

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BARBARA HAMBLY

THE
DARK HAND OF
MAGIC

THE SUN WOLF
AND STARHAWK SERIES



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Barbara Hambly



For Sensei

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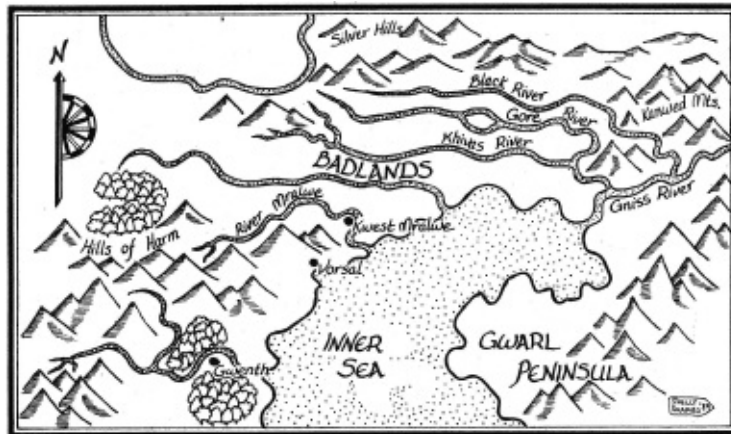
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

It should be noted here that not all of the opinions expressed in this book are those of the author.



Chapter 1

SUN WOLF'S CAPTURE, as Sun Wolf himself reflected at his execution, was sheer, stupid ill luck, which Dogbreath of Mallincore would have told him was only to be expected under the circumstances.

The arrow that brought him down took him high in the back from the shelter of a pile of stones he'd have bet his last silver bit—which happened to be in his pocket at the time—couldn't have hidden an emaciated coyote. He hit the sand of the dry arroyo bed in a second's whirling disorientation and sickening pain and the next moment got a gritty faceful of gravel, kicked up as his horse bolted. His first thought was, *So much for the King of Wenshar's guarding our backs.*

His second thought, through a descending curtain of gray weakness, was that, if he blacked out, he was a dead man.

Hooves throbbed in the sand under his unshaven cheek. He made his good eye open and, with odd, tunneled clarity, saw his partner, Starhawk, spur after his escaping horse. It was like her, he thought detachedly, watching her lean from her saddle to grab at the trailing rein, to go after the horse before ascertaining that he still lived. They had been lovers for nearly a year, but she'd been a mercenary soldier for eight, and knew precisely how long a ride it was over the black granite mountains of the Dragon's Backbone to safety.

He knew who'd ambushed them, of course, and why.

Lying in the deep sand of the wash with an arrow in his back, he wondered why he'd been under the impression that this wasn't the sort of thing that people had to put up with after they became wizards.

Shirdar warriors, the fast-moving cavalry of the deep desert, were already coming down the canyon wall, their horses springing down trails for which goats would have demanded hazard pay. By this time of the afternoon, the foothill canyons were drowned in dove-colored shadow, though the rim of sky above was amber-hot. In the burnished light, the warriors' white robes

billowed with dreamy slowness. The Wolf knew he was going into shock and fought to stay conscious and to keep his breathing slow and deep. He had to fight, too, not to spring up and make a run for it. Besides making a target of him—provided he managed to get on his feet at all—with the Hawk as far off as she still was, it would only waste his strength. Long experience of being wounded in the battles that he'd spent most of his forty years fighting for other men's pay told him now that he had none to spare.

Healing spells, he thought belatedly. *I'm supposed to be a wizard, dammit.*

His mind fumbled at the words to call forth power and to slow the blood welling stickily between the thick muscles of his back and the scuffed sheepskin of his jerkin, but the pain of the wound itself clouded his mind and made it difficult to concentrate. It was a very different thing from healing others, totally leaving aside the fact that, when he'd worked healing-magic on others, he hadn't had half a dozen irate warriors getting set to play cat's cradle with his entrails.

Starhawk was riding back already, the captured horse on a rein, weaving and ducking the arrows that flashed around her—a tallish, rangy woman in her late twenties whom most men were blind and stupid enough to call plain. She still wore the metal-studded green leather doublet of the King of Wenshar's guards, in which she'd lately been employed; short-cropped hair the color of old ivory whipped in strings across a face that was thin, cool, and marked with an old scar down one cheek and a blackly recent bruise the width of a sword blade. Their stay in Wenshar, southernmost of the Middle Kingdoms, had been brief but wildly eventful.

Her distance to him shortened. So did the shirdar's. This was going to be close. There was just time, he thought, if he could mount fast and unaided. With two horses they should be able to hold that slim lead over the lizard-dry mountains to the more settled lands of Dalwirin to the north, where the shirdar dared not hunt.

Gathering his limbs under him, he reflected, with grim detachment, on what a hell of a word "if" was.