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BARBARA HAMBLY



**THE
MAGICIANS
OF NIGHT**

THE SUN-CROSS SERIES



The Magicians of Night

BOOK II OF SUN-CROSS

Barbara Hambly

BLOOD-MAGIC

A hundred yards from the Schloss, Rhion felt power running along the leys. The whole lodge, even the air around it, was lambent with a horrible, unfocused strength.

In the luminous square of the lodge's open door, von Rath stood waiting. He sprang down the steps to seize Rhion's arms. His eyes were dilated and he swayed on his feet like a drunken man. There were blood spots on the hem and the sleeves of his white ceremonial robe.

"We've done it!" he cried. "We've raised power!"

Past him, Rhion could see the air in the hall pulsing with power, power that flowed uncontrolled down the paneling and moved like snakes in the cold light of the stairs.

Without question, they'd raised power and magic.

But it was blood-magic—the dark, infernal magic that came from the unwilling sacrifice of human victims!

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ONE

“I THINK HE’S COMING AROUND.”

The words reached Rhion of Sligo as he hung in darkness, suspended above cold screaming infinities of lightless chaos, slipping back... slipping back...

He tried to cry out, tried to fight, unconsciousness dragging at his limbs like the darkness that lay between Universes, the darkness of the Void through which he had come. *Jaldis, help me...* But his numb lips and mouth would not form the syllables of his master’s name. *Don’t let me die...*

Burnt vinegar kicked his brain. He gasped as the darkness of unconsciousness stripped away like a rag; strong fingers closed around his flailing wrist. The dagger of amber light that stabbed his eyes faded to the glow of candles, a constellation of six small flames in an iron holder opposite the bed where he lay. The light of them still hurt, and he closed his eyes again. The hideous leaching of the Void’s remembered cold eased. A voice asked, “Are you all right?” in a harsh, guttural alien language, and Rhion thought, with what little strength was left in him, *At least the Spell of Tongues works here.* His master Jaldis had warned him that in this strange universe magic no longer existed—he had been afraid the spell that allowed a wizard to understand speech mind to mind would no longer be effective.

“I-I don’t know.”

He opened his eyes. The candle flame seemed warm now, comforting in its familiarity. Around him, the room was dim, and they’d taken away his spectacles. Without them, the face of the young man seated beside him on the narrow bed was, even at this distance, blurred, but Rhion’s eyesight was good enough to show him a face pale and beautiful, the pitiless beauty of a god carved in ivory, beardless, with short-cropped fair hair and a sword scar crossing one high cheekbone like the careless slip of a sculptor’s chisel. Beyond that he could see only umbrous shapes, glints of silver on close-fitting black garments, and the shadow of exhaustion, strain, and some dreadful grief that informed every line of the face and the set of those wide shoulders.

“Rest easy,” the beautiful young man said. “You’re quite safe.”

A shadow stirred in the darkness; candlelight flashed across spectacle lenses and a boy of eighteen or so, unhealthily fat, pallid, sweaty, and likewise clothed in close-fitting—in his case ill-fitting—garments of gray and black loomed beyond the young god’s shoulder. “Should I tell the others, P-Paul?”

“In a moment, Baldur.” The kindness in his voice, the infinite control, spoke worlds about the young mage’s relationship with this boy, whoever he was, who stared at him with such eager adoration in his eyes.

Paul, Rhion thought, turning the alien name over in his mind. The two wizards whom Jaldis had contacted through the Dark Well, the two wizards who had begged him to cross the Void and help them restore magic to this magicless universe, had been called Eric and Paul.

He whispered, “Eric...” and the wizard Paul’s control cracked, infinitesimally, his lips pressing taut and his eyes flinching away.

But a moment later his glance returned to Rhion, and he said, quite steadily, “Eric is dead. The Dark Well...” He hesitated, then went on as if repeating something he had memorized, his gray eyes focused resolutely on the pillow next to Rhion’s head. “He said, ‘We are losing him...’ He cried out.” His fingers, which still held Rhion’s wrist, began to shake and he released his grasp quickly, pressing his hands together to still them. The boy Baldur lurched forward, reaching toward those square, dark shoulders, but after all he did not quite have the courage to touch.

Like a nightmare ghost of pain, Rhion remembered the terror of feeling his own life slide away. Those eternal seconds in the Void whispered where he had tried to blot them from his consciousness—the howling abysses of all the colors of blackness, the horror of realizing that though the tiny gold emblem of the burning sun-cross flickered somewhere in the darkness to guide them, there was no magic to bring them through.

He remembered Jaldis’ soul, his strength that was so much greater than the twisted fragile shell of his body, surrounding the failing core of his own being and holding him up.

Then the marshfire flicker of a sudden spurt of light, the thread of magic that had come through to bring them across at last.

“He...he stepped into the Dark Well, into the Void.” Paul stared beyond Rhion as if he could still see into the Well that had given them a window to the Void. “And it collapsed upon him. Fell in on itself around him. He screamed—the sound seemed to come from... from very far off. And when we pulled him out, he was dead.”

His hands had begun to shake again. Rhion whispered, “I’m sorry.” But, looking up into that set, ravaged face, he doubted the young mage heard.

While Paul had been speaking, a door had opened behind him, and a harsh bar of unnaturally steady yellow light fell through. Two forms stood there—Rhion fumbled for his spectacles, resting, he now guessed more than saw, on the small table near the head of the bed where he lay. The forms clarified into a very tall man in his fifties with hollow cheeks and a burning dark glance beneath a handbreadth of greasy black hair, and a smaller, slighter man, perhaps twenty years older, with flowing white mane and beard framing a pale, fanatic stare. The light behind them haloed them with its bizarre,

motionless glare, brighter than a hundred torches. Rhion remembered Jaldis had spoken of *electricity*, artificial light that was made without magic, made for the benefit of anyone who cared to use it.

With his spectacles, Rhion was able to see a little more of the room, small and spartan and lined with more books than he'd ever seen in a private residence with the exception of the stone house of Shavus Ciarnin, Archmage of the Morkensik Order, his own Order of wizardry at home.

Paul seemed to pull himself together a little, sitting up in his leather-covered wooden chair. "These are Auguste Poincelles and Jacobus Gall, my colleagues in the effort to restore wizardry to this world," he said in his soft voice. The tall man acknowledged the first introduction with a nod, the bearded fanatic the second. "Baldur Twisselpeck..."

"I'm Rhion of Sligo." He saw the swift glance that passed between Poincelles and Gall behind Paul's back. "The Dark Well is gone, then?"

In his own world, where magic still existed, simply breaking the Circles of Power that held the shuddering dark of the window into the Void was sufficient to destroy it. In this world, who knew?

"Yes," Paul said, after long silence. "Yes."

"You can see the place where it was," the wizard Gall added, still standing, arms folded, in the doorway.

"We did everything we knew how to bring it back." The wizard Poincelles gestured with one long arm, like a spider against the light. "But it was useless."

Dizziness caught at Rhion as he stood up. Paul, clearly now the leader of these otherworld mages, put a steel-strong arm around him to keep him on his feet, and Gall and Poincelles fell back before them as they passed through the door and into the hall. Baldur trailed behind like a lumpish black dog at Paul's heel.

The walls of the hallway, Rhion noted automatically, were of plaster and wood, like the houses in Felsplex, impregnated with stale incense and the smoke of burned herbs—some form of nicotina, he thought. Their feet rang hollow on the oak planks of the bare floor, and he guessed, even before he turned to glimpse a wide stairway leading down, that they were on an upper floor of some good-size building. Voices murmured from below, echoing in the well of the stairs; he saw Poincelles and Gall trade another glance, but their eyes were chiefly on him, wondering at this chubby, bespectacled little man with his scruffy brown beard and his shabby brown-and-black robes, as if they could not actually believe they'd seen him come stumbling out of that column of darkness.

He wondered what they'd made of Jaldis' thick jeweled spectacles, whose

magic gave his blind eyes sight, or of the wooden box of silver whistles and gut that to some degree replaced the voice that the old King's men had cut out of him with their knives, to keep him from witching them all those years ago...

As they had said, the Dark Well was gone.

The stars and circles of its weaving still sprawled, smudged with a confusion of hurried foot scuffs, over the worn plank floor of the upstairs room a few doors down the hall from the one in which he'd come to. The air was heavy with the cloying sweetness of dittany and the copper-sharp stink of dried blood. Baldur put out his hand and touched a switch in the wall, and glaring yellow light sprang to being in the room from a glass globe in the middle of the ceiling. Rhion blinked up at it for a moment, shading his eyes against its blaring strength, then looked at the floor again.

But there was nothing to be seen among the spirals and circles of power—dribbled candle wax, dried blood, a few dark spots where the Water Circle had been drawn, only the great ritual sun-cross they had drawn as a guide, the emblem of magic's eternal renewal scrawled upon the floor, and the prosaic air of this world dispersing the last veils of smoke.

"Well," he said shakily, putting a hand on the wall for balance to stand. "It took Jaldis three days to weave one on our side of the Void—the gods know how long it will take him here. But I don't expect he'll be well enough to for weeks—the Void's magic drained his strength very badly the last time he touched it—and after one crossing I for one am in no hurry to have him start. Is he... Is he all right?"

It came to him that none of them had mentioned his master; as the cloudiness and exhaustion cleared a little from his mind, he cursed himself for not asking earlier. Jaldis might need him; tampering with the Void or working with the Dark Well had always left the old man prostrated, too exhausted to work so much as a simple fire-spell, for days, sometimes weeks... Seven years ago, during an earlier vain attempt to contact the wizards whose voices he had heard crying out of magic's death, he had suffered a mild stroke.

But the four men surrounding him remained silent.

Cold touched him inside, an echo of cries in darkness, forever unheard.

At length Paul asked quietly, "You mean... Jaldis came with you after all?"

Looking up into that beautiful angel face, Rhion felt as if the floor beneath his feet had given way. "He... he stepped into the Void with me, yes."

No, he thought numbly, grayness beginning to creep into the edges of his sight. *Oh please, gods of magic, don't tell me he's dead . . . Jaldis my friend ... Don't tell me I'm here on my own... Jaldis dead... no way back... Jaldis my friend...*

From what seemed to be a great distance Paul's voice came to him. "He said he was trying to get another wizard to come in his stead." His gray eyes were worried as he touched Rhion's elbow with a steadying hand. "He was blind, he said, and in need of certain magical implements to see and speak..."

Dear gods... Rhion's mind stalled on the brink of a roaring vortex of panic and despair. *Dear gods, don't do this to me.* "The other mages couldn't come." He was surprised at how steady his voice sounded, even though barely audible even to his own ears. "He and I... I wasn't going to let him come alone..."

"But you are a wizard, too, aren't you?" Baldur demanded, sudden anxiety in his watery brown eyes. "We c-can't have wasted..."

"Shut up, pig-dog!" Paul snapped viciously, his own face chalky in the hard yellow glare.

A thousand images swam through Rhion's mind in a single hideously elongated instant of time—Tally, his beloved, the sunlight dappling her hair as they lay together in the grotto at the end of her father the Duke's palace gardens; the laughter of his sons. Jaldis' thin mechanical voice saying *We can afford to think neither of the future nor of the past which we leave behind ...*

So this was the end of the dream Jaldis had cherished these seven years—the dream that had sustained him, obsessed him—the dream of restoring magic to a world in which it had vanished, the dream of, perhaps, saving magic, if it came to be threatened in their own.

I'm here alone.

No magic. And no way home.

Jaldis had never showed him how to weave a Dark Well. And though he had studied magic for seventeen of his thirty-five years, he knew that his own power was no more than average, his learning scanty in comparison to what his master's had been, what Shavus the Archmage's was, or what any of the great wizards of his own or any other of the major Orders...

"Come." Paul urged him gently back through the door. Blindly Rhion was aware of Baldur touching the button on the wall again, and the light vanishing as instantly as it had appeared, with a hard metallic *click*. *So that's electricity.*

"Lie down and sleep. We'll speak of this in the morning; we'll find some way to continue the work your friend wanted to help us do."

Rhion staggered, faintness rising through him with sudden, dizzying heat. He caught himself on the jamb of a door across the hall. Through that door the soft luminescence of candles wavered; his sight cleared again, and he saw within the half-lit darkness a tall man lying dead upon a leather divan, candles burning at his head and feet and an ornamental silver dagger unsheathed upon his breast. Rhion looked back quickly and saw beside him Paul's drawn gray