

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BARBARA HAMBLY

A close-up, black and white profile of a man's face, showing his nose, lips, and a full beard. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of his skin and the density of his hair.

**THE
SILICON
MAGE**

THE WINDROSE CHRONICLES



The Silicon Mage

Windrose Chronicles

Book II

Barbara Hambly

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CHAPTER I

The worst thing about knowing that Gary Fairchild had been dead for a month was seeing him every day at work.

"So whatcha doing after we get outta here tonight, babe?"

Joanna Sheraton tried not to stiffen, tried to recapture the half-tolerant, half-evasive tone characteristic of her conversations with him before... before. "I don't know, Gary. Ruth and I had talked about going to the movies." It sounded tinnily unconvincing even to her own ears.

Gary's face, as he leaned around the avocado burlap-padded partition into her cluttered programming cubicle, fell into its familiar pout. But there was a rehearsed quality to it, as there was to the slouching stance of that compactly muscled body in its assortment of Sears' best polyesters. It was something he knew Gary used to do, but now and then he forgot and stood straight and poised. There was an amber glint far back in the brown eyes, worlds distant from Gary's doglike eagerness.

Joanna felt her heart pounding fast and turned back to comparing the green lines of information on her terminal with the bug-riddled runout of the Tiger missile test analysis program, so he wouldn't see the nervous tremor of her mouth.

"Babe, what's the matter? You mad at me?" He had the whine down perfect that time.

She swung around a tad too quickly. "No. That is..." It was astonishingly difficult to remember patterns of voice and behavior several months old, particularly when she thought about them consciously, particularly with those brown eyes, watchful now, studying her face. She swallowed hard and pushed back the feathery tangle of untidy blond curls from her face.

"Babe, listen." He came around the partition, removed a stack of printouts from the cubicle's other chair, and sat down with that new, lithe grace, reaching out to take her hands. The nails were growing back—Gary had habitually bitten them to the quick. It was the closest that she'd let him get to her since she'd guessed what had happened to Gary—to the real Gary.

She made herself calm, made her eyes meet his.

He went on, "I don't know where you went when you disappeared at the end of August, or what happened to you..." That was a lie. He knew, all right; the only thing he didn't know was how much she had realized on the night of her return. "But I know something's been bothering you ever since you came back. You've been avoiding me."

"No!" Again it was too quick. The management of San Serano habitually turned off the air conditioning in Building Six around three in the afternoon; the close swelter of the October heat was, she hoped, enough to account for the crawl of sweat down her face and neck. Stammering, she tried to recoup. "I've been sort of avoiding everybody, Gary. Really, I just-I just don't want to see anyone now."

He smiled a little. "That's why you're going to the movies with Ruth?" His fingers tightened over hers. She hoped to hell they didn't feel as cold to him as they did to her. His eyes warmed with all Gary's old shallow charm. "You've got to deal with it sometime, babe. Get it out in the open." Past the cubicle door, voices sounded, and the scuff of feet echoed oddly in the high ceilings of the plant's testing bays just beyond the computer section where they sat. It was five o'clock. People were going home.

Hastily she pulled her hands away from him. Over her shoulder, as she began to stumble through backup procedures, he went on. "Why don't you come out to dinner with me, we go back to my place, and we talk. Okay?"

Two and a half months ago the invitation would have meant merely that he was going to try and talk her into bed with him. Now she knew, with a cold that seemed to spread from her hands and feet to the very pit of her stomach, that what he wanted was to get her alone.

"Another time, Gary." Her hands fumbled the typed commands; she hit the ESCAPE button and tried again, hoping he wouldn't read her fear and begin to ask himself why.

"Babe..." He came around behind her and put his hands on her shoulders, bare in the sleeveless top that was the only answer to the heat of an unspeakable California autumn. She had to clench her teeth and fight not to strike his hands away with loathing and terror. "Next week?"

"Maybe..." For a horrifying instant she blocked on the proper command to get out of the mainframe, her distracted mind praying he wouldn't notice.

"Tuesday?"

She was about to say "Maybe" again, then realized that every moment the discussion lasted, people were leaving the plant. In a very few minutes Building Six would be virtually empty, and he wouldn't have to maneuver to get her alone...

She turned in her swivel chair, looked up into his eyes, and conjured up a sigh. "All right."

He smiled, but there was a gleam of a different triumph in his eyes.

She was shaking all over as she walked out to the parking lot.

He had been trying for weeks to get her alone, sometimes subtly, sometimes blatantly; like her, he was working delicately around things that he wasn't supposed to know, pretending he didn't know exactly what had happened to her in those weeks at the end of summer when she'd been gone, pretending he hadn't met her on the other side of the dark Void that separated universe from universe.

He hadn't been Gary then, of course.

Joanna shivered as she started up the car, a decrepit blue bomber of a '75 Mustang, remembering the frail, delicate old Archmage, the head of the Council of Wizards, Salteris Solaris. He'd fooled them all: his grandson the young warrior Stonne Caris; Gary—the real Gary, in those days -whom he'd duped into acting for him on this side of the Void; and all the Wizards of the Council... herself... He'd fooled them, and had left poor Salteris' stripped-out husk of body and mind to migrate on and devour Gary's self in his turn, as he'd left others.

He was Suraklin the Dark Mage, now after her.

The damnable thing was that there was no proof.

It was no wonder, she thought, that Antryg Windrose went insane.

She guided the car down the long stretch of Lost Canyon Road to where the Ventura Freeway lay, a glittering snake of constipated steel wavering with heat-dance, and wondered bleakly if Antryg were still alive.

He has to be, she thought, a threadbare litany with which she had tried to sustain herself for the last four weeks. *Please, God, don't let him be dead.*

She had no proof of that, either.

Tears of remorse, anger, and shame burned her eyes.

Likewise, she had no proof that those blank periods of gray and causeless depression that had more and more often troubled her and everyone she knew were anything other than her own unsettled mind. Yes, at such times no one at San Serano seemed to be able to do any work or to perform such tasks as they attempted correctly; yes, such spells coincided with an increase in newspaper accounts of both suicides and senseless gang violence, not only in Los Angeles, but in San Francisco, New York, Tokyo, London, or anywhere else she could read about. One or two newspapers had come up with facile sociological theories about economic anxiety and shifts in demographics. They might even have been right. But going downstairs to visit her friend Ruth after one such spell, Joanna had seen the painting on which Ruth had spent weeks, gessoed over with great, impatient smears of hardening white.

That was still not proof that the life-energy of the world was being intermittently drained and bled—not fatally, or at least not intrinsically fatally—across the Void, to create electricity to power a computer in a world which had neither.

In the last four weeks, Joanna had read a great deal about that computer in Suraklin's files.

She nosed the Mustang up the freeway on ramp, one tedious car length at a time, and into the sluggish flow of traffic. Whatever air-conditioning system the car had once possessed had bitten the big one years ago; she relied on what Ruth called four-eighty air conditioning; one opened all four windows and drove at eighty. It worked when one wasn't trying to get down the 101 at five-fifteen on a Friday afternoon with everybody else in the southern half of the state of California. At least she was inbound, toward L.A. instead of away from it; the traffic *was* moving—at about two yards per hour, but moving. The outbound lanes were stopped in both directions as far as the eye could see.

The slowness gave her time to think about tonight, and with thought came fear.

She'd been living with fear for over a month now and she hadn't gotten used to it yet. The abnormally heavy traffic reminded her again that it was Friday, making her heart triphammer with dread. There was a good chance that it would be tonight...

She and Antryg Windrose had guessed that Suraklin had a computer whose electrical/magical power relays fed on life, hidden in some fortress, some cavern, or some other hideaway in the Empire of Ferryth, the world on the other side of the Void, before she'd ever tapped into Suraklin's files. For months Gary had been programming them into the big Cray mainframe at San Serano, while he'd worked at stealing by modem-powered computer-scam an experimental mainframe of artificial-intelligence proportions to set up on the other side of the Void. It was ultimately ironic, she thought wryly, that, having stolen via computer, Gary's personality, his self, should now be nothing more than a series of programs logged in a computer's electronic guts.

She'd seen that program. Everything about Gary—his likes and dislikes, his intricate network of computer-tapped bank accounts, the affairs he'd carried on with other women while he'd sworn his undying love to her, and the details of the particularly nasty variety of pornography he'd favored—had all been neatly digitalized. In other files, she'd found the details of the old Archmage Salteris' personality and what had been that of the poor imbecilic Emperor of Ferryth, whose shell still stumbled drooling through the palace at Angelshand while his mad son ruled the Empire.

And with them was the personality, the memories, and the knowledge of the man who had stolen and inhabited the bodies and minds of the Emperor, of Salteris, and of Gary in turn—the evil old man whose speech patterns and gestures Gary occasionally used and whose amber cat-glint eyes had watched her so intently today, the wizard Suraklin, whom all had once called the Dark Mage.

The computer was his ticket to eternity. Joanna knew it existed and knew he was programming his personality, petrifying it in everlasting silicon, so that he would at last live forever. The drain on the life-energies of her own world and of the world in which the computer itself was situated—the world across the Void—wasn't strong enough to kill. It would only maim, in a way for which there was no word, forever.

She knew it existed, but she had no proof.

She was fighting him absolutely alone.

She edged the car out of traffic, off the freeway and into a supermarket parking lot in Encino, still halfway across the San Fernando Valley from her home. From the front seat, she fished her purse, a monstrous affair of macrame and bunny skins the size and weight of a dead Labrador dog; from the trash pit of the trunk she dug a blue nylon backpack of the kind schoolkids

carry books in, crammed to bursting and heavy as if it contained lead. Slinging these over her shoulder, she locked up the car and crossed the parking lot on foot, a small, sturdy girl, her untidy blond curls now damp and matted with sweat, like a schoolkid herself in her worn blue jeans and sleeveless top. Within fifteen minutes she was on a bus headed back toward San Serano.

Definitely, she thought, *a candidate for the Academy for the Bewildered*. Her behavior in the last month—breaking into computer files, hiding her car and sneaking back to the darkened plant after everyone was gone, avoiding the man she'd been sleeping with for the last two years—was bizarre enough to qualify her as a paranoid in anybody's book. Her dreams were something she wouldn't wish on her worst enemy.

"I've spent most of my life terrified of a man who's been dead for years," Antryg Windrose had told her once. And she understood now how the Prince Regent had become a hopeless paranoid at the age of ten, positive that his father the Emperor had ceased to be his father and unable to prove it to a soul.

She leaned her head against the vibrating metal of the window frame of the bus, closed her eyes, and tried not to smell the fattish man in a brown leisure suit who'd come to sit next to her on the crowded conveyance.

The whole situation—the events of her disappearance, the terrible thing she had learned, the tall, gentle madman who had kept her safe both from the Inquisition and from the random abominations traveling now through the Void between universes—had the aspect of some hideous quadratic equation, with two solutions and no means of determining which was correct.

The daylight side of the equation was simply that she had been temporarily insane. That was easy. At Gary's house party last August, she'd imbibed some chemically enhanced punch, of which there'd been a fair amount, and had undergone a long period of illness and violent hallucinations, peopled by wizards, warriors, evil princes, and the kind of man whose love she had always craved. And, like Judy Garland in *The Wizard of Oz*, she had waked again to a black-and-white world of people she had known all her life saying soothingly to her, "It was only a dream, dear; only a dream."

The night side of the equation was also a dream.

That dream had come to her a few nights after her return to this world from wherever she had been. It had recurred—cloudy, haunting, terrible—five or six times since.

In the dream she was in a stone-walled room, like the dungeon of the Inquisition from which Antryg had rescued her; by its heavy proportions, it was somewhere underground. Clammy cold radiated from the damp wall behind her, but she was sweating from the heat that blazed from the condensed cherry flames on the room's small hearth. A man was working at the fire, bent over it with his troll shadow flung vast and fidgeting on the curved stone of wall and roof groin, stripped to loincloth and shoes in the heat, with his skull shaved bald. In the corner where she stood, Joanna could smell the acrid reek of his sweat. The faint, brisk tapping of his little hammer on iron sounded loud in the silence, punctuating the crackle of the coals and the asthmatic hiss of the bellows being worked for him by a girl apprentice whose sleeveless shift showed biceps like a man's. She, too, was shaved bald, as was the big, clumsy-looking woman in gray velvet robes who stood before the hearth, perspiration trickling down the fatty rolls of her neck. The smell of unwashed wool, wet earth, and smoke lay heavy on the air.

That fat woman was looking, not at what the smith was doing by the fire, but at the doorway opposite, a low black arch of shadows, sinister as the maw of some Boschian beast.

In time, there was movement in that dark, and the fat woman in gray folded her hands over her stomach and smiled.

The man they brought in was taller than all but two of the guards who held him. When Joanna had stood in the circle of his arms, her head had not come as high as those broad, bony shoulders. Framed in a tangled explosion of graying brown hair, his face was chalky with exhaustion, the wide gray eyes in their bistered hollows dilated with drugs.

The big woman stepped forward, her eyes like pieces of chipped blue glass in the pouchy flesh. "Antryg Windrow," she said, and the prisoner raised his head.

Without his spectacles, Joanna knew he was half-blind. She saw the swooping network of lines-raying back from eyelids to temples and down over his cheeks-tighten as he tried to get her into focus.

"Antryg Windrow, do you confess to the crimes of which you have been accused?"

He drew in breath to speak, then paused. Sweat shone in the torchlight on his upper lip, the preposterous arch of his nose, and the pit of his throat, visible through the tattered collar of the coarse robe he wore. Asleep, dead-