

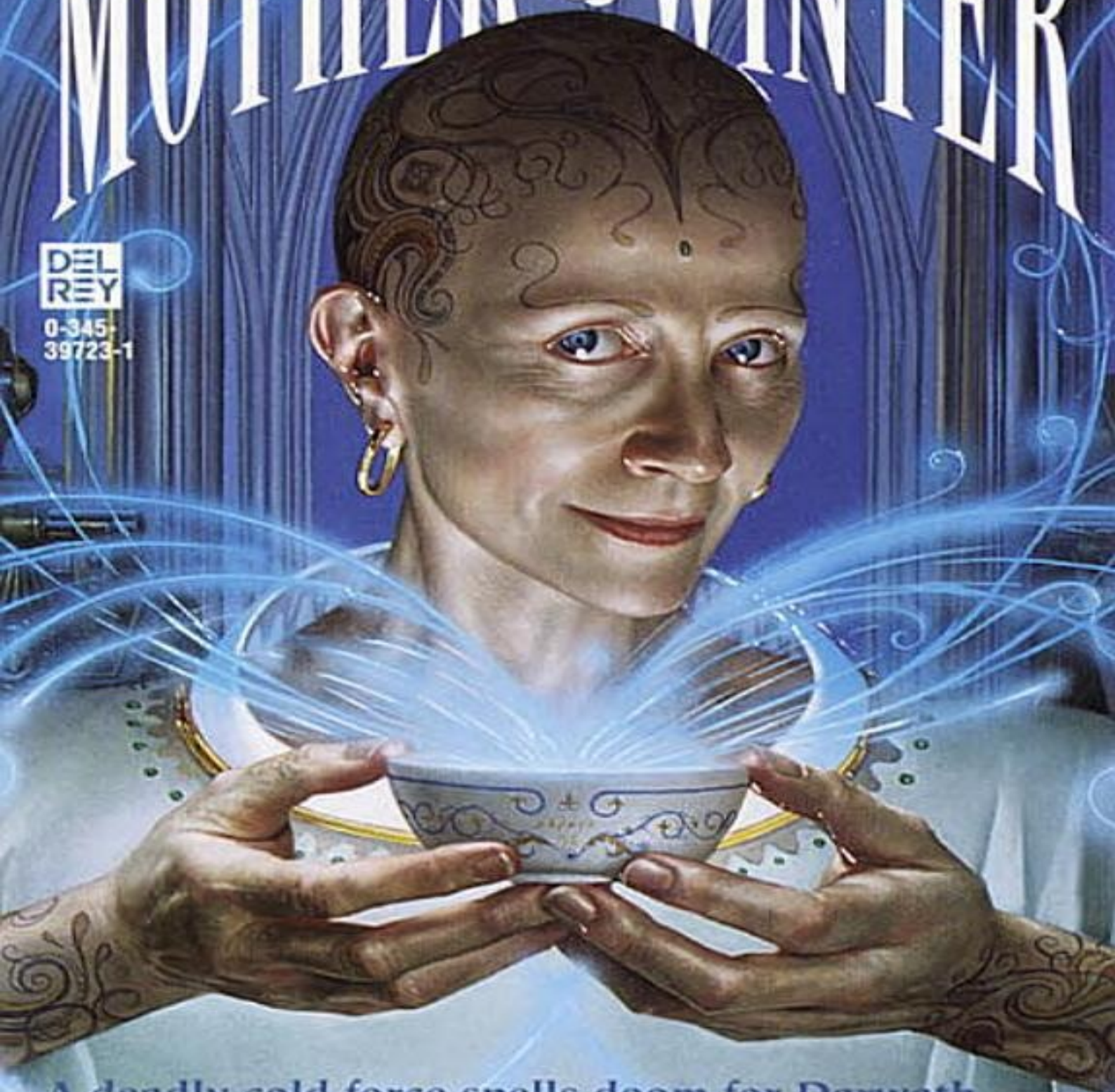
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MOTHER & WINTER

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A deadly cold force spells doom for Darwath.

Mother Of Winter

Darwath Saga

Book IV

Barbara Hambly

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Prologue

In the moonstone dawn, the lone rider dismounted at the top of the steps, passed through the black square open eye where the doors would one day be, and halted on the edge of shadowed abyss. The woman who lay on the obsidian plinth in the chasm's midst knew by the shape of his shoulders and back, by the way he carried his head, who he was; there was in any case only one person he could be. The wind that brought the smell of the glaciers down to her funneled past him through the passageway and carried on it the stench of blood.

When he stepped clear of the gate's collected gloom, she saw he was covered with it, as if he had lain down in a butcher's shambles. Some of it she knew was his, all mixed with the nigrous grease of torch smoke; there was also mud on his bare left forearm where he had fallen or been thrown from his horse, and on his bare knees above his boot tops, as if he had knelt in gore-soaked earth-to raise someone in his arms, perhaps.

The great clean-hewed pit of the foundation lay between them, deep as the cliffs that surrounded the Vale, and filled with the night's last shade. The plinth that rose through it, nearly to the level of the ground, was circled by half-made levels and support pillars like the greatest trees in some primordial iron forest, dwarfed to fragility by the chasm's sheer size. The machines that fused the black stone walls, insectile monsters of crystal and meteor iron, stood quiescent on platforms in the scaffolding; smaller slave-crystals and drones floated in the air between like exhausted stars, and here and there great sheets of wyr-web flashed softly in the nacreous light. Where the stairways and catwalks joined and crossed between the greater platforms, sleeping figures could be seen, lying where they had collapsed within the rings and spheres of silver dust, dried blood, smoke and light that trailed off the fragile plank flooring to float like sea-wrack on the air.

He looked down to meet the woman's eyes.

Depleted by last night's Great Spell, she propped herself up with her hands and coughed, feeling twice her sixty years. As the man picked his way across the spiderweb lines of bamboo and planking, descended ladders and stepped over gaps that fell away into a thousand feet of gloom, she saw that he, too, moved carefully, holding to the ropes and stopping now and then to stand half bowed over, gathering strength.

"It's all right," she said, when he looked down from a ladder at the intricate patterns woven on the plinth's circular top. "The spells are accomplished, such as they are. Stay between those two lines and all will be well."

He was a respecter of such things. Not everyone was these days. He looked around him again, and she wondered if, from the plinth, he could see what she saw: the whole of the future edifice called forth in those ghostly trceries, as if the fortress already existed, wrought of starlight and future time.

Every Rune, every circle, every sigil and smoke-trace had been placed individually, by her hand or the hands of those who slept all around her huddled in the lee of the Foci, broken by what they had done.

And to no avail, she thought. To no avail. She asked him, "Are they dead?"

He nodded.

"All of them?"

"All."

It was not the worst thing she had ever borne, but in some ways more painful than the knowledge that the world's end was coming sooner than anyone had reckoned. She had loved many of those who died last night.

"You should have asked our help."

He was unshaven under the filth; even the ends of his long hair, by which he was nicknamed at Court, were tipped with grue. "It was the only chance you had, of raising the power to do this." He had a voice like gravel and clinkers in an iron pan. "The locking point of sun, moon, and stars, you said. The time of greatest power." He swallowed, fighting pain. "It was worth what it cost."

She folded her arms across her breasts, bare beneath the midnight wool of her cloak. The morning was very cold. Below her the murmur of water was loud where springs had been broached in the rock. The smell of wet earth breathed up around them. Far down the Vale where the trees grew thick at the head of the pass, birds were waking.

"No," she said. "For we failed. We put forth all our strength, and all our strength was not enough. And all this-" The movement of her hand took in the half-raised walls, the silent machines, the chasm of foundation, the whisper of water and of that half-seen skeleton of light. "-all this will pass away, and

leave us with nothing."

Her head bowed. She hadn't wept for years, not since one night when she'd seen a truth too appalling to be contemplated in the color of the stars. But her grief was a leaden darkness, seeming to pull them both down into the beginning of an endless fall. "I'm sorry."

Book One
Fimbultide

Chapter One

"Do you see it?" Gil Patterson's voice was no louder than the scratch of withered vines on the stained sandstone wall. Melding with the shadows was second nature to her by now. The courtyard before them was empty and still, marble pavement obscured by lichen and mud, and a small forest of sycamore suckers half concealed the fire-black ruins of the hall, but she could have sworn that something had moved. "Feel it?"

She edged forward a fraction of an inch, the better to see, taking care to remain still within the ruined peristyle's gloom. "What is it?"

The possibility of ghosts crossed her mind.

The five years that had passed since eight thousand people died in this place in a single night had been hard ones, but some of their spirits might linger.

"I haven't the smallest idea, my dear."

She hadn't heard him return to her from his investigation of the building's outer court: he was a silent-moving man. Pitched for her hearing alone, his voice was of a curious velvety roughness, like dark bronze broken by time. In the shadows of the crumbling wall, and the deeper concealment of his hood, his blue eyes seemed very bright.

"But there is something."

"Oh, yes." Ingold Inglorion, Archmage of the wizards of the West, had a way of listening that seemed to touch everything in the charred and sodden waste of the city around them, living mid dead. "I suspect," he added, in a murmur that seemed more within her mind than outside of it, "that it has stalked us since we passed the city walls."

He made a sign with his hand, small, but five years travel with him in quest of books and objects of magic among the ruins of cities populated only by bones and ghouls had taught her to see those signs. Gil was as oblivious to magic as she was to ghosts-or fairies, or UFOs, for that matter she would have added-but she could read the summons of a cloaking spell, and she knew that Ingold's cloaking spells were more substantial than most people's houses.

Thus what happened took her completely by surprise.

The court was a large one. Thousands had taken refuge in the house to which it belonged, in the fond hope that stout walls and plenty of torchlight would prevent the incursion of those things called only Dark Ones. Their skulls peered lugubriously from beneath dangling curtains of colorless vines, white blurs in shadow.

It was close to noon, and the silver vapors from the city's slime-filled canals were beginning to burn off, color struggling back to the red of fallen porphyry pillars, the brave blues and gilts of tile. More than half the court lay under a leprous blanket of the fat white juiceless fungus that surviving humans called slunch, and it was the slunch that drew Gil's attention now.

Ingold was still motionless, listening intently in the zebra shadows of the blown-out colonnade as Gil crossed to the edge of the stuff.

"It isn't just me, is it?" Her soft voice fell harsh as a blacksmith's hammer in the unnatural hush.

"It's getting worse as we get farther south." As Gil knelt to study the tracks that quilted the clay soil all along the edges of the slunch, Ingold's instruction- and that of her friend the Icefalcon, rang half-conscious warning bells in her mind. What the hell had that wolverine been trying to do? Run sideways? Eat its own tail? And that rabbit-if those were rabbit tracks ... ? That had to be the mark of something caught in its fur, but ...

"It couldn't have anything to do with what we're looking for, could it?" A stray breath lifted the long tendrils of her hair, escaping like dark smoke from the braid jammed under her close-fitting fur cap. "You said Maia didn't know what it was or what it did. Was there anything weird about the animals around Penambra before the Dark came?"

"Not that I ever heard." Ingold was turning his head as he spoke, listening as much as watching. He'd put back the hood of his heavy brown mantle, and his white hair, long and tatty from weeks of journeying, flickered in the gray air. He'd trimmed his beard with his knife a couple of nights ago, and resembled St. Anthony after ten rounds with demons in the wilderness.

Not, thought Gil, that anyone in this universe but herself and Ingold, because she'd told him-knew who St. Anthony was. Maia of Thran, Bishop of Renweth, erstwhile Bishop of Penambra and owner of the palace they sought, had told her tales of analogous holy hermits who'd had similar problems.

Unprepossessing, she thought, to anyone who hadn't seen him in action.