

The Cry of the Newborn

James Barclay

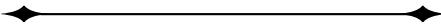
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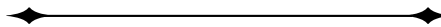
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*Cry of the
Newborn*



THE
ASCENDANTS
OF ESTOREA
BOOK 1

James Barclay

GOLLANCZ
LONDON

Cast List

THE CITIZENS OF WESTFALLEN

Ardol Kessian FATHER OF THE ASCENDANCY,
WIND HARKER
Willem Geste ASCENDANCY ECHELON,
FIREWALKER
Genna Kessian ASCENDANCY ECHELON, PAIN
TELLER
Andreas Koll ASCENDANCY ECHELON, LAND
WARDEN
Hesther Naravny ASCENDANCY ECHELON, LAND
WARDEN
Gwythen Terol ASCENDANCY ECHELON, HERD
MASTER
Meera Naravny ASCENDANCY ECHELON,
FIREWALKER
Jen Shalke ASCENDANCY ECHELON, WATERBORN
Arducius ASCENDANT
Gorian ASCENDANT
Mirron ASCENDANT
Ossacer ASCENDANT
Elsa Gueran READER OF WESTFALLEN
Bryn Marr A BLACKSMITH

OFFICERS OF THE ESTOREAN CONQUORD

Herine Del Aglios ADVOCATE OF THE ESTOREAN
CONQUORD
Paul Jbered EXCHEQUER OF THE GATHERERS
Felice Koroyan CHANCELLOR, ORDER OF THE
OMNISCIENT
Arvan Vasselis MARSHAL DEFENDER OF
CARADUK
Thomal Yuran MARSHAL DEFENDER OF
ATRESKA
Katrin Mardov MARSHAL DEFENDER OF
GESTERN
Orin D'Allinnius CHIEF SCIENTIST TO THE
ADVOCATE

Harkov CAPTAIN OF THE PALACE GUARD
Erith Menas A GATHERER
Harin A GATHERER

**NORTHERN
FRONT LEGIONS**

Roberto Del Aglios GENERAL OF THE ARMY
Davarov MASTER OF SWORD, 21ST ALA
Elise Kastenias MASTER OF HORSE, 8TH LEGION
Goran Shakarov MASTER OF SWORD, 15TH ALA
Dahmishev MASTER SURGEON
Rovan Neristus MASTER ENGINEER
Ellas Lennart ORDER SPEAKER

**EASTERN
FRONT LEGIONS**

Gesteris GENERAL OF THE ARMY
Pavel Nunan MASTER OF SWORD, 2ND LEGION
Dina Kell MASTER OF HORSE, 2ND LEGION

**SOUTHERN
FRONT LEGIONS**

Jorganesh GENERAL OF THE ARMY
Parnforst MASTER OF SWORD, 34TH ALA

**SAILORS OF
THE CONQUORD**

Gaius Kortonius PRIME SEA LORD OF THE
OCETANAS
Karl Iliev SQUADRON LEADER, OCENII
SQUADRON
Patonius CAPTAIN OF *CIRANDON'S PRIDE*
Anthus RIGGER, *CIRANDON'S PRIDE*
Gorres SURGEON, *CIRANDON'S PRIDE*

**CITIZENS AND
OTHERS**

Lena Pretal PRAETOR OF GULL'S FORD,
ATRESKA
Han Jesson A POTTER FROM GULL'S FORD
Harban Qvist KARKU GUIDE
Icenga Qvist GOR-CAMAS OF THE KARKU
Rensaark SENTOR, TSARDON FORCES
Kreysun PROSENTOR, TSARDON FORCES

Chapter 1

834th cycle of God, 1st day of Genasrise 1st year of the true Ascendancy

And there they were, lying asleep and at peace. Newborn and helpless. Beautiful and fragile. And in that, no different from any other infants born to this world blessed by God.

Never though, had a quartet of newborns undergone such lengthy and mute observation; been examined with such anxiety, hope and wonder. The atmosphere was so deeply charged it should have made them fretful enough to wake and cry. They did not.

Crowded around the line of cribs and looking down on the tiny faces were those for whom these three boys and one girl, scant hours into life, represented the culmination of generations of dedication. Yet for all the accumulated wisdom brought to bear and the endless paper records of all that had gone before, they still did not know if these four would achieve their birthrights.

However long they stared there would be no sign. The infants would give no hint if they possessed everything, or anything, that the exhaustive calculations suggested they would. But still they stared, reverent. The Ascendancy's Echelon had gathered around the cribs in complete accord. They could all sense something. After countless disappointments and false dawns, this time it was different. It had to be.

Shela Hasi stood behind the cribs with seven of the Echelon's nine members in front of her. There would be the inevitable, interminable wait for signs of true talent. But until the frustration of those years set in, they would hope and dream for the realisation of a destiny whose genesis was lost in the mists of ancient religion and belief. She felt awed by their presence. The entire community of Westfallen was close for many good reasons, of centuries longstanding, yet the Echelon had an aura that set them apart. In them rested

lingering ability, extraordinary dedication and an all-consuming determination.

Shela couldn't deny the occasional spark of envy. She'd been a Waterborn herself until she was ten. Wonderful times that would live with her forever. The day the talent had deserted her she'd nearly drowned.

That had been almost forty years ago now and there were still times she felt the loss as she had at that first moment. A violation of her body. The robbery of something she had come to assume was hers by right. So she envied the Echelon their continued link with the Ascendancy, their taste of the potential that they all prayed these infants possessed.

Yet she also pitied them the daily anxiety. While those whose talents faded usually suffered their loss early in life, it was not unknown for one in more advanced years to be shorn of their link. That pain would be terribly hard to bear. Every night she, like every strand member, prayed that the Echelon remained undamaged. So far, God had answered their prayers.

She smiled at them. These most revered of Westfallen's people were held rapt by the new arrivals. From Ardol Kessian, one of only three survivors of the first strand, to Jen Shalke, barely into her teens and only just coming to terms with her destiny. Such a sweet man, Ardol Kessian. One hundred and thirty-two years old now, completely hairless and stooped but still robust. His smile took the chill from a cold day and his voice, deep and sonorous, had been a comfort to the Echelon across the generations. He was a peerless Wind Harker and indeed had told them all how warm it would be during the births and in the days after. His was a keen talent and one they would inevitably miss when he returned to the earth and God's embrace.

'They are beautiful, aren't they?' said Shela, her whisper carrying loud across the silence of the cosy, sun-bathed nursery. A light breeze blew fresh sea air through the open windows. Shela could hear the hot air channelling through the hypocaust beneath the flagstones under their feet, adding further gentle warmth for the delicate newborns.

Kessian's deep green eyes twinkled beneath his bald brows. 'Glorious. Treasured. Carrying all our hopes and desires, though they cannot know it.' He nodded. 'And I approve of the names, too. Fine choices all.'

He reached out a minutely trembling hand to smooth the brow of each child in turn, speaking quietly as he did so.

‘Mirron, much will rest on your shoulders. You will bear the pressure of motherhood in addition to all else that will fall on you. Your strand-brothers lying beside you this day will support you always as you will them. Ossacer and Arducius, you carry the names of great warrior heroes but never should you be moved to strike another down. Your destiny is in peace. And Gorian. Blessed indeed by the name of our father. Keep it well. Be true to his memory. Fulfil your destiny and, with your brothers and sister, achieve that which we cannot. Use it for the benefit of us all under God the Omniscient.’

He turned to his friend of a hundred years, Willem Geste of the second strand. ‘Willem, a prayer.’

The Echelon came together and each knelt on one knee. One hand touched the ground, the other held palm up and open to the sky. Shela rested her hands on the outer cribs, embracing them all.

‘The Ascendancy stands before you, our God, to commend these newborn children to your care. Newborn who we pray will become your most powerful servants on this earth. We promise to nurture and train them, that they in turn will do your work while they are blessed by you with life; preserving the land and the sea and all those who depend upon them. We ask that you protect them, watch over them and love them as you do all your children. We ask this in the name of the true faith of the Omniscient. We of the pure strands of the Ascendancy beseech you, our God. So it will be.’

‘As it always was,’ they intoned as one.

‘Thank you, Willem,’ said Kessian, standing. ‘Now, before Shela throws us all out of here, I think we should take our leave and let these little ones rest.’

‘Can’t I stay longer with them?’ Jen Shalke’s voice carried a whine.

Kessian put a finger to his lips. Shela smiled to herself.

‘In a moment, young Jen,’ he said. ‘First of all, Gwythen, Meera, back to bed. I have no idea what possessed you to stand with us so soon after giving birth. You must be exhausted.’

‘We are of the Ascendancy Echelon,’ said Gwythen Terol, mother of Ossacer. ‘It is our duty.’ Her voice was proud but her face was drawn.

‘Nevertheless, please rest now,’ he said gently, the warmth never

leaving his voice despite his chiding words. ‘Willem, Genna, we have work to do and texts to study. There are answers we still need though I suspect much of our evidence lies sleeping in these cribs. Everything else will have to wait until we see what they become.’

‘And as for you, young Jen, I’m sure Shela will be happy to have your company in the days and seasons to come. However, today our nursemaid must introduce and accustom herself to her charges alone. Meanwhile, there are fish to be caught and fishers wanting to know where to cast their nets. It’s a beautiful day and the sea is warm. Perhaps you could find us a shoal, eh? Or the feast tonight will be lessened, will it not?’

Jen’s smile was adoring and Shela felt again that familiar moment of envy at the young Waterborn’s ability. She had known the freedom of the world beneath the waves until it had been wrenched from her. She dreamed often of what she had seen and the places she had gone. She relived her past through Jen’s tales and, for her part, was the only one who really understood the young woman. It had brought them very close. Shela dropped her gaze. For all that they respected her as a strand member and for her skills as nursemaid, she could never be one of them and feel that bond the Ascendancy shared so effortlessly.

The door to the nursery opened. Hesther Naravny entered, closing it behind her. A Land Warden of the fifth strand, she was a passionate, fiery woman in her mid-sixties. Hesther looked around the Ascendancy, her expression darkening as her eyes travelled over them.

‘Meera, what do you think you’re doing here? You too, Gwythen, for that matter. You should not be out of bed.’

‘The Echelon gathered to bless the newborns,’ said Meera. ‘So perhaps I should be asking you why you *weren’t* here?’

‘Always the petulant child,’ muttered Hesther. ‘Will I have to look out for you into your dotage, Meera?’

‘If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times. You are not my mother.’

Hesther’s face softened and she stepped close to Meera, cupping the woman’s cheeks in her hands. ‘No, but I am your sister and I love you more than any living thing under God’s sky. You are a mother of the ninth strand, the strand we all pray is the one to take us to ascendancy, and I would not see you risk yourself. Please Meera, the labour was difficult. You must rest.’

Meera sagged and nodded. 'I know. But this is just so . . . and look at my beautiful child.'

Hesther's face lit up. 'I am a proud aunt and a proud sister before I am part of the Echelon. You have a beautiful son, an important son. But come now. Gwythen, you as well. Help each other back to bed.'

The Echelon gave them room, Willem opening the door.

'Bless you both,' he said. 'Sleep well.'

'Right,' said Hesther when the door had closed once again. 'Ardol, the forum has been packed since first light. They are patient but surely it's time to give them some news.'

Kessian inclined his head. 'No sense in keeping them in suspense any longer. There is plenty to prepare.'

'So there is,' said Hesther. 'Shela, how are they?'

'Peaceful. But they can always have more peace.'

Hesther winked at her and walked to the door. 'I'll address the town. The rest of you, out.'

The nursery opened directly on to the marble-floored colonnade that enclosed the central courtyard gardens of the Ascendancy villa. Hesther walked quickly between two columns and out into the sun which warmed the flagstones under her sandaled feet and sparkled on the water trickling from the four fountains, each set in the centre of a quadrant of the courtyard. All around her, the scents and colours of flowers, grasses and small trees created a powerful sense of burgeoning life. Hesther breathed it in, feeling energised.

Behind her, she had left the best and brightest hopes of the Ascendancy. It filled her with a childlike excitement that hurried her to a trot across the beautiful gardens, down the long entrance vestibule, through the cool reception hall and out into the streets of Westfallen.

Westfallen nestled at the head of a steep-sided inlet which opened out, a hundred miles south, into the vastness of the ocean. Half a mile beyond the harbour walls the spectacular Genastro Falls cascaded over a thousand feet into the inlet, taking with them the run-off from Willows Lake, away to the east, two miles from the town.

The villa sat on a rise above the bulk of the town, overlooking the glorious golden bay with its stone- and concrete-built harbour. Scattered about the gentle slopes of the town sat larger villas surrounded by their farmland. Crops were ripening in the fields and

animals grazed or basked in the tranquillity of the day. Down towards the forum, the narrower, tightly packed, streets were lined with low houses and a few tenements under which shops opened onto pavement or square.

The town was deserted. The fleet of thirty fishing boats was dragged up onto the beach. No one stirred beneath the lazily flapping shop awnings. Everyone was at the forum. Hesther could hear the hubbub of voices and see the crowd gathered in front of the oratory. Hundreds of people waiting for news. Approaching as quickly as she dared without getting out of breath, Hesther heard a ripple of laughter through the crowd. Someone was entertaining them at least.

She entered the forum at the rear of the oratory and climbed the few steps onto the stage. Surrounding the paved space, shops and stalls were empty. The sun reflected from polished columns, white painted walls and warm red-tiled roofs. Every voice quietened the moment Hesther was seen. The young tumblers and jugglers scattered away from her and back into the crowd.

She breathed deep to calm herself, smoothing the front of her simple sleeveless blue dress and adjusting the cinch at her waist. She arranged the long auburn curls on her head and surveyed the townsfolk, all of whom had waited all day just to hear her words. She felt the weight of her sixty-five years then, the expectations that she carried on everyone's behalf and what success would bring.

All anyone here wanted was a life free of change and the pressure for change. Yet what she was about to announce would signal change of a most fundamental nature. In all their faces she saw expectation. In those not touched by the strands, she saw excitement and naivety too. A craving for the news she brought and no notion that it would affect their lives so deeply should the newborn grow into their potential.

She felt no guilt, only exhilaration. Because every face told of a spirit that would stand with them forever. The hush was unbearable. She was compelled to speak.

'My friends. They are born and they are well.'

The roar all but knocked her from her feet.

Ardol Kessian rested his elbows on the table and his chin in his hands. He shifted his backside against the hard bench, grunting at the discomfort. Someone really should have fetched him a cushion by

now. Night was full. The stars spread to the horizon in every direction. The air was clear and still warm. There would be no rain for seven days though the scattered cloud in a couple of days would keep them a little cooler.

In front of him, the floor of the forum was awash with people, faces bright in the fire and lantern light. On the oratory, the band roused weary dancers again with another old favourite. Hand drum and tympani beat the rhythm, kithara and pipes provided the melody and a strong voice guided the moves.

It was a long time since he had dared take to the centre of the forum to dance. He missed it. The energy and the joy, the close touch of a woman, and the scent of her in the spin. Her eyes on him as they stepped and turned. Now he contented himself with watching the younger generations make all the same mistakes he had made in his youth. A long time ago now. He glanced to his right and laid his hand on Genna's.

'Remember how we met on the floor?'

'Yes, Ardol,' said Genna, resignation in her tone. 'You ask me every time we watch a dance.'

'Do I?' Kessian's mouth turned up at the corners. 'I forget.'

'When it suits you.'

He squeezed Genna's hand. He would go first. Genna was thirty years his junior. They'd been tilling the earth together this last eighty years. He wondered how she would bear up without him. She'd probably be glad of the peace and quiet.

'Jen did well today,' he said, refusing to slip into melancholy on a night of celebration like this.

'That she did,' agreed Genna.

The fresh smells of grilling fish mixed with woodsmoke, roasting meats and the yeasty odour of spilt ale. Jen had found seabass and sardines. The nets had bulged and there would be plenty on the market when the hangovers had cleared the next morning.

'Do you mind if I interrupt you?'

Kessian looked up and across the table. There stood Arvan Vasselis, Marshal Defender of Caraduk. He had ridden in with his wife and young son late in the afternoon, having received the message five days previously that the births were imminent. His flag, deep blue, trimmed with gold and displaying rearing twin bears, flew above his residence which commanded peerless views of bay and harbour.

'Impeccable timing as always,' said Kessian, making to rise. Vasselis gestured him not to.

'Never known to miss a Westfallen party. I even brought some wine with me.' Vasselis placed two ornately carved ceramic jugs of something no doubt old and expensive on the table. 'Mind if I sit down?'

'You hardly have to ask,' said Kessian.

'Rank is no excuse for rudeness,' Vasselis said, dragging the opposite bench back a little. He leaned over and kissed Genna's cheeks before he sat. 'Pour away.'

Genna poured the dregs out of their two goblets and snared another that someone had abandoned on their table. She wiped them all out with a cloth from her waist before filling them with Vasselis's wine.

'And where is our country's first lady?' she asked.

'Netta? Oh, settling Kovan, I expect. This would all be a little much for him. Best he sleeps through it.'

'Don't you have a retinue for that sort of thing?'

'I think you'll find we can cope as parents,' said Vasselis. 'Besides, we hardly need to worry, do we? Not here.'

'You're never quite going to get used to the trappings of your position, are you?'

Vasselis chuckled. 'Step out of line, Kessian and you'll find I understand certain of my trappings very well indeed.'

He raised his goblet and the three of them chinked and drank.

'Very good,' said Kessian, feeling the full red wine soothe its way down his throat, leaving the aftertaste of rich, ripe plums.

'You doubted it?' asked Vasselis.

The friends fell silent. Kessian studied Vasselis as he watched the dancing and celebration all around him. He felt proud, observing this man sitting among his citizens. So much at ease, feeling neither superior nor under any threat to his authority.

Kessian had seen him grow from a young lad fascinated with the sea to become the ruler of Caraduk. He was the Ascendancy's most powerful ally and fiercest protector of its secrets. Even with him on their side, maintaining the secrecy beyond Westfallen's borders was a constant battle and a dreadful anxiety. If what they hoped turned out to be true, they would need him more than ever in the years to come.

Abruptly, Vasselis stopped tapping his fingers on the table in time

to the drums and turned his large brown eyes on Kessian. Vasselis had short dark hair and a soft, friendly face which an unfortunate few would always mistake for a sign of weakness.

‘So,’ he said. ‘Is it them?’

Kessian shrugged. ‘It depends how much you believe in omen and how much in science. Even for me, the coincidence is exciting. Mathematically though, we set no store by it.’ His face cracked into a smile and he shook his head, trying in vain to dislodge the thrill that strained at every nerve the moment he thought about them. ‘They were all born in the same hour to mothers from within and without the Echelon and after almost identical difficult labours. An hour where the rain passed, the clouds broke and the sun burst through. And if you believe people like Andreas Koll and Hesther Naravny, an hour where the birds fell silent and every cow, sheep and pig, every dog and cat, turned its head to the villa.’

‘And do you believe it?’ asked Vasselis.

Kessian’s smile broadened and he drained his goblet. ‘I believe there is something in the atmosphere that affected this whole community around the time of the births. I also believe in the theory of mass empathetic outpouring of an emotion like hope or love. I don’t believe in omens and portents. At least, I try not to.’

‘Ardol, my old friend, you are avoiding my question. Is it them?’

Kessian chewed his lip. He looked out across the forum and the dancing, the crowds of animated talkers and drinkers. The noise of the music and laughter, the strong cooking smells and the harsh light of flame and lantern clamoured around his head. It was a clamour the wine amplified uncomfortably. He wondered when he had started feeling like this.

‘I’m old, Marshal Vasselis. I cannot afford for it not to be them.’