

SHADOWHEART

ALSO BY JAMES BARCLAY

Chronicles of The Raven

DAWNTHIEF

NOONSHADE

NIGHTCHILD

Legends of The Raven

ELFSORROW

SHADOWHEART

DEMONSTORM

SHADOWHEART

LEGENDS OF THE RAVEN

JAMES BARCLAY



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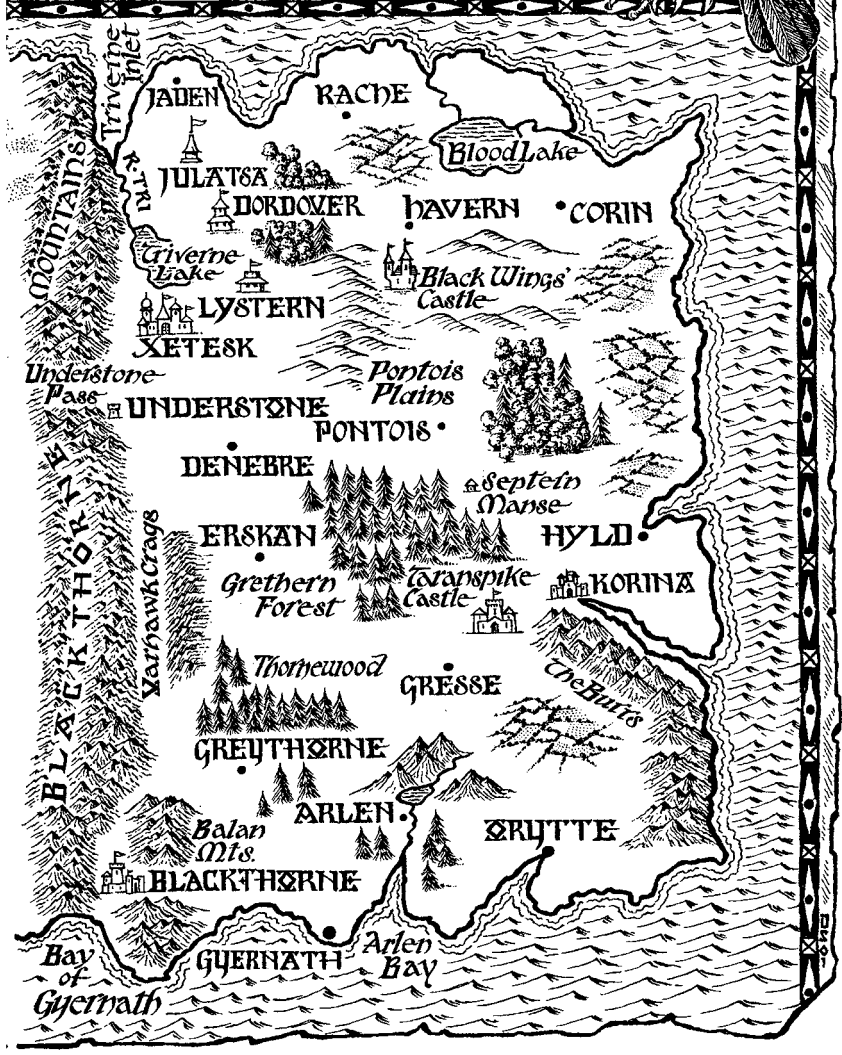
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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

For my two oldest friends,
Peter Robinson and John “George” Cross.
More than three decades and still counting . . .





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
Ranyl CIRCLE SEVEN MASTER MAGE, XETESK
Myx A PROTECTOR
Suarav CAPTAIN, XETESKIAN COLLEGE GUARD
Chandyr COMMANDER, XETESKIAN ARMIES
Nyam SENIOR MAGE, XETESK
Vuldarog ARCH MAGE, DORDOVER
Heryst LORD ELDER MAGE, LYSTERN
Izack COMMANDER, LYSTERIAN CAVALRY
Pheone HIGH MAGE DESIGNATE, JULATSA

THE ELVES

Myriell AL-DRECHAR
Cleress AL-DRECHAR
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
The ClawBound

BALAIANS, WESMEN AND A DRAGON

Blackthorne A BARON
Devun LEADER OF THE BLACK WINGS
Diera WIFE OF THE UNKNOWN WARRIOR
Tessaya LORD OF THE PALEON TRIBES
Riasu LORD KEEPER OF UNDERSTONE PASS
Sba-Kaan GREAT KAAAN

CHAPTER 1

The detachment of cavalry from the mage college city of Lystern wheeled and attacked again, charging hard at the defenders holding their positions outside Xetesk's east gates. Targeting the weakened left flank, they sped in, hooves churning mud, swords and spear tips glinting in the bright, warm afternoon sunlight. Thirty horses, sweat foaming under saddles, galloping under the steady control of crack Lysternan riders and led by Commander Izack.

"Come on, this time," whispered Dila'heth to herself, watching the attack from a rise above the blood-drenched battlefield.

Down in the centre of the line, the bulk of the surviving Al-Arynaar and TaiGethen elves were engaged in a cat-and-mouse game, trying to lure the stubborn Xeteskians out of alignment. So far, their efforts had been fruitless. Protectors at the core of the defensive line, so disciplined, so deadly, remained unmoved.

A fusillade of spells erupted from the ranks of Xeteskian mages behind their warriors. FlameOrb, HotRain, DeathHail, homing in on the cavalry as they drove in. Lysternan shields glared and flashed, revealing the rich green depths of the manalattice that held them firm, deflecting the deep blue of the enemy castings.

Dila'heth could feel the pressure of the shields through the spectrum and respected their strength and the ability of the mages who rode while they cast.

Immediately, response came from the elven and Lysternan mages in the field behind the combat line. Yellow and green Orbs, burnished with flares of deep red and orange, soared over the warriors. Two dozen of them, wide as cartwheels, splashed down into the Xeteskian support. Shields creaked, blue light like sheet lightning seared the sky; but they held. It had been this way for twenty days. Probing, watching, feinting and attacking. The battle had barely moved.

"Keep up the pressure!" shouted Dila'heth, her words taken by runners down to the field command. "Let's give that cavalry time."

Izack's men struck, Dila'heth wincing at the impact. Horses snorted, men leant out left and right, swords and maces hammering down, their charge taking them deep into the defenders before they were halted. Even at a hundred yards and more, Dila's keen eyes could pick out individual suffering with grim clarity.

Leading his men, Izack, mouth open in a battle cry lost in the tumult, struck the helmet of an enemy, his blade crushing the metal. The foot soldier

collapsed senseless and the hooves of the horse following trampled him into the mud. Further right, a lone Xeteskian pike skewered a horse's chest. The jolt threw the rider over his mount's head. The desperate, dying animal screamed, its hooves flailing. It fell, one shod hoof splintering the Xeteskian's rib cage, its body crushing its own rider. At the back of the charge, an enemy was knocked off balance by the press of horse flesh around him. He spun and staggered, his defence dropped and a spiked mace ripped off his face.

Swords flashed, horses reared, men roared. In the chaos, Dila watched Izack. The cavalry commander seemed to have so much more time than any of those around him. He pushed his horse through the throng, batting aside strikes to both him and his mount. She could see his mouth move as he tried to direct his riders to the point he sensed was weakest.

His horse kicked forward, taking an enemy in the groin. Izack ignored the man's cries, fencing a strike away from his leg and cutting backhanded into his attacker's midriff. He was going to break through. The tide was with him and with those still in the saddle. Protectors were detaching from the centre of the line but they'd be too late. And waiting behind Izack, a hundred-strong reserve, made up of cavalry, Lysternan swordsmen and the Al-Arynaar. Enough to force the breach wide and open up the Xeteskian support mages to weapon attack. Dila's only concern now was the centre of the main fighting line. It absolutely had to hold.

Feeling sure the battle was about to turn decisively, she swung round to call every able-bodied ally to arms and into the battle. At first, she thought the faintness and sudden nausea she felt was because she'd spun too fast. But she saw her condition reflected in the expressions of the Julatsan-trained Al-Arynaar mages standing by her and knew it was something infinitely worse.

"Oh no."

The chain of focused mana cells holding together the powerful, elven, linked Spell- and HardShields collapsed. It was a sudden and violent shifting in the flow, as if every casting mage had simultaneously lost the ability to maintain the simple shape. But this was no mass error. Dila'heth had felt it. Every mage carrying the linked Julatsan construct was left helpless as the power in the spell scattered back into the individual castings, shattering them instantly.

Dila rocked with the referred pain of three dozen backfiring spells. Out in the field, mages, their minds threshed by flailing mana strands, clutched the sides of their heads, fell screaming to the ground or dropped catatonic from the shock. And two hundred swordsmen and as many in the support lines were left exposed to anything Xetesk could throw at them. There were nowhere near enough Lysternan shield mages to cover everyone.

A cataclysmic event had disrupted the Julatsan mana focus. It had been brief and the question of what had happened had to be faced, but right now hundreds of elves and men were terribly vulnerable. Dila'heth began to run down the slope toward the battlefield, calling mages to her, those that could still function at all.

“Shields! We must have shields!”

But the push was falling apart right in front of her. Nervousness had spread through the fighting force like cracks on thin ice. To the left, Izack hadn't broken through fast enough. He couldn't yet threaten the enemy mages and the Xeteskians had picked up on the crisis engulfing their opponents. Their warriors put more power into every strike, their arrows flew in tighter volleys and their mages . . . Tual's teeth, their mages cast everything they had.

Dila'heth tried frantically to gather the shape for a SpellShield while she ran but it eluded her. The mana wouldn't coalesce to give the shape its protective form, but was always just beyond her grasp, like a butterfly on the breeze. Scared more than she dared admit, she slowed to a stop then started to reverse, simultaneously seeing Izack breaking off his attack and the arc of the first Xeteskian spells surge across the sky.

“Clear the field, clear the field!” Dila'heth shouted, half turning, almost running.

She could see knots of mages trying to cast, others helping confused and comatose victims. More mirrored her own fear, unsure of what to do. Xetesk's first spell impacts made the decision for them.

More FlameOrbs than Dila could count fell at the back of the allied line, detonating in the mud and splashing mage fire over defenceless men and elves. And where that fire touched a Xeteskian SpellShield, it flared brief cobalt and dissipated harmlessly. Safe behind their defence, the enemy just stood and watched.

A FlameWall erupted along the combat front and panic tore the allied line to shreds. Burning, trapped and terrified, the line disintegrated, men and elves scattering left, right and back, anywhere that the flame might be less intense. Here and there, pockets of Lysternan shields provided shelter for anyone lucky enough to get under their protection but the overwhelming reliance had been on the Julatsan-based elven construct and too few could find sanctuary.

Everywhere she looked, Dila'heth could see burning swordsmen running blindly away, heading for the camp and the help that would be too late for so many. Flaming corpses littered the ground and the air was filled with the screams of the dying, pleading for help and relief. But in places, field captains were beginning to call their men and elves to fledgling order. Dila shook herself.

“Come on, we’ve got to help them!” she yelled into the roar of flame and the shrieks of agony all around her. She ran to the nearest victim, trying to force the simplest healing conjuration into her mind. Anything that would extinguish the mage fire that burned his clothes and covered his bare arms, eating at his flesh.

The shape formed slowly, frustratingly so, but at least it was coming. But then, so did the HellFire. Columns of superheated blue scorched from the smoke-filled sky, each one targeting a single soul. Scant yards away, one struck the central figure in a group of mages. The deluge consumed his body in an instant, the splatter took the other five in a flood of flame and the detonation pitched Dila from her feet.

What little order there had been developing in the retreat was destroyed. With FlameOrbs still crashing to earth and HotRain beginning to tumble from the sky in fist-sized tears, the rout was complete.

Dila’heth lay where she had fallen, bleeding from a cut on her forehead. Beside her, the swordsman had died, his cries fading quickly as he succumbed. She raised her head to see DeathHail slashing across the field. It would be a miracle if anyone escaped alive.

Only Izack remained in control. Dila watched him lead his cavalry across the front of the Xeteskian line, blunting any move, the shields surrounding his men flashing deep green from repeated spell impact. But the enemy had made no effort to move forward. Shorth take them all, but there was no need. They had already won the day. Chances were, the battle was theirs too.

Dila dropped her head back into the mud, tears of pain and frustration squeezing from her smarting eyes. Clouds of smoke billowed across the field, muffling the sounds of defeat and triumph all around her. Somehow, they would have to regroup but first they had to understand why their magic had failed so catastrophically.

Exhausted and aching, bleeding and strained, Dila pulled herself to her knees and began to crawl from the battlefield, waiting for the moment when the DeathHail ceased and she could run. Bodies lay thick on the ground before her. Some were moving, most were not. To her left, a further detachment of cavalry galloped out to support Izack. But on the rise in front of the camp she could see a line of men and elves just standing and staring in disbelief at the disaster that had swamped them all.

Yniss himself would have to smile on them if they were to turn the tide now.

The great hall at the top of Lystern’s squat, wide college tower felt chill despite the warmth of the day and the sunlight streaming through the ornate stained glass windows that overlooked the huge circular table.

In an arc surrounding the Lord Elder Mage, Heryst, sat the four mages who made up the law council. All old men, all trusted advisers of the relatively young college and city ruler. Opposite them, The Raven were gathered around Darrick, who stood at their centre while they sat, listening to the charges laid against him. Otherwise, but for fifteen college guardsmen and a gaggle of clerks and monitor mages, the hall was empty, its spectacular domed and timbered roof ringing hollow.

Hirad Coldheart couldn't shake off a fundamental sense of wrong. It pervaded his every sense and had settled like a cloying web over his body. He had already been reminded twice of court protocol and now The Unknown Warrior left a restraining hand on his shoulder, keeping him in his seat. He had been promised his say but he couldn't shift the notion that it would be after any decision had been made in the minds of those opposite him. Not Heryst, the law council.

Darrick, of course, had remained impeccably disciplined throughout. Former General of the Lysternan armies and now accused of desertion, treason and cowardice he had returned to the college of his own free will to answer the charges. And nothing The Raven could say about the timing of his decision, and which priorities they felt he should place higher, carried any weight whatever.

He was a deeply principled man and for him, clearing his name transcended any action The Raven wanted to undertake. Those principles were one of the things that made him such a valuable addition to The Raven. But they were also a frustration Hirad found difficult to bear. So much remained to be done and he felt they were wasting time. Events were moving fast and they couldn't afford to be left behind.

Heryst looked round from a brief whispered conversation with the law mages. Two were frowning, one shaking his head, the fourth impassive.

"At this juncture," said the Lord Elder Mage, "we will drop the charge of treason. It is clear that your intention was not to act against Lystern. Indeed your assertion that our alliance with Dordover at the time was the potentially more treasonable act is one we cannot counteract with any great surety. Endangering the men under your command by virtue of that treason is therefore also dismissed.

"But the charges of desertion and cowardice must stand and you will answer them."

Hirad opened his mouth but The Unknown squeezed his shoulder.

"Ridiculous," muttered the barbarian.

"I know," said The Unknown.

"I laugh at any suggestion of cowardice," said Darrick. "But within the laws of Lystern, I am guilty of desertion. That is not in dispute."

“That is not a clever opening to your defence,” said Denser.

Darrick looked to his right long enough to spear the Raven’s Xeteskian mage with the stare that had sent a thousand raw recruits’ pulses stuttering before he continued.

“It was desertion,” affirmed Darrick. “But the circumstances mitigate my actions and indeed made my decision the only honourable one.”

“There is no precedence for mitigation,” rumbled one of the law mages, a heavy-jowled man with eyes sunk deep into fleshy sockets.

“Then precedence must be set by this hearing,” said Darrick, betraying no hint of his emotions. “Because this was not desertion through cowardice or fear. Neither was it desertion that in any way increased the risk to the men in my command. In peacetime, it would have been considered resignation on principle.”

“But this was not peacetime,” continued the mage. “And you were facing an enemy.”

“Even so, the circumstances will be heard,” said Heryst.

“You are swayed by your personal friendship,” said a second law mage, grey haired and long nosed.

“And by his previously unblemished record of service, courage and honour in battle,” said Heryst. “We are not trying a conscript here.” He smiled as he turned to Darrick. “Make this good, Ry. There’s a heavy penalty attached to your unmitigated guilt.”

“I am only too aware of that,” replied Darrick. “And that in itself is the first part of my defence—that I came here voluntarily to answer this charge. There was little chance of my being arrested with war at our borders. I need to clear my name so I can take my part without looking over my shoulder for college guards carrying warrants.”

“I’m sure you have all our thanks for offering yourself up without our needing to divert resources,” said the long-nosed mage dryly.

Hirad scowled and tensed. He wasn’t happy with the atmosphere. The four old men were clearly intent solely on establishing guilt. Only Heryst seemed truly interested in the possibility that Darrick took the only decision open to him under the circumstances. The question was, did he have ultimate sanction in this forum?

“The docks at Arlen, those three seasons ago, were a place where not just I but every Lysternan was betrayed. It was where some of those empowered to determine control of the Nightchild abandoned their morals and put her under sentence of death. And not just her, but also her mother, Erienne, who sits at my left.”

“We are perfectly—”

“You will let me speak uninterrupted, my Lord Metsas,” said Darrick. There was no anger in his voice.

Metsas’s face darkened but he said no more.

“As has been documented, I found myself commanding cavalry that, far from preventing a ship sailing at the behest of the Lystern-Dordover alliance, were in fact defending it from Xeteskian aggression. And that is because it contained Dordovan mages in cahoots with Black Wings. Black Wings, gentlemen. The ship also contained a hostage: Erienne.”

Darrick gestured to Erienne and Hiram saw remembered pain flicker over her features. She laid her head briefly on Denser’s shoulder.

“Dordover was using her to get to Lyanna. Her daughter. And then the mages would have cast her to the Black Wings to be murdered while they did the same to the Nightchild. It was an inhuman tactic for which Dordover deserves nothing but eternal contempt. And if any here present were in tacit support, that contempt is yours too.

“I love my city and college, make no mistake. I love its principles, its morals and its ethics. And I could not lead a force that would see those values betrayed. It was a decision which broke my heart but I had no other option. Surely, as the men who uphold our ethics and principles, you must understand.

“But know this, too. I carried out my resignation correctly. I handed command to Izack in the knowledge that he was fully capable of carrying out his duties as correctly as I was. He proved me right, of course. My men were not put at excessive risk and the burden of Lystern’s actions was taken from them. It was I who received the orders; Izack and his men were merely duty-bound to carry them out.

“Yet, at the same time, I gave them a choice. I did not incite mass desertion and, as the record shows, no such action was taken. The decision was left with each individual’s conscience, but what choice did most of those men really have? They had families who relied on them. They had lives to lead beyond the conflict. And they had nowhere to go.

“I was different. I had The Raven.”

Heryst shifted in his seat, evading Darrick’s steady gaze. Hiram watched the law mages too. None showed the slightest understanding of, or sympathy for, Darrick’s dilemma. And the words spoken merely confirmed the shallow nature of their thinking.

“Indeed you did have The Raven,” said the long-nosed mage. “And you fought alongside Xetesk while at the opposite end of the docks, your men were being killed by Xetesk. How do you equate that with responsible discharge of your duties?”

Darrick nodded slowly. “Lord Simmac, if my duty was to protect mur-

derers and witch-hunters, then I am happy to have failed. If it was to protect the innocent and deliver the best possible outcome for Balaia and hence Lystern then, with one glaring exception, I and The Raven succeeded. Though subsequent events have removed any shine from our success.”

“The exception being?” asked Simmac.

“That Lyanna died and so we will never know if she could have used her power for the good of us all.”

“Of course,” said Simmac, as if the fact had slipped his mind.

“Dordover wanted her dead the moment she escaped them,” said Hirad quietly. “What was your desire, I wonder?”

Heryst looked at him squarely. “Hirad, with all due respect, we are not here to debate Lystern’s flawed alliance with Dordover. Ry Darrick is on trial here.” He allowed himself a brief smile. “But since you have been desperate to speak ever since we began, perhaps now is the time, if Darrick is done?”

“For now,” said Darrick. “Though I reserve the right to speak again.”

“Granted,” said Heryst. “Hirad, the floor is yours.”

The barbarian stood, feeling the cold stares of the law mages gauging him.

“It’s really simple,” he said. “The events Darrick set going saved the elves from extinction. He saved so many lives by joining us. Still not quite enough, though.”

The Unknown squeezed his forearm. The Raven still felt it. They’d been too late to save Ilkar, the elf who had been with The Raven since the start. An elf they all loved and who, ironically, had feared watching them all grow old and die around him.

“And how exactly do you work that out?” asked Simmac, expression all but a sneer.

Hirad felt the almost overwhelming urge to cross the table and flatten his long nose. He took a deep breath.

“Because,” he said carefully, “had he not organised the defence of the Al-Drechar’s house on Herendeneth; and had he not fought with The Raven and alongside Xetesk in that house against the Dordovan and Black Wing invasion, not just Lyanna, but all the Al-Drechar would have been dead. And with them, as it turned out, would have died every elf. Only they had the knowledge to rebind the statue of Yniss and halt the plague.”

“I fail to see—” began Simmac.

“And where would your forces be now without the elves, eh?” Hirad raised his voice, hearing it echo into the rafters. “Without their swords and their magic to back you and Dordover against Xetesk? Answer me that and keep sneering.” Hirad almost sat then but there was one other thing to say.

“Ry Darrick is one of the bravest men I have ever met. He is also without question the most moral and upright. Everything he does is for the benefit of

Balaia, and that is something we should all be striving for, don't you agree? Removing him would remove one of our most potent weapons from the fight that is still to come. And believe me, we are on your side. The side that would see balance restored to our land.

"Remove him and you make The Raven your enemy. And you don't want that."

Hirad sat. He felt his pulse thudding in his neck and was glad of the weathered tan on his face; he was sure he was flushed.

"Well done, Hirad," said The Unknown.

Darrick turned his head and nodded fractionally.

"Does anyone else wish to speak?" asked Heryst.

"Hirad speaks for us all," said The Unknown. "Darrick is Raven. He was instrumental in saving the elven race and his honour and courage are beyond question. If you find Darrick guilty without redress, you must ask yourselves exactly what it is you are actually finding him guilty of."

"Desertion," said Metsas, the word snapping from his mouth. "From Lysternan lines."

"Or perhaps of doing his duty by his country."

"If you believe that," said Metsas.

"Oh, I have no doubt," said The Unknown. "But it is you who sit in judgement."

"For the record," said Heryst, "and excuse the slight contradiction but I am both Darrick's judge and commanding officer, I must make mention of Darrick's unblemished record of courage and service to the city and college of Lystern. To list every event would take longer than we have, and that in itself should inform us of his character. They are all well documented but three stand out as shining examples of his loyalty, strength and ability.

"The sorties into Understone Pass in the years before the pass fell. How much more damaging would the Wesmen invasion have been a decade later had we lost the pass earlier?"

"The battle at Parve six years ago. Darrick led his cavalry into the heart of Wesmen power to break their lines and allow The Raven through. Without him, would Denser have been able to cast Dawnthief and pierce the hearts of the Wytch Lords?"

"Finally, the Wesmen invasion. Darrick's command of the four-college force was critical in delaying the Wesmen long enough for help, in the form of the Kaan dragons, to arrive on the closing of the Noonshade rip.

"Within those commands, acts of personal heroism and sacrifice were played out. In his time as Lystern's general, Darrick has, without question, been central to saving Balaia."

Hirad could see the law mages' expressions. Their disdain for what they had heard was plain. These were mages of the old school, which taught that allegiance to Lystern and a love of Balaia were not necessarily linked. And Darrick had chosen Balaia.

"Are we done?" asked Simmac. Darrick and Heryst both nodded. "Good." The elderly mage snapped his fingers and a young woman detached herself from the clerks. "The SoundShield, please."

She nodded and began to cast. Her hands described a dome above the heads of the five who sat in judgement. She mouthed silently, cupped her hands and spoke a single command word, completing the simple spell.

"How long will it take?" asked Hirad, watching Metsas begin to speak and seeing him flick his hand at The Raven. Heryst frowned and shook his head as he replied.

"Not long, I fear," said Darrick. "I've only the one ally inside that bubble of silence."

"But at least he's head mage," said Hirad.

"I suspect that means little in the middle of a war that half of Heryst's council thinks Lystern should not be fighting," said Denser.

"True," said Darrick.

"You think Heryst may sacrifice you as a sop to the opposition faction?" asked The Unknown.

"It's possible," said Darrick. "He's not as confident as I remember him."

"I don't see it," said Erienne. "Surely the salvation of the elves is enough."

"To save my life, possibly. To free me, I don't know."

To his left, Hirad heard a growl. He glanced across to where Thraun sat, eyes fixed on the law mages and Heryst. Thraun's face was pinched and angry, lips drawn back over his teeth.

"Blind men," said Thraun.

"I know what you mean," said Hirad.

They fell silent, watching the law council argue Darrick's fate while the tension soared in the great hall. Hirad felt sweat on his palms and, next to him, Darrick at last showed some emotion. His face was lined with anxiety beneath his tight brown curly hair and his fists clenched and unclenched by his sides. He swallowed hard and glanced round at Hirad, his smile terribly weak, his eyes small and scared.

Time stretched. The Raven couldn't look at each other, their gazes instead locked on the scene being played out in silence across the table. Metsas and Simmac had already revealed their hands and Heryst's allegiance was clear. It rested on the two who had not spoken a word during the hearing. Where would their heads and hearts fall?

The quiet dragged at Hirad's ears while he watched Heryst reply in obvious anger. His hand slapped the table, vibrations carrying around its circumference. The Lord Elder Mage jabbed a finger at Metsas and gestured at the two undecided mages. The law mage winced and shrank back in his chair but his expression hardly changed. Heryst asked a simple question. Metsas shook his head, Simmac made no move and the other two nodded.

"The decision is made on majority." Heryst's voice was unnaturally loud, puncturing the silence once the SoundShield had dispersed.

If it was possible, Darrick stood a little straighter, his hands still once again.

"The findings of the law council hearing in the matter of Lystern's charges of desertion and cowardice against former general Darrick are as follows."

Heryst's face was carefully neutral but his eyes couldn't disguise his discomfort. Hirad clutched the arms of his chair. He felt suddenly very hot and wished for just a morsel of Darrick's bearing.

"The charge of cowardice is dismissed. The charge of desertion, of leaving the men in your command to face a foe of unknown strength and of subsequently leaving the scene of battle to take up arms against an ally is upheld.

"The usual penalty for desertion is death without appeal. But these are not usual times. And there is no doubting your abilities as swordsman, horseman and leader of men."

Lord Metsas cleared his throat but a sharp glance from Heryst stilled any further interruption.

"It is the decision of this court, therefore, that you, Ry Darrick, be redrafted into the Lysternan cavalry, there to serve under Commander Izack in the war against Xetesk. Your rank will be reduced to cavalryman second class but, as you are aware, the Lysternan armed forces have always rewarded clear ability with swift promotion, often in the field.

"You will leave for the east gates front at dawn tomorrow. Do you have anything to say now sentence is passed?"

Hirad didn't know what to think. Relief that Darrick wasn't to be executed was diluted with the knowledge he was to be taken from The Raven. And on the back of so much recent loss, Hirad couldn't shift the notion that somehow The Raven were being forced to share his punishment.

For a few moments, Darrick was still while the chamber awaited his reaction. It was not one that any of them expected.

"I accept the decision but not the punishment," he said.

Lord Metsas snorted. "You speak as if you have a choice."

"I do," said Darrick. "I can choose to agree to your punishment or remain true to what I believe."

Hirad was sure everyone could hear his heart beating in his chest, the silence was that pronounced. Heryst was completely confused; his face had fallen and he looked as if he was about to burst into tears. Erienne was shaking her head but The Unknown and Thraun were nodding. Hirad was with them.

“And what exactly is it that you believe?” Lord Metsas asked.

“That Balaia needs me with The Raven far more than it does at Xetesk’s east gates. That we can right the balance if we’re left to act and the allies hold Xetesk at her walls. That my return to the Lysternan cavalry is a sham.

“Gentlemen, you have to understand me. I am Raven. And that is all I will ever be now until the day I die.”

Across the table, Metsas and Simmac relaxed into their chairs. Heryst closed his eyes briefly and leant forward, fingers kneading his forehead.

“Then I have no option,” he said. “I’ve done everything I can for you. Ry Darrick, if you refuse to join the cavalry, the sentence of this court can only be one thing. Death.”