

KNIGHT OF THE DEMON QUEEN

BARBARA HAMBLY



BALLANTINE BOOKS

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Praise for
Barbara Hambly's *Dragonshadow*

“I might be slightly prejudiced for dragons, and I am definitely prejudiced in favor of anything Barbara Hambly wants to do with her main characters, Lord John and Jenny ... She handles the action with great skill and charm, and the universe with beautiful imagery ... She writes darn good books, our Barbara!”

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“First-rate high fantasy ... Elegant, intelligent, and entertaining ... 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.”

—*Publisher's 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)

By Barbara Hambly

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CHAPTER ONE

Jenny Waynest's son Ian took poison on the night of winter's first snowfall. He was thirteen.

She was dreaming about the demon when it happened. The demon was called Amayon, beautiful as the night and the morning, and she had dreamed of him every night since fall, when his possession of her had ended. While her soul was imprisoned in a pale green crystal, he had inhabited her flesh and done such things as still made her wake weeping, or screaming, or speaking his name out of a longing so desperate she thought she would die of it.

In daylight the grief of his loss, and her shame at that grief, occupied her mind against her will, to the exclusion of all other things. Otherwise she would have seen—she hoped she would have seen—the pain and horror growing in her son's eyes.

This night there was a part of her that knew where Ian was. In her dream she saw him in the small stone house on Frost Fell—the house that had been her master Caerdinn's up to the old man's death. Later Jenny had lived there, until she had gone with Lord John Aversin, Thane of the Winterlands and her lover of ten years, to live at Alyn Hold. Asleep in their bed at the Hold now, she saw their son in the old stone house, saw him descend the stair from the loft and with a glance, as wizards could, kindle the wood on the hearth.

He shouldn't be there, she thought. It was past midnight and the snow had been falling since just before dark. *He shouldn't be there.*

Rest, Amayon's voice whispered. *Sleepy dreams are better than plans and schemes.*

Her consciousness drifted away.

Ever since the magics of the Demon Queen Aohila had taken Amayon from her, Jenny had tried to decide whether the pain she felt was a memory that Amayon had left or whether he spoke to her still. Sometimes she thought that she could hear his voice, gentle and

trusting as a child's, though he was Aohila's prisoner behind the Mirror of Isychros. At other times she guessed that the coaxing sweetness, the hurtful mocking, were only a poison he'd left to make her suffer. *How like him*, she thought, and she did not know if she thought it fondly or with hatred.

Maybe both.

People who survived possession weren't the same afterward.

Her mind returned to her son. He sat beside the hearth, his head bowed, thin fingers twisting at his dark hair.

She remembered her own pain when the demon who'd possessed her had been driven out.

At least he still has magic.

The loss of Jenny's magic, as a result of the final battle with the demons, had been the worst of all.

You saved them, the sweet soft voice whispered in her mind: like Amayon's voice, though sometimes it sounded like her own. *You fought the demons for your son, and for Lord John, and for the Regent of the Realm. You did just as you ought. Yet you lost everything. How fair is that?*

The image came to her of Ian casually brushing aside her spells of ward, running his hands over the terracotta pots of her poisons in the brassy dull firelight, but the vision melted with her resentment and her grief. *Sleepy dreams*, the voice coaxed. *Lovely sleepy dreams. Of Amayon. Of magic.*

She saw Ian open a pot that she knew contained monkshood. Saw him dip his fingers into the coarse powder.

Perhaps you'll find the magic again within your beautiful heart.

The sweet voice lured her back to her dream, where she lay in the great bed in the Hold with John breathing soft beside her. His beaky face was turned away; he was clerkish and shortsighted and middle-aged, and nothing like the great thanes who had ruled the Winterlands before him, save for his scars.

Dreaming, she broke open her own ribs and tore her chest apart, as the demon had suggested. She saw her heart, which in her dream was wrought of a thousand crystals, scarlet and crimson and pink. Dreaming, she lifted it out. Blood gummed her fingers together as she fumbled for its catch, as if her heart were a box. The catch was a

diamond, like a single poisoned tear.

Fascinated, she watched her heart unfurl in all directions, as if in opening the box she had somehow folded herself inside it. Within it she was, curiously, once again in the curtained bed with John, in a warm frowst of worn quilts and moth-holed furs. Like mirrors within mirrors she saw the scarred husk of her own body, burned in the final battle when she had pinned the demon-ridden renegade mage Caradoc with a harpoon beneath the sea: hair burned away, eyelashes burned away—magic burned away.

John lay beside her, twined in the arms of the Demon Queen.

“Don’t wake her,” the Queen whispered, and giggled like a schoolgirl. She was beautiful, as Jenny had never been beautiful: tall and slim, with breasts like ripe melons and coal-black jeweled hair. She traced on John’s bare flesh the silvery marks it had borne when he’d returned from the Hell behind the mirror, marks that could occasionally be seen in the light of the earthly moon. Then she pressed her lips to the pit of his throat, where a small fresh scar lay like a burn.

She laughed huskily when John cupped her breasts in his hands.

“Let him be!”

Jenny’s cry waked her. Like falling through a chain of mirrors, she fell from the imagined tower and imagined bed to the real ones and sat bolt upright, the air icy in her lungs. Beside her, John slept still.

He dreams of her. Rage washed from Jenny all thought of that other dream, the dream of Ian hunting among the ensorceled poison pots at Frost Fell. *Laughs at me with her while I sleep.*

Her cry had not waked him, and that made her angry, too. Hating him, she rolled from the bed and through the heavy curtains. The tower chamber was cramped and fusty: table and chest and large areas of the floor littered with John’s books. He had a formidable library, laboriously collected from the ruins of crumbling towns, copied, collated, begged, and borrowed. Since summer’s end, when they had returned from the South, John had been reading everything he could get his hands on concerning demons and melancholy and the silent sicknesses of the heart.

As if, Jenny thought angrily, he can cure Ian by reading!

But that was always John’s answer.

His armor lay among the books: a battered doublet of black leather, spiked and plated with iron and chain; dented pauldrons and a close-fitting helm; longsword and shortsword and a couple of fine Southern cavalry blades; spectacles with bent silver-wire frames; and a pair of muddy boots. Rocklys of Galyon, whose machinations to rule the Realm had set in motion last summer's terrible events, had stripped the Winterlands of its garrisons: John was back riding patrol, as he had done most of his adult life.

He had little time these days to give his son.

And less, Jenny thought, to give to her.

Fingers stiff with scars, she shoved up the latch of the heavy shutters and stood gazing into darkness only a degree less heavy than that in the room. Snow covered the bare fields, the bare moor beyond. The smell of the sky calmed her, dispelled the envenomed miasma of her dreams.

Ian. The dream of him stirred at the edge of her thoughts.

Sleepy dreams. The sweet voice whispered and pulled at her heart. *Sleepy dreams, not plans and schemes.* Somehow it sounded rational, true in its simplicity, like a nursery song.

When she'd left the bed, the burning heat of the change of life had been warming her flesh, but that fled away now and her limbs were cold. Better to return to bed and the comfort of her dreams.

"Jen?"

The cold from the window must have waked John.

Anger and resentment burned her. She wanted to be alone with her wretchedness and her grief.

"You were dreaming of her, weren't you?" Her voice snapped in her own ears, black ice breaking underfoot and miles of freezing water beneath. She spat the words back at him over her shoulder. She knew that he stood next to the bed, wrapped in one of its shabby furs, long hair hanging to his shoulders as he blinked in her direction, seeing nothing.

And just as well, she thought bitterly. Face and scalp and body scarred by demon fire and poisoned steam, and scarred within by the heats and migraines and malaises of the change of a woman's life. *Better he be half blind and in darkness than see me as I am.*

"I can't help me dreams, Jen." He sounded tired. They'd fought

before going to bed. And yesterday, and the day before.

“Then don’t deny me mine.”

“I wouldn’t,” John retorted, “if dreams was all they were. But you had a demon within you...”

“And you believe them, don’t you?” Jenny swung around, trembling. “Believe those people who say that anyone who has been taken by a demon should be killed? That’s what all those books of yours say, isn’t it?”

“Not all.” There was a warrant out in the South for his life for trafficking with the Demon Queen. Had Rocklys of Galyon not taken the King’s troops from the North to fuel her demon-inspired rebellion, he might already have been executed.

“Is that what you want?” She struck at him with her words as if it were he, and not the archdemon Folcalor’s final outpouring of magic, that had robbed her of her power. “To kill me, as the books say? To kill Ian, for something neither of us wanted, for something that happened against our wills?”

He was a man who had grown up keeping his thoughts to himself, and he said nothing now.

“I was taken trying to save him!” she cried into his silence. She had a sweet small voice: gravel veined with silver. It sounded brittle to her now, and shrill. “For trying to save him, for trying to save you, and all these precious people of yours around here! This is what came of it! I hated the demon!”

“Yet you did every damn thing you could to keep me from sending it away behind the mirror.” There was an edge of anger to his quiet words. “And you’ve been mourning it since.”

“You don’t understand.” Jenny had learned that it was possible to hate and love the same thing at the same time.

“I understand that neither you nor my son has eaten nor slept well for months, and that as far as I’ve been able to see you haven’t done a hand’s turn to help him.”

You don’t understand, she wanted to say again. To scream the words at him until he knew what she felt. But instead she lashed at him, “*Your son?*” How *dare* he?

And at the same time she thought, *Ian*, and her mind snatched at shredded images of a boy sitting in despair beside a hearth. She