



BARBARA HAMBLY

Author of *Dragonsbane*

DRAGONS SHADOW

"She writes darn good books, our Barbara!"

—ANNE McCAFFREY

More praise for *Dragonshadow*

“With its resourceful, forty-five-year-old heroine who must make difficult choices, face both emotional and demonic challenges and deal with the pain of her past, Hambly’s novel should appeal to mature readers who seek more than flashing swords and simple sorcery... This novel excels as a sequel but readers new to the story won’t miss a beat.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Beautifully concise, adroitly plotted, inventive, and insightful; a wrenching affair that works its barbed pleasures ever deeper into the enthralled, horrified reader.”

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

“Hambly creates a believable setting and compellingly real characters without sacrificing the sense of a truly magical world, both beautiful and deadly. This is *not* yet another predictable sword and sorcery tale. This story concerns the temptations of power and the cost of resisting evil.

Grief and loss are inescapable. Unlike *Dragonsbane*, however, *Dragonshadow* promises readers another book in which, perhaps, the protagonists will find peace and healing.”

—Amazon.com

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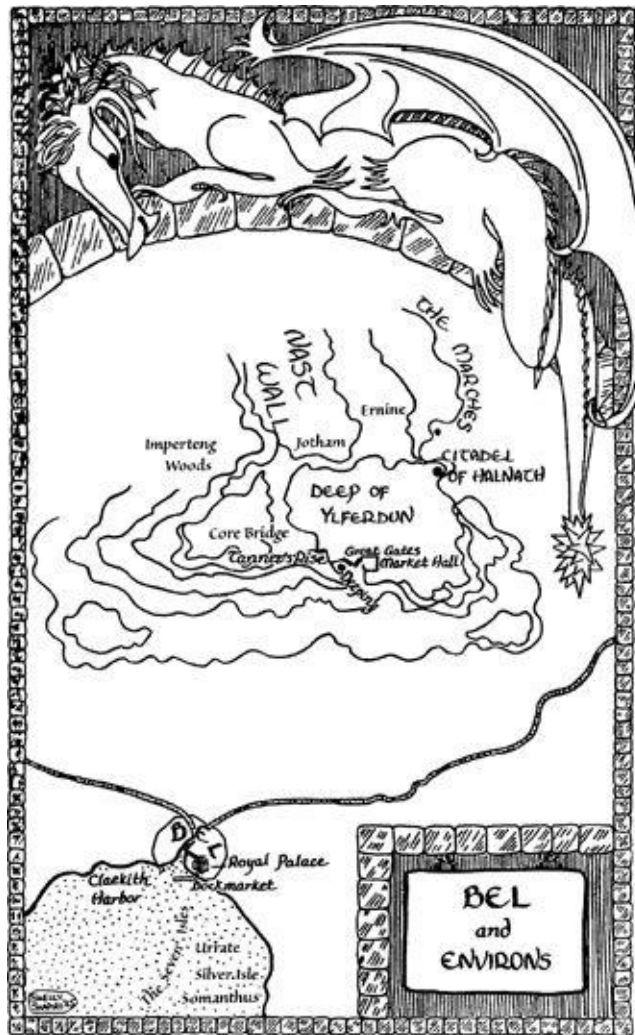
DRAGONSHADOW

Barbara Hambly



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Book One

THE SKERRIES OF LIGHT

CHAPTER ONE

Dragonsbane, they called him. Slayer of dragons.

Or *a* dragon, anyway. And, he'd later found out, not such a very big one at that.

Lord John Aversin, Thane of the Winterlands, leaned back in the mended oak chair in his library as the messenger's footfalls retreated down the tower stairs, and looked across at Jenny Waynest, who was curled up on the windowsill with a cat dozing in her lap.

“Bugger,” he said.

The night’s first appreciable breeze—warm and sticky as such things were in the Winterlands in summer—brought the grit of woodsmoke through the open window and made the candle flames shudder among the heaped books.

“A hundred feet long,” Jenny murmured.

John shook his head. “Gaw, any dragon looks a hundred feet long if you’re under it.” He pushed his round-lensed spectacles more firmly onto the bridge of his long nose. “Or in a position where you have to think about bein’ under it in the near future. I doubt it’s over fifty. That one we slew over by Far West Riding wasn’t quite thirty ...” He nodded to the cold fireplace, where the black spiked mace of the golden dragon’s tail-tip hung. “And Morkeleb the Black was forty-two, though I thought he’d whack me over the back of the head when I asked could I measure him.” He grinned at the memory, but behind the spectacles Jenny could see the fear in his eyes.

Almost as an afterthought he added, “We’ll have to go after it.”

Jenny stroked the cat’s head. “Yes.” Her voice was inaudible. The cat purred and made bread on her knee.

“Funny, that.” John got to his feet and stretched to get the crick out of his back. “I’ve put together every account I can find of past Dragonsbanes—all them old ballads and tales—and matched ’em up as well as I could with the King-lists.” He gestured to the vast rummage that covered desk and floor and every shelf of the low-vaulted study: bound bundles of notes, parchments half copied from waterstained books found in the ruins south of Wrynde. Curillius on *The Deeds of the Ancient Heroes*, Gorgonimir’s *Creatures and Phenomena*. A fair copy of a fragment of the old *Liever Draiken* sent by the Regent of Bel, a connoisseur of both ancient manuscripts and the tales of Dragonsbanes. Notes yet to be copied—he’d jotted them down two years ago—of a dragon-slaying song sung by one of the garrison at Cair Corflyn, all mixed up with wax note tablets, candles, inkwells, scrapers, prickers, pumice, candle scissors, and dismantled clocks. For the fourteen years they’d been together, Jenny had heard John swear every year or two he’d put the place in order, and she knew that the phrase “put together” must not be taken too literally.

Magpie gleanings of learning by a man whose curiosity was an unfilled well; accretions of useful, interesting, or merely frivolous lore spewed back at random by circumstance and the mad God of Time.

“Some Dragonsbanes slay one dragon and that’s that, they’re in the ballads for good,” mused John. “Others slay two or three, and two of those, as far as I can figure ’em, are within ten years of the singletons. Then you’ll get generations, fifty, sixty, seventy years, when the dragons mind their own business, whatever that is, and nobody slays anybody¹. This is three for me. How’d I get so lucky?”

“The North is being settled again.” Jenny set Skinny Kitty aside and went to stand behind John, her arms around his waist. Through his rough red wool doublet and patched linen shirt she felt the ribs under the hard sheath of muscle, the warmth of his flesh. “It was the cattle herd at Skep Dhû garrison that the dragon hit. There probably hasn’t been this much livestock in the North since the Kings left. It may have drawn this one.”

“Gaw,” he said again, and set his hand over the folded knot of hers. An oddly deft hand for a warrior’s, inkstained and blistered in two places from a chemical experiment that took an unexpected turn. But thick, like his forearm, with the muscle of a lifetime of wielding a sword. In profile his was the face of a scholar. In his reddish-brown hair, hanging loose to his shoulders, the candlelight gilded the first flecks of gray.

He’d been twenty-four when he’d gone against the gold Dragon of Wyr, and his side still hurt like a knife-thrust from the damaged ribs whenever the weather turned. Jenny’s fingers could detect the ridge of the biggest scar he’d taken when he fought Morkeleb the Black in the burned-out Deep beneath Nast Wall. *Life is fragile*, she thought. *Life is precious, and life is short*. “How many is the most any Dragonsbane has been able to slay?” she asked, and John half-turned his head to grin down over his shoulder at her.

“Three. That was Alkmar the Godborn. His third dragon killed him.”

In the hour or so that separated them from moonrise, John and Jenny mustered all they would need for the slaying of the Dragon of Skep Dhû, such of them as were stored at the Hold. John’s battle armor, almost as battered and sorry as the doublet of black leather and iron in which he was wont to patrol his lands. Two axes, one a short, single-grip weapon that could be wielded from the back of a horse, the other longer and heavier, a two-handed thing for finishing a creature dying on the ground. Eight harpoons, like boar spears but larger, barbed and massive and written over with spells of death and ruin.

John’s half-brother Muffle, sergeant of the local militia and smith of the village of Alyn, had forged the first two in a hurry, when the Dragon of Wyr had descended on the herds of Great Toby fourteen years ago, and the others had been made a few weeks after that. Jenny had put spells of death on them all. In those days her powers had been small, hedge-witch magics taught her by old Caerdinn, who had once been tutor at Alyn Hold, and she had known little of dragons, only scraps and snippets culled from John’s books. Killing the golden dragon had taught her something of a dragon’s nature, so when Prince Gareth of Magloshaldon, later Regent for the King of Belmarie, had come begging John’s help against the Dragon of Nast Wall, she had been able to weave more accurate spells. Her magic was still, at that time, small.

Now she sat on the wooden platform that John and Muffle had built at the top of the tower for John’s telescope. The eight harpoons lay before her on the planks. Far below she heard John’s voice, and Muffle’s, distant as birdsong

but far more profane, as they dragged out cauldrons and wood. She heard Adric's voice, too, a gay treble—her second son, at eight burly and red-haired and every inch the descendant of John's formidable, bearlike father: *He should be in bed!* Beyond a doubt three-year-old Mag was trailing, silent as a marsh fey, at his heels.

For a moment she felt annoyed at John's Cousin Dilly, who was supposed to be looking after the children, and then let all thought of them slip away with the releasing of her breath. *You cannot be a mage, old Caerdinn had said to her, if your thoughts are ever straying: to your supper, to your child, to whether you will have the next breath of air after this one is gone from under your ribs. The key to magic is magic. Never forget that.*

And though she had found that magic's key was something else, in many ways the old man had been correct. Her thought circled, like the power circle she had drawn on the platform around herself and the harpoons, and like the power that came down to her in silver threads from the shape of the stars, her thought took shape.

Cruelty. Uncaring. The quenching of life. The weary welcoming of the final dark.

Death-spells. And behind the death-spells, the gold fierce fire of dragon-magic.

For four years, now, that dragon-blaze had burned in her blood.

Morkeleb, she thought, forgive me.

Or was it not a thing of dragons to forgive?

Morkeleb the Black. The Dragon of Nast Wall.

She summoned the magic down from the stars, out of the air, called it from the core of fire within her that had burned into life when, by Morkeleb's power, she had been transformed to dragon-kind. Though she had returned to human form, abandoning the immortality of the star-drakes, part of her essence, her inner heart, had remained the essence of a dragon, and she understood power as dragons understood it. Since it was not a thing of dragons to think or care, she did not, as she wove her death-spells, think or care about Morkeleb, who had loved her.

Loved her enough to let her return to human form.

Loved her enough to return her to John.

But after the death-spells were wrought and bound into the harpoons, she sat on the rickety platform above the Hold, her arms clasped round her knees, listening to the far-off voices of her husband and her son and remembering the skeletal black shape in the darkness, the silver labyrinthine eyes.

Morkeleb.

"Mother?"

Starlight showed the trapdoor that opened among the slates of the turret roof, but it did not penetrate the shadow underneath. Mageborn, Jenny was

able to see her elder son, Ian, a weedy twelve-year-old, her own night-black hair and blue eyes in John's beaky face. He stepped onto the steeply slanting roof and made to come down the stairs, and she said, "No, wait there." The weariness of working the death-songs dragged at her bones. "Let me gather these up and send them on their way."

Ian, she knew, would understand what she said. Only this year his own powers had started to manifest: small, as any teenager's were—the ability to call fire and find lost objects, to sometimes see in fire things far away. Ian sat on the trapdoor's sill and watched in fascination as she drew the glimmer from out of the circles, collecting it like cold spider-silk in her hands. All magic, Caerdinn had taught her, depended on Limitations. Before even beginning to lay down the circles of power, let alone summon the death-spells, she had cleansed the platform with rainwater and hyssop and laid on each separate rough-hewn plank such Words as would keep the vile magics from attaching to the place itself. Spells, too, were required to hold the wicked ferocity of what she had done within a small space, so it would not disperse over the countryside and cause ruin and death to everyone in the Hold, in the village, in the farms that nestled close to the walls. Like a miser picking up pinhead-sized crumbs of gold dust with his fingernails, so Jenny gathered into her palms each whisper and shudder of the death-spells' residue, named them and neutralized them and released them into the turning starlight.

"Can I help?"

"No, not this time. You see what I'm doing, though?" He nodded. As she worked, she felt, rising through her—as it always rose, it seemed to her, at the most inopportune of times—the miserable flush of heat, the reminder that the change of a woman's life was coming upon her. Patiently, wearily, she called upon other spells, little silvery cantrips of blood and time, to put that heat aside. "With spells of cursing you must be absolutely thorough, absolutely clean, particularly with spells worked in a high place," she said.

Ian's eyes went to John's telescope, mounted at the far side of the platform; she saw he read her thought. It would not take much, they both knew, for the rail to give way, or John to lose his balance. A fragment of curse, a stray shadow of ill will, would be enough to cause John or Ian or anyone else to forget to latch the trapdoor, or for the latch to stick, so that Adric or Mag, or one of Cousin Rowanberry's ever-multiplying brood, could come up here ...

And even so, the platform was the safest place in all the Hold to work such spells.

As she and Ian bore the harpoons down the twisting stair, Jenny remembered what it had been, to be a dragon. To be a creature of diamond heart and limitless power. A creature to whom magic was not something that one *did*—well or less well—but the thing that one was: will and magic, flesh and bone, all one.

And not caring if a child fell from the platform.

With the moon's rising John and Jenny and Ian rode out from Alyn Hold to the stone house on Frost Fell, where Jenny had for so many years lived alone. It had been Caerdinn's house, and Jenny had lived as the old wizard's pupil from the time she was thirteen and the buds of power she'd had as a child began to blossom. A single big room and a loft, bookshelves, a table of pickled pine, a vast hearth, and a big bed. It was to this house that John had first come to her, twenty-two and needing help against one of the bandit hordes that had been the scourge of the Winterlands in the days before the King sent his protecting armies to them again. He'd been challenged, Jenny recalled, to single combat by some bandit chief—maybe the one who had slain his father—and had heard that no weapon could harm a man who'd lain with a witch.

But she'd remembered him from her own childhood and his. His mother had been Jenny's first teacher in the arts of power, a captive woman, an Icerider witch: The scandal when Lord Aver married her had been a nine days' wonder through the Winter-lands. When her son was four and Jenny seven, Kahiera Night-raven had vanished, gone back to the Iceriders, leaving Jenny with no better instructor than Caerdinn, who had hated all Iceriders and Kahiera above the rest. From that time until his arrival at Frost Fell, she had seen Kahiera's son barely a score of times.

Riding up the fell now, she saw him in her mind as she had seen him then—cocky, quirky, aggressive, the scourge of maidens in five villages ... And angry. It was his anger she remembered most, and the shy fleeting sweetness of his smile.

"Place needs thatching," he remarked now, standing in Battle-hammer's stirrups to pull a straw from the overhang of the roof. "According to Dotys' *Catalogues*, v1illagers on the Silver Isles used to braid straw into solid tiles and peg 'em to the rafterwork, which must have been gie heavy. Cowan"—the head stableman at the Hold—"says it can't be done, but I've a mind to try this summer, if I can find how they did the braiding. If we're all still alive by haying, that is." Chewing the straw, he dropped from the warhorse's back, looped the rein around the gate, and trailed Jenny and Ian into the house. "Garn," he added, sniffing. "Why is it no matter what kind of Weirds you lay around the house, Jen, to keep wanderers from even seein' the place, mice always seem to get in just fine?"

Jenny flashed him a quick glance by the soft blue radiance of the witchlight she called and bent to pull from under the bed the box of herbs she kept there. Hellebore, yellow jessamine, and the bright red caps of panther-mushroom, carefully potted in wax-stoppered jars. Jars and box were written around with spells, as the house walls were written, to keep intruders away, but there were two mice dead under the bed nevertheless.