were on the walls and surrounding them was bedlam. Even Tessaya found the surge in volume of noise and the closeness of the action hard to take in. His charge wobbled at the knees. Urine poured down the boy’s leggings and he vomited again. But in the midst of it all, he drew his blade, a short stabbing sword.

In the light cast by torches and braziers, the small breach was under concerted attack. Three other breaches could be seen left and right. Xetesians were running in from the right and were packed left but coming under pressure from Wesmen on both sides. The parapet was no more than five feet wide, was unfenced and had never been built to defend in this fashion. Tessaya saw the game at once.

“Push out!” he yelled and jumped from the wall onto the bodies of the dead and into the backs of the living, shoving hard.

The Wesmen in Tessaya's way were forced off balance, able only to try and brace themselves against their enemies. In front of them, the reflex backward pace was fatal. With nowhere to go, the three Xeteskiens nearest the edge stepped out into nowhere, grabbed at those nearest and at least half a dozen fell into the city far below. One of his warriors went with them. Two others saved themselves.

"Keep the breach open," he ordered. "Fight, my tribes, fight. Hold right, push left. Let's isolate those bastards. Someone get these bodies over the edges."

They obeyed. Tessaya was with them and they would do anything he asked of them. He looked back to see where the boy was and saw him fighting and killing; terror replaced by the desire to live. He would not.

Riasu breasted the battlement and howled a battle cry, circling his axe above his head.

"Riasu, pass the message back down the ladders. I want clear wall between the two nearest gatehouses. Do it!"

Without waiting, Tessaya plunged into the fight. His axe carved down between two of his warriors, splitting the skull of an enemy. Blood fountained into the torchlit night. The first Xeteskian blood he had spilt in years. He drew back his axe to move into the space his warriors left him.

Before he focused on his next victim, he stared out over the city of Xetesk. The towers of the college stood stark against the sky, light blazing from every window and wall.

"I am coming," he growled. "I will cast you down."

"Get back to the walls!" ordered Dystran, Lord of the Mount of Xetesk. "Wesmen are standing on them. I look at my senior commander and do I really have to wonder why?"

Dystran had intercepted Commander Chandyr in the dome of the college tower complex having seen his most decorated soldier thundering through the streets on his horse. The otherwise empty dome echoed to raised voices. Chandyr's battle-scarred face was pale and angry. Dystran knew exactly how he felt.

"No, my Lord," said Chandyr. "You have withdrawn too many mages to the college. Give them back."

"I will not exhaust every mage I have."

"Then do not expect me to hold the walls much longer."

"Ever the poor soldier blames lack of resource and support."

Chandyr's eyes narrowed. "Three thousand men against a few hundred, and many of those only just returned exhausted by forced march from Julatsa. What would you have me do, Lord Dystran?"

“I would have you do your job.”

“I am doing it,” said Chandyr quietly. “I am before you trying to prevent a massacre.”

“Then how is it Wesmen have scaled my walls?”

Chandyr snapped. Dystran saw the shadow cross his eyes and felt the sharp prod of the commander’s gauntleted finger in his ribs.

“Xetesk’s walls, not yours,” he said, menace in his tone. “And they are there because the defence to keep them away was taken from me by you at dusk. You have a responsibility to this city which you are shirking. What use is the college if the city is burning around it, eh?”

Dystran did not speak for a moment, allowing Chandyr to lower his hand.

“The college is the city,” he said. “And as ruler of the college, all the walls are mine. I shirk nothing, Chandyr. Indeed I should be applauded for taking mages from the slaughter over which you are presiding. They at least will be able to strike back.”

“Another of your indiscriminate dimensional spells, Dystran?” Chandyr scoffed. “You will kill more innocents than enemies.”

“I will stop the Wesmen,” said Dystran, feeling his patience expire. “And you, Commander Chandyr, will remember to whom you are speaking and, if you take my advice, will choose your next words very, very carefully.”

A half smile flickered across Chandyr’s mouth. It didn’t touch his eyes. He nodded and took a pace forward, coming so close Dystran could barely focus on him.

“Never accuse me of being a poor soldier again.”

“Men are judged by their actions,” replied Dystran mildly, though his heart was beating faster.

“You only get one warning,” said Chandyr.

The commander spun on his heel and strode from the dome, shouting for his horse. Dystran watched him go, letting his anger build. He had no wish to suppress it and enjoyed the heat it generated in his mind and body.

Chandyr did not understand, he reflected, hurrying out of the dome toward the base of his tower. His guards saluted him on his approach. Something else Chandyr had failed to do. A typical soldier. Blind to the bigger picture. Fit only to accomplish the task set before him and sometimes not even that.

“I want Sharyr in my reception chamber right now,” he ordered. “He’ll be in my hub rooms.”

“Yes, my Lord,” said both men.

Dystran began to climb his stairs. He replayed Chandyr’s words, the tiny

claws of doubt scratching at his self-confidence. That they had underestimated the Wesmen was not in question. This had been no disordered attack. There were brains and tactics behind it along with brimming determination and a willingness for self-sacrifice that had been breathtaking. Tessaya was out there somewhere.

What taxed Dystran most was not that the Wesmen lord had managed to marshal his warriors into very effective decoy and draw units. The issue here was that he plainly knew Xetesk was poorly defended by mage and soldier and had deliberately kept up his attack waves to force stamina exhaustion. Where had he got his intelligence?

Tessaya's aim had been obvious earlier in the day. It was why Dystran had withdrawn a core of mages to join the dimensional team and prepare for the next casting window. A window that had better be open.

Chandyr had been unable to hold the Wesmen back, though. He was surprised and disappointed by that. Xeteskian soldiers and archers should have been able to deal with a few ladders. How was it then that Wesmen had done that which no one should have been able to do?

Perhaps he should have probed further.

By the time he reached his reception chamber on the third landing, he could hear running footsteps behind him. He threw open the balcony shutters of the dimly lit room to reveal an uncomfortable picture of the threat to his city. He augmented his sight with a quick casting to sharpen the fine detail.

Lights blazed in a wide ring around an area over two hundred yards in length. It was bustling with Wesmen but not thronged. They were attacking left and right toward the nearest turrets and had built a shield wall, fresh-cut wood for the most part, toward the city. Archers were having some success but it was not affecting the advance along the battlements.

Chandyr had defended the turrets heavily. The Wesmen were suffering significant casualties but without a solitary spell to force them back to their ladders their weight of numbers would ultimately tell. How soon was hard to say. Before dawn in all probability.

"Dammit," he breathed. "Where did I go wrong?"

"My Lord?" queried a voice behind him.

"Sharyr," said Dystran, not turning to face his new head of dimensional magics. Barely more than a student but the best he had left. "Come here. Tell me what you see."

He heard a nervous shuffle then slightly laboured breathing mixing with snatches of noise from the walls. Dystran looked across to Sharyr and watched the balding young man scanning the night, anxious to pick up whatever he was supposed to see. He shifted uncomfortably and gave a half shrug.

“Wesmen on the walls?” he ventured, voice tremulous.

“Excellent,” said Dystran. “Does that scare you?”

“Yes, my Lord,” said Sharyr. “I have family in the city.”

“Then they are fortunate because you will personally be keeping them safe, won’t you?”

“Me? I—”

Dystran turned to face his nervous student.

“The distance between the walls of the city and those of this college is slight for a rampaging Wesmen army. Less than a mile, wouldn’t you say?”

“My Lord.”

“This is not a big city,” said Dystran. “When do you think the Wesmen will take either of those turrets?”

Sharyr stared at him blankly.

“You see,” continued Dystran. “When they do, they will have access to our streets and more importantly, the south gatehouse. And there are thousands of them just itching to get in.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“The point is that this undefined but quite possibly short length of time is how long you have to be ready to cast the spell of your choosing.”

“I—” Sharyr backed up a pace into the room.

Dystran turned to follow him. “You do understand that none of those men will reach the college, don’t you? If Chandyr can’t stop them, you will. Won’t you?”

“The—the alignment isn’t going to be complete until this time tomorrow night,” managed Sharyr.

“Oh dear,” said Dystran, putting a hand to his mouth. “Whatever will you do?”

“Well, I don’t know, my Lord,” replied Sharyr, missing Dystran’s sarcasm completely.

Dystran bore down on Sharyr, forcing the younger man to back away across the room.

“Then let me enlighten you.” His voice barely above a whisper carried all the menace of long practice. “You will be ready to cast because you and I both know that the alignment can be forced for the purposes of the casting. I have written at great length on the subject. The spell will be difficult to control and you will instruct your charges how to handle the forces and inform them of the personal consequences of failure. Backfire from a dimensional casting is very, very messy.”

Sharyr fetched up against the mantle of the fire. Fortunately for him, there was no heat from the embers.

“The risks to our city . . .” he began.

Dystran leant in further. “The Wesmen will take this college if they are not stopped. That is the risk to our city. You will stop them or you will die in the attempt. Any of your team who feel they are not up to the task can report to me to discuss it.”

“I—”

“Do not fail, Sharyr.” Dystran straightened and stepped back a pace, seeing the terror in the student’s expression, the sweat beading on his brow and the darting of his eyes. He chose to smile. “You have heard the shout, ‘Death or glory’? Bet you thought it only applied to soldiers, didn’t you? Think again, get down to the catacombs and be ready. When the time comes, I will call you personally to the walls of the city. Go.”

Sharyr had the presence of mind at least to bow his head and mutter, “My Lord.”

But the door to the reception chamber opened before he reached it and an old man with tears on his face stood in the brazier light from the stairway. It was Brannon, Ranyl’s manservant of decades.

“Please, my Lord,” he said. “You must come quickly.”

Dystran felt his world dropping around him and fear shiver through his body.

“Oh no,” he breathed, already starting to run. “Not now. Not now.”