

NOONSHADE

ALSO BY JAMES BARCLAY

Chronicles of The Raven

DAWNTHIEF

NIGHTCHILD

NOONSHADE

CHRONICLES OF THE RAVEN

JAMES BARCLAY



an imprint of **Prometheus Books**
Amherst, NY

Published 2009 by Pyr®, an imprint of Prometheus Books

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Inquiries should be addressed to
Pyr
59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228-2119
VOICE: 716-691-0133, ext. 210
FAX: 716-691-0137
WWW.PYRSE.COM

13 12 11 10 09 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Barclay, James, 1965-.

Noonshade / by James Barclay.

p. cm. — (Chronicles of the Raven ; 2)

First published: London : Gollancz, an imprint of Orion Publishing Group, 2000.

ISBN 978-1-59102-782-9 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Title.

PR6102.A76N66 2009

823'.92—dc22

2009022623

Printed in the United States on acid-free paper

FOR MY PARENTS,
KEITH AND THEA BARCLAY.
ALWAYS THERE, ALWAYS WONDERFUL.





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

The intensity of vibration grew in his head. Within the dark of the Choul, deep beneath the jungles of Teras, those of the Brood-at-rest shifted in sudden nervousness, most of them unaware of what they were feeling.

Like an itch he couldn't rub, the humming picked at his mind and worried him deep in the core of his being. He opened a huge blue eye, pupil widening to admit the dim light from the entrance high above, picking out the hollowed damp rock, the lianas creeping down and the lichen which covered every surface. It showed him the fluttering of a wing, the shaking of a neck and the shifting of clawed feet as the Brood moved to premature wakefulness. He felt the quickening of pulses, the rumble of lungs drawing in air and the creaking of jaws stretched wide.

A great shiver coursed his body and Sha-Kaan's heart leapt. The vibration, a siren for disaster, clamoured in his skull. He came to his feet, great wings unfurling for flight, a cry forming in his mouth. He called to the Brood and led them from the Choul, charging toward the light, drawn to the great boiling in the sky where a new battle was just beginning.

CHAPTER 1

It would be a glorious victory. Lord Senedai of the Heystron Tribes stood on a raised platform watching the smoke billowing over Julatsa as building after building was put to flame. The acrid smell of the smoke was beautiful in his nostrils and through the fog it created, he could see the white and black fire his Shamen wielded through linkage with the Wytch Lords, tearing what was left of the city's heart to shreds. And there was nothing the Julatsans could do to stop them.

Ripping from their fingers and gnawing at the stone and woodwork of the once proud College city, the white fire issued from the fingertips of a hundred Shamen, demolishing building, fence and barricade. And where men and women ran in terror, the black fire picked the flesh from their bones and gouged the eyes from their skulls while they fell screaming to die in agony.

Senedai felt no sympathy. He leapt from the platform and yelled his Lieutenants to him. All that held up his progress to the College itself were the mages who still shielded great swathes of the city borders and the enemy soldiers who protected the mages from the swords of his warriors. It was time to put a stop to this irritating resistance.

As he ran toward the battle, issuing orders and watching the standards and banners sway as tribes ran to do his bidding, a wall of flame erupted ahead, the spell detonation rippling through the ground as the targets, all Shamen, were engulfed and died without a sound of their own.

"Press! Press!" he yelled. But this close the noise, muted to a roar only a hundred yards away, was as deafening as it was distinct. He could hear individual sword clashes, the cries of panic, fear and pain. He could hear bellowed orders, desperate and confident, and he could hear the thud of metal on leather, the tumbling of stone and the cracking of timber.

Beside him, his warrior guard ran a crescent of protection while he kept himself just out of bow range as did all but his most foolhardy of Shamen. The line of Julatsans was thin to the point of collapse and Senedai knew that once pierced, there would be a route straight through to the walls of the College itself.

Horns blew and his warriors surged again. Behind the enemy lines, mages were torn to shreds by the black fire, even as they spoke their spells of protection. He could taste the anguish of his foe and his Wesmen axes rose and fell, showering blood into the smoke-muddied sky.

"I want those mages to the right destroyed!" he shouted at a lieutenant. "See it is signalled immediately." The ground heaved with Julatsan magic,

cold air blasted through the warmth of the day and the sky rained drops of fire, his tribesmen paying dearly for every pace they took.

A detachment of Shamen broke and ran right, arrows peppering the ground where they moved. One fell, a shaft buried deep in his thigh. He was left to writhe. Senedai watched them go, felt a thrill when their hands and mouths moved, summoning the fire from deep within the black souls of the Wytch Lords to project its hideous power on helpless victims.

But as he watched, he felt a change. The fire pulsing from outstretched fingers guttered, strengthened briefly, flickered and died. A ripple spread across the tribes. From every part of the battle ground, shouts were raised and Shamen stared at their hands and each other, incomprehension and fear on bleak faces.

From the enemy, a cheer, gaining in intensity, swept along the defensive line. Immediately, the barrage of spells increased and the defenders pushed into the confusion that gripped his warriors. They fell back.

“My Lord?” ventured a Captain. Senedai turned to the man, whose face held anxiety not fit for a Wesmen warrior, and found a rage boiling inside him. His gaze swept back across his failing attack, taking in the magic that blasted his men and the swords of the exhausted defence that fell with renewed energy and determination. He pushed the Captain aside and ran forward, heedless of the risk.

“By all the Spirits, are we not warriors?” he bellowed into the roar of battle. “Horns, sound the attack! All fronts. Magic be damned, we fight with steel. Attack, you bastards, attack!” He crashed into the battle, his axe ploughing through the shoulder of a defending Julatsan. The man collapsed and Senedai trod on the corpse, ripping the axe clear to bat it side-on into the face of the next enemy. Around him, the tribesmen responded, picking up songs of battle as they surged again.

Horns sounded new orders, wavering standards straightened in the hands of their bearers and moved forward again. The Wesmen poured back into the battle for Julatsa, ignoring the spells that handed out death and maiming injury indiscriminately, and seeing the defenders begin to wilt at the ferocity of the onslaught.

Lord Senedai dared a look either way along the lines and smiled. Many warriors would die without the Wytch Lords’ fire but the day, he determined, would still belong to the Wesmen. Noting the positions of the knots of offensive casting mages, he slapped aside a clumsy thrust and forged back into the fray.

The Raven stood in silence in Parve’s central square. The battle was won. Dawnthief had been cast, the Wytch Lords destroyed and their city once more

a place of the dead. Above them, the aftereffect of Dawnthief hung in the sky, brown and modulating, an alien and malevolent stain suspended like some predatory beast above the land of Balaia. It was the dimensional rip to nowhere.

Away across the square, Darrick and the remnants of the four-College cavalry had destroyed any remaining resistance and now piled bodies onto makeshift pyres; Wytch Lord acolytes, Wesmen and Guardians in one area, their own fallen in another, and the reverence with which dead cavalymen were handled was in stark contrast to the dragging and throwing of enemy corpses. Styliann and the Protectors were in the blasted pyramid, searching the rubble for anything that might give clues to the ancients' brief but cataclysmic return to power.

The silence in the square was palpable. None of Darrick's men spoke as they went about their sombre task; the sky under the rip was bereft of birds and the breeze that gusted across the open space seemed muted to a whisper as it coiled around Parve's buildings.

And for The Raven, victory was once again tarnished by loss.

Denser leaned heavily on Hiram, Erienne at his other side, her arm about his waist. Ilkar stood by the barbarian. Opposite them, across the grave, Will, Thraun and The Unknown Warrior. All of them gazed down at the shrouded form of Jandyr. The elf's bow lay the length of his body, his sword from chin to knees.

Sadness echoed its quiet around The Raven. At the moment of triumph, life had been taken from Jandyr. After everything he had survived, his was an unkind fate.

For Ilkar, the loss was keen. Elves were not numerous in Balaia, preferring as a rule the heat of the Southern Lands. Few now travelled to the Northern Continent excepting those called by magic and even their numbers were dwindling. They could ill afford to lose elves like Jandyr. But the grief was felt most personally by Will and Thraun. Their long-time friend had died in the service of Balaia and The Raven. What had begun as a simple rescue had finished on the steps of the Wytch Lords' tomb at the end of a desperate chase to find and cast the only spell that could save Balaia from the ancient evil. Yet Jandyr had died not knowing the outcome of the casting of Dawnthief. Life could be cruel. Mistimed death more so.

The Unknown intoned The Raven's words of parting. "By north, by east, by south, by west. Though you are gone, you will always be Raven and we shall always remember. Balaia will never forget the sacrifice you made. The Gods will smile on your soul. Farewell in whatever faces you now and ever."

Will nodded. "Thank you," he said. "Your respect and honour are truly appreciated. Now Thraun and I need time alone with him."

“Naturally,” said Ilkar. He moved away.

“I’ll stay a little longer,” said Erienne, disentangling herself from Denser. “After all, he came to rescue my family.” Will nodded and she knelt by the grave-side, joining the thief and Thraun, the shapechanger, in their regrets and hopes.

The Unknown, Hiram and Denser caught up with Ilkar and the quartet sat in the lee of the pyramid tunnel, the rip above and behind them, its presence huge and menacing. Further out in the central square, Darrick’s men continued piling bodies ready for the pyres. Great slicks of dried blood swathed the paving stones and here and there, pieces of torn clothing blew and ruffled in the warm breeze. Styliann and the Protectors remained inside the pyramid, no doubt dissecting every rune, painting and mosaic.

General Ry Darrick walked over and joined them as The Unknown finished passing around mugs of coffee from Will’s bubbling pan. There was a brief quiet.

“I almost hate to bring this up,” said Darrick. “But great as the victory is, we number perhaps three hundred and there are a good fifty thousand Wesmen between here and our homes.”

“Funny isn’t it?” said Ilkar. “You think about all we’ve achieved and the result is that we’ve given Balaia a chance and no more. Nothing is certain.”

“So much for basking in glory,” said Hiram.

“Don’t underestimate what we’ve done,” said Denser from his prone position, hands under his head. “We have removed the certainty of the Wytch Lords’ triumph and their dominion over Balaia. And more than that, we’ve destroyed them and given ourselves real hope. Bask in that.”

“I’ll try,” said Hiram, the smile returning to his face.

“Remember,” said Denser. “The Wesmen have no magic.”

“And we have no armies,” said Ilkar.

“I wonder if there’ll be anything left to return to?” mused The Unknown.

“A Communion would help to clarify a few things,” agreed Denser.

“Thanks for your input, Denser,” said Ilkar. “Why don’t you sleep it off?”

“Just saying,” said the Xeteskian Mage sharply.

“I think we’re a little far from Understone, don’t you?” Ilkar patted him on the shoulder.

“Selyn did it.” It was Styliann. The Raven started and turned. The Lord of the Mount of Xetesk walked out of the shadow of the pyramid tunnel. The Protectors remained deep inside. He looked pale and tired, his hair lank about his shoulders, the braid holding his ponytail long since gone.

“May I?” He gestured at the pot. The Unknown shrugged and nodded. Styliann ladled out a mug of coffee and sat with The Raven.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said.

“Is there no end to your talents?” muttered Denser.

Styliann’s eyes flashed. “The Dawnthief catalysts may be destroyed, Denser, but I am still your commanding mage. You would do well to remember that.” He paused. “Selyn was a Communion specialist. She reported large forces of Wesmen leaving Parve in the direction of Understone just before she entered the city. They will not have reached Understone yet so we have them to face before we reach the pass.” Styliann’s jaw set as if his next words were battling not to be heard. “For now, we should work together.”

The atmosphere cooled. The Unknown spoke. “Your last intercession, though welcome, was hardly a determined effort to help. Before that, you tried to kill us all. Tried to turn the Protectors against me. Now you want us to work together.” The Unknown looked away into the pyramid, his face troubled.

“We got here without your help. We’ll get back without it,” said Hirad.

Styliann regarded them calmly, the hint of a smile playing over his lips.

“You’re good, I’ll grant you that,” he said. “But you are overlooking the severity of your situation. The Raven will never reach the East unaided. Remember, Understone Pass was opened for you but is now almost certainly closed. I have the Communion range and contacts to organise passage. You do not and Darrick ultimately reports to me and the four Colleges.”

“Doesn’t sound like you need us at all,” said Hirad. Styliann smiled.

“One can always use The Raven.”

The Unknown nodded slightly. “You have an idea, I presume?”

“A route, yes; the tactics I’ll leave to the General.” He looked across at Darrick who had remained silent throughout the exchange, his expression changing only by a hair at the reminder of his position in the chain of command.

“Perhaps you’d better tell us your route, my Lord,” said Darrick.

Hirad’s head was thumping. He needed a drink. Alcohol, preferably, to chase away the pain for a while. He lurched to his feet, making for the fire.

“You all right, Hirad?” asked Ilkar.

“Not really,” he replied. “My head’s killing me.” A cold sensation cascaded through his back, like snow shaken from the bough of a tree, gone as soon as it had come. There was a change in the air, a movement that had nothing to do with the breeze blowing warmly about them.

Hirad stopped, looking up into the sky, clear blue but for the huge rip modulating gently. As he watched, the mottled brown surface rippled violently, bubbled, punched outward and tore for a split second. A barking roar shattered the relative peace of the afternoon. Triumphant, apocalyptic, terrible.

Hirad screamed, turned and ran away blindly in the direction of the

eastern forest miles away, every fear he had harboured since his encounter with Sha-Kaan realised in an instant.

So soon after victory, they faced ultimate defeat and total destruction. There was a dragon in the skies of Balaia.

It was the way he liked it best—the way of the sword. Wesmen were warriors, not mages. And though the Wytch Lords' power had seen them to victories more quickly than he had dared hope, the Lord Tessaya was confident they would have triumphed even without the white and black fires.

Now that magic, borrowed, stolen, gifted, call it what you will, was gone. The Shamen no longer held sway and the Wesmen belonged to their tribal lords once more. It was at once terrifying and exciting. Should the unity crumble, they would be swept back across the Blackthorne Mountains by the armies of the four Colleges. If he could hold them together, Tessaya believed they could take Korina and with the capture of the capital city would come the heart, soul and wealth of Eastern Balaia.

But he had to fear the Colleges against whom they now had no defence. His dream of seeing the Towers of Xetesk burn had gone, at least for now. A wry smile touched his weather-worn, deeply tanned face. There were other ways of fighting mages.

Defeat was never an option for Tessaya. Particularly when he was drinking in the glow of recent victory. And victory against mages.

Panic had threatened to engulf the thousands pouring through Understone Pass as word had spread that the Shamen had lost their link to the Wytch Lords. But Tessaya, in unwitting mirror to Senedai far away in Julatsa, had stilled the unrest, choosing to run at the head of the Wesmen pack as it exploded into the sunlight of the East.

The College army knew they were coming but was hopelessly outnumbered. Wave after wave of Wesmen had torn into the lines, their howls drowning the screamed orders, the cries of fear and the wailing of the dying. With Tessaya leading, they were unstoppable, the blood of victory pounding in their heads, their swords and axes slicing flesh and splintering bone. The front line had been stubborn but, with their bodies littering the mud in front of the pass, and the mage support destroyed, it was little more than an organised slaughter, which left Tessaya disappointed.

Sitting in Understone's inn, now cleared of bodies, he recalled the fight, the elementary defensive mistakes and the confusion of orders that reached his ears. But most of all he remembered those who had run and those who had cast up their arms and surrendered before hope was truly lost. So different from the fight at the western end of Understone Pass. There he had seen an enemy organ-

ised and prepared to fight to the last man. An enemy that had held his armies for longer than it had any right to. An enemy he could respect.

But what disappointed him most was the failure of the General, whom Tessaya had been informed was in charge at Understone Town, to live up to his reputation. Shame. He should have been another exciting adversary. As it was, he had proved as much a coward as the rest. Darrick was a name the Wesmen would quickly forget to fear.

The door to the inn opened and his elder Shaman walked in. Without the Wytch Lords' power he was no longer a man Tessaya had to watch but the Lord of the Paleon tribes bore him no less respect.

Tessaya poured him a drink, the two men sitting across a table in the shadows at the rear of the building.

"You're looking tired, Arnoan."

"It's been a long day, my Lord."

"But over now, by the sounds of it." The noise of celebration was building.

"How are your injuries?" asked Arnoan.

"I'll live." Tessaya smiled, amused by Arnoan's fatherly concern. The burn down his right forearm was sore and blistered but treated, clean and dressed. He had been quick in the dive as the FlameOrb had splashed, so had lived.

The cuts he sported on his face, chest and legs were merely trophies of fierce fighting. Still, at his age and influence, looks weren't important and besides, he found himself tiring of the attentions of women. His line would survive the war; his sons ranged from babes in arms to muscled youths. And now their father had led the tribes to victory at Understone. Where next? It was a question clearly taxing Arnoan.

"What will the morning bring?" asked the Shaman.

"Rest and building. I will not lose Understone Pass again," said Tessaya. His expression hardened. "Lord Taomi and the southern force should be with us in a day at most. Then we can plan the conquest of Korina."

"You really believe we can achieve that?"

Tessaya nodded. "They have no armies. Only city defence and reservists. We have ten thousand here, fifteen thousand within two days of the pass, another twenty-five thousand who crossed Triverne Inlet to attack the Colleges and whatever the south brings us. Who is going to stop us?"

"My Lord, nobody disputes that the military advantage lies with us. But the mage strength of the Colleges is considerable. It would be a mistake to underestimate them." Arnoan leaned forward, his bony fingers knotted in front of him.

Tessaya hefted his burned arm. "Do you think I am in danger of doing

that?" He eyes narrowed. "Arnoan, I am the oldest tribal Lord, with the largest tribal Council under me. It is so because I have made a habit of never underestimating my enemy.

"The mages are powerful and the Colleges will stand against us in strength. But a mage tires quickly and without a guard is quickly slain. Losing our magic was a blow but we were born to the sword, not the spell.

"The Wesmen will rule Balaia and I will rule the Wesmen."

No help would come to Tessaya from the south. The Wesmen were routed and running for Blackthorne Town while its namesake Baron rested high in the crags above the battlefield of his victory. With him were the concussed but otherwise happy Baron Gresse and around five hundred men and mages, all dreaming of a return to their homes.

But the euphoria of the victory at Varhawk Crags would soon wear off. Their situation remained parlous. All but a dozen or so mages had been killed by the white fire, the wounded outnumbered the able-bodied and the Wesmen's defeat had everything to do with their confusion at losing the Wytch Lords' magic. Blackthorne and Gresse had merely stoked the fires of panic. If the Wesmen chose to come back looking for them, a second victory would be hard won indeed.

Blackthorne, however, considered such a return very unlikely. In the confusion at the Crags, there was no telling what strength either side had and he knew if he were the Wesmen commander, he would retreat to Blackthorne, lick his wounds and plan his next strike while waiting for reinforcement from across the Bay of Gyernath.

The Baron came to the entrance of the overhang he'd taken as his command position. There was not much room for anything but a fire at the entrance and a few of his senior people inside. Gresse was there, propped up against a wall, his head, Blackthorne knew from experience, thudding wildly and inducing waves of nausea if he dared move.

In front of him, the crags stretched away north and south. Following the victory, he had brought his men and mages south, upwind of the stench of so much death. His fallen people had burned on pyres, the Wesmen dead were left to feed the scavengers. The overhang sat at the top of a gentle rise away from the treacherous edge and scree slopes of Varhawk. On the little plateaus and shallow slopes, his men rested under a warm but cloudy sky. Fires burned in a dozen places despite the Wesmen threat and Blackthorne's perimeter guards were under strict instructions not to turn to the light until their watches were complete. In key positions, elven eyes pierced the night to give early warning of any attack and so calmed the nerves of the sleeping.

There was little noise now. The celebrations had given way to excited

chatter, then a low hum of conversation, then fatigue as night fell. Blackthorne permitted himself a smile. To his right, a man cleared his throat.

“My Lord?” Blackthorne turned to face Luke, the nervous youth he had sent to count heads.

“Speak up, lad.” With an effort, the Baron softened his automatically stern demeanour and placed a fatherly hand on the youth’s shoulder. “Where are you from, Luke?”

“A farm three miles north of Blackthorne, my Lord.” His eyes scoured the ground at his feet. “I’ll be the man of the farm now. If there’s anything left of it.”

Blackthorne could see Luke, no more than sixteen, biting back tears, his long dark hair covering the sides of his face. The Baron squeezed his shoulder then let his hand drop.

“We have all lost people we love, Luke,” he said. “But what we can take back, we will, and those who stood with me and saved the East from the Wesmen will be known as heroes. The living and the dead.” He stopped, lifted Luke’s chin so that the youth’s shining eyes met his.

“Was it a good life on your farm?” he asked. “Speak truthfully.”

“Hard, my Lord,” said Luke, the admiration burning in his face. “And not always happy, if I’m honest. The land isn’t kind every year and the Gods don’t always bless us with calves and lamb.”

Blackthorne nodded. “Then I have failed you and everyone like you. Yet you were still prepared to lay down your life for me. When we are masters of Blackthorne once again, we will talk at greater depth. But now, you have some information for me?”

“Yes, my Lord.” Luke hesitated. The Baron nodded for him to speak. “There are five hundred and thirty-two altogether, my Lord. Of these, eighteen are mages and five of them are too badly injured to cast. There are five hundred and fourteen men at arms and more than four hundred of them have some form of wound from battle. Of the worst, one hundred and five cannot fight. I have not counted those who will die by morning.” Luke stopped. “My Lord,” he added.

Blackthorne raised his eyebrows. “And what makes you so sure these men will die?”

“Because I have seen it often enough on the farm, my Lord,” said Luke his confidence finally growing. “We aren’t so different, people and animals, and I hear it in their breathing and see it in their eyes and the lie of their bodies. Inside, we know when our time is near; so do animals, and it shows.”

“I’ll have to take your word,” said Blackthorne, fascinated by the realisation that he had probably seen less death in his long life than the youngster

in front of him. Though they had surely both seen enough in the last few days to last a lifetime, he had never studied it. To Luke though, death of livestock was an economic problem and a risk of his occupation. "We must talk more another time, Luke. Now, I suggest you find a place to lay your head. We face hard days and I need men like you at your best."

"Goodnight, my Lord."

"Goodnight, Luke." Blackthorne watched the young man walk away, his head a little higher, his stride a little longer. He shook his head gently, the smile returning to his face. So were the fates at birth. Another day, Luke the farmer's son might have been born a Lord. Blackthorne was sure he would be equally at home in a Castle as a cowshed.

The Baron mulled over the numbers Luke had given him. Less than four hundred and fifty men able to fight, terribly short of mages and of those he could press into action, the overwhelming majority were hurt in some way. He guessed the Wesmen still outnumbered them two to one. And he had no idea how many were still in his Town, or at the beachhead, or on the road to Gyernath, or spread throughout the East. He bit his lip, quelling the sudden flutter in his heart. Hard days. And he had to be stronger than he had ever been.

The reality was that, unless some form of organisation grew from the chaos that ran the length of the Blackthorne Mountains, the Wesmen could still reach Korina, despite the loss of their magic. The Colleges would have to step in further. Take control. And while that was unpalatable, it was preferable to the alternative.

But the Colleges were distant and the problems of Blackthorne would hardly register. He could expect little help from the north but one thing he could do was attempt a Communion with Xetesk. Communication was an advantage the peoples of the East would have to exploit if they were to win.

Baron Blackthorne yawned. It was time to check on Gresse, and to sleep. Tomorrow, there were decisions to be made. He had to discover the wider picture. Understone, Gyernath, the scattered coastal and inland villages. He had to know where any help was coming from to drive the Wesmen back across the Bay of Gyernath. And he had to find a way to take back his town, his castle. His bed. Suppressing sudden anger, Blackthorne turned his back on the night and walked under the overhang.

The Wesmen kept on coming. Thousands of them pouring toward the borders of Julatsa, scrambling over the bodies of their fallen kinsmen and heaving themselves against the stuttering College Guard. From his Tower, Barras gazed down on the confusion, saw the spells ripping into the invading army and saw them roll relentlessly on.

It was midafternoon and the only respite in the fighting had been at the moment the Wesmen's magic deserted them. That moment, Barras' heart had surged because he knew The Raven had destroyed the Wytch Lords. He had cried in relief and joy then; and he could have cried in frustration now.

Because far from shattering the Wesmen, the setback merely seemed to inflame their anger. They had attacked again with a greater fury than before, their swords, axes and warrior passion driving them on and on.

At first it had been slaughter, the College Guard able to hold as waves of spells devastated the Wesmen lines. Thousands had died under the might of the Julatsan barrage, defenceless against the FlameOrbs, IceWind, Earth-Hammer, DeathHail, HotRain and BoneSplinter.

But the mana stamina of a mage is finite without rest and the Wesmen knew it. And the Julatsans had already spent so much on shielding men and buildings on the Shamen attack fronts. The Wesmen knew that too.

Now, with the spell barrage reduced to a tactical trickle, the Wesmen were moving with awesome confidence, crashing into the ranks of the College Guard and the reservists, unafraid now of what the next mana strike might bring.

To Barras' left, the General of the Julatsan forces bit his lip and cursed.

"How many are there?" he demanded of no one, his tone thick and exasperated. There had to be well over ten thousand.

"Too many," replied Barras.

"I am well aware of that," snapped the General. "And if that is meant to be a slur on—"

"Calm yourself, my dear Kard. It is a slur on no one, merely a statement of fact. How long can we hold them?"

"Three hours, maybe less," said Kard gruffly. "Without walls, I can't promise any more. How did the Communion go?"

"Dordover dispatched three thousand men yesterday at our request. They should be here by nightfall."

"Then you may as well tell them to turn back," said General Kard, his voice bitter, his face suddenly aged. "Julatsa will have fallen by then."

"They'll never take the College," said Barras. Kard raised his eyebrows. "Who's going to stop them?"

Barras opened his mouth to speak but closed it again. Kard was a soldier and couldn't hope to understand.

That the College might be taken was unthinkable. More than that, it was abhorrent, an eventuality that brought bile to the Elder elven mage's throat. And there was a way of stopping the Wesmen taking their prize.

But as he turned his face back to the battle at the edge of the city and

saw his people suffer under the blades of the invaders, Barras prayed it wouldn't come to that. Because what he had in his mind, he wouldn't wish on anyone. Not even Wesmen at the gates of his beloved College.