

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**BARBARA HAMBLY**



# DRAGONSbane

THE WINTERLANDS SERIES



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# Dragonsbane

Barbara Hambly



For Allan

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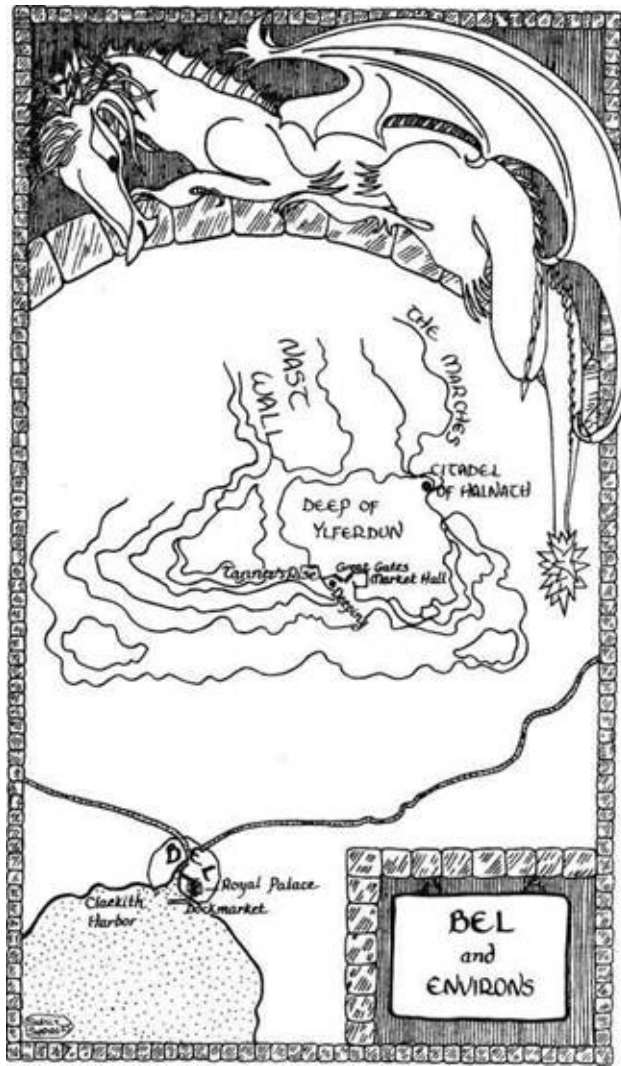
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# CHAPTER I

BANDITS OFTEN LAY in wait in the ruins of the old town at the fourways—Jenny Waynest thought there were three of them this morning.

She was not sure any more whether it was magic which told her this, or simply the woodcraftiness and instinct for the presence of danger that anyone developed who had survived to adulthood in the Winterlands. But as she drew rein short of the first broken walls, where she knew she would still be concealed by the combination of autumn fog and early morning gloom beneath the thicker trees of the forest, she noted automatically that the horse droppings in the sunken clay of the roadbed were fresh, untouched by the frost that edged the leaves around them. She noted, too, the silence in the ruins ahead; no coney's foot rustled the yellow spill of broomsedge cloaking the hill slope where the old church had been, the church sacred to the Twelve Gods beloved of the old Kings. She thought she smelled the smoke of a concealed fire near the remains of what had been a crossroads inn, but honest men would have gone there straight and left a track in the nets of dew that covered the weeds all around. Jenny's white mare Moon Horse pricked her long ears at the scent of other beasts, and Jenny wind-whispered to her for silence, smoothing the raggedy mane against the long neck. But she had been looking for all those signs before she saw them.

She settled into stillness in the protective cloak of fog and shadow, like a partridge blending with the brown of the woods. She was a little like a partridge herself, dark and small and nearly invisible in the dull, random plaids of the northlands; a thin, compactly built woman, tough as the roots of moorland heather. After a moment of silence, she wove her magic into a rope of mist and cast it along the road toward the nameless ruins of the town.

It was something she had done even as a child, before the old wander-mage Caerdinn had taught her the ways of power. All her thirty-seven years, she had lived in the Winterlands—she knew the smells of danger. The late-

lingering birds of autumn, thrushes and blackbirds, should have been waking in the twisted brown mats of ivy that half-hid the old inn's walls—they were silent. After a moment, she caught the scent of horses, and the ranker, dirtier stench of men.

One bandit would be in the stumpy ruin of the old tower that commanded the south and eastward roads, part of the defenses of the ruined town left from when the prosperity of the King's law had given it anything to defend. They always hid there. A second, she guessed, was behind the walls of the old inn. After a moment she sensed the third, watching the crossroads from a yellow thicket of seedy tamarack. Her magic brought the stink of their souls to her, old greeds and the carrion-bone memories of some cherished rape or murder that had given a momentary glow of power to lives largely divided between the giving and receiving of physical pain. Having lived all her life in the Winterlands, she knew that these men could scarcely help being what they were; she had to put aside both her hatred of them, and her pity for them, before she could braid the spells that she laid upon their minds.

Her concentration deepened further. She stirred judiciously at that compost of memories, whispering to their blunted minds of the bored sleepiness of men who have watched too long. Unless every illusion and Limitation was wrought correctly, they would see her when she moved. Then she loosened her halberd in its holster upon her saddle-tree, settled her sheepskin jacket a little more closely about her shoulders and, with scarcely breath or movement, urged Moon Horse forward toward the ruins.

The man in the tower she never saw at all, from first to last. Through the browning red leaves of a screen of hawthorn, she glimpsed two horses tethered behind a ruined wall near the inn, their breath making plumes of white in the dawn cold; a moment later she saw the bandit crouching behind the crumbling wall, a husky man in greasy old leathers. He had been watching the road, but started suddenly and cursed; looking down, he began scratching his crotch with vigor and annoyance but no particular surprise. He did not see Jenny as she ghosted past. The third bandit, sitting his rawboned black horse between a broken corner of a wall and a spinney of raggedy birches, simply

stared out ahead of him, lost in the daydreams she had sent.

She was directly in front of him when a boy's voice shouted from down the southward road, "LOOK OUT!"

Jenny whipped her halberd clear of its rest as the bandit woke with a start. He saw her and roared a curse. Peripherally Jenny was aware of hooves pounding up the road toward her; the other traveler, she thought with grim annoyance, whose well-meant warning had snapped the man from his trance. As the bandit bore down upon her, she got a glimpse of a young man riding out of the mist full-pelt, clearly intent upon rescue.

The bandit was armed with a short sword, but swung at her with the flat of it, intending to unhorse her without damaging her too badly to rape later. She feinted with the halberd to bring his weapon up, then dipped the long blade on the pole's end down under his guard. Her legs clinched to Moon Horse's sides to take the shock as the weapon knifed through the man's belly. The leather was tough, but there was no metal underneath. She ripped the blade clear as the man doubled up around it, screaming and clawing; both horses danced and veered with the smell of the hot, spraying blood. Before the man hit the muddy bed of the road, Jenny had wheeled her horse and was riding to the aid of her prospective knight-errant, who was engaged in a sloppy, desperate battle with the bandit who had been concealed behind the ruined outer wall.

Her rescuer was hampered by his long cloak of ruby red velvet, which had got entangled with the basketwork hilt of his jeweled longsword. His horse was evidently better trained and more used to battle than he was: the maneuverings of the big liver-bay gelding were the only reason the boy hadn't been killed outright. The bandit, who had gotten himself mounted at the boy's first cry of warning, had driven them back into the hazel thickets that grew along the tumbled stones of the inn wall, and, as Jenny kicked Moon Horse into the fray, the boy's trailing cloak hung itself up on the low branches and jerked its wearer ignominiously out of the saddle with the horse's next swerve.

Using her right hand as the fulcrum of a swing, Jenny swept the