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**BARBARA HAMBLY**

A dark silhouette of a person with long, flowing hair, standing next to a sword. The person's hair is blowing in the wind. The sword is positioned vertically to the left of the person. The background is a light, hazy gradient.

**THE  
TIME OF THE  
DARK**

THE DARWATH SERIES



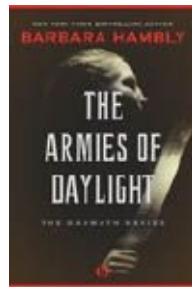
# THE DARWATH SERIES

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# The Time of the Dark

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**Barbara Hambly**





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The Reaches of the Dark



# CHAPTER ONE

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GIL KNEW THAT IT was only a dream. There was no reason for her to feel fear—she knew that the danger, the chaos, the blind, sickening nightmare terror that filled the screaming night were not real. This city with its dark, unfamiliar architecture, these fleeing crowds of panic-stricken men and women who shoved her aside, unseeing, were only the vivid dregs of an overloaded subconscious, wraiths that would melt with daylight.

She knew all this; nevertheless, she was afraid.

She seemed to be standing at the foot of a flight of green marble stairs, facing into a square courtyard surrounded by tall peak-roofed buildings. Fleeing people were shoving past her, jostling her back against the gigantic pedestal of a malachite statue, without seeming to be aware of her presence at all; gasping, wild-eyed people, terrified faces bleached to corpses by the brilliance of the copper quarter moon. They were pouring out of the gabled houses, the men clutching chests or bags of money, the women jewels, lap-dogs, or children crying in uncomprehending terror. Their hair was wild from sleep, for it was deep night; some of them were dressed but many were naked, or tripping over bedclothes hastily snatched, and Gil could smell the rank terror-sweat of their bodies as they brushed against her. None of them saw her, none of them stopped; they stumbled frantically up those vast steps of moonlit marble, through the dark arch of the gates at the top, and out into the clamoring streets of the stricken city beyond.

*What city? Gil wondered confusedly. And why am I afraid? This is only a dream.*

But she knew. In her heart she knew, as things are known in dreams, that this scene of frenzied escape was even now being repeated, like the hundredfold reflections in a doubled mirror, everywhere in the city around her. The knowledge and the horror created a chill that crept along her skin, crawled wormlike through her guts.

They all felt it, too. For not a man would stop to lean on the pillar behind her, nor a woman stumble on the steps at her feet. They looked back with the blank, wide eyes of madness, their frenzied gaze drawn as if against their will to the cyclopean doors of ancient time-greened bronze that dominated the wall opposite. It was from these that they fled. It was behind this monstrous trapezoidal gateway that the horror was building, as water builds behind a weakening dam a soft, shifting, bodiless evil, an unspeakable eruption into the land of the living from out of black abysses of space and time.

There was motion, and voices, in the cavern of the arched gateway behind her, muffled footfalls and the thin, ringing whine of a sword as it was drawn. Gil turned, her thick hair tangling in her eyes. The wild, jumping dance of wind-bent torches silhouetted crowding forms, flickering across a face, the blade-edge, the dull pebbled gleam of chain mail. Against the thinning tide of desperate civilians, the Guards stepped into the cool pewter monochrome of the moonlight—black-uniformed, lightly mailed.

booted, men and women both, the honed blades of their weapons shining thinly against the play of the shadows. Gil could catch a glimpse of a nervous rabble of hastily armed civilians massing up behind them, whispering in dread and fumbling with unpracticed hands at the hilts of borrowed armaments, grim fear fighting terrified bewilderment in their half-seen faces. And striding down ahead of them was an old man in a brown robe, an old wizard, hawk-eyed and bearded and bearing a sword of flame.

It was he who stopped on the top step, scanning the court before him like a hunting eagle while the last of the fleeing, half-naked populace streamed raggedly up the stairs past Gil, brushing against her, unseeing, past the wizard, past the Guards, bare feet slapping hollowly in the black passage of the gates. She saw him fix his gaze on the doors, knowing the nature of that eldritch unseen horror, knowing from whence it would come. The battered, nondescript face was serene behind the tangled chaparral of beard. Then his gaze shifted, judging his battleground, and his eyes met hers.

He could see her. She knew it instantly, even before his eyes widened in startled surprise. The Guards and volunteers, hesitating behind the old man, unwilling to go where he was not ahead of them, were looking around and through and past her, dubiously seeking the wizard's vision in the suddenly still moonlight of the empty court. But he could see her, and she wondered confusedly why.

Across the court, from the cracks and hinges of those timeless doors, a thin, directionless wind had begun to blow, stirring and whispering over the silver-washed circles of the pavement, tugging at Gil's coarse black hair. It carried on it the dank, cold scent of evil, of acid and stone and things that should never see light, of blood and darkness. But the wizard sheathed the gleaming blade he held and came cautiously down the steps toward her, as if he feared to frighten her.

But that, Gil thought, would not be possible—and anyway she was only dreaming. He looked like a gentle old man, she thought. His eyes, blue and bright and very fierce, held in them neither pride nor cruelty, and if he were afraid of the shifting, sightless thing welling in darkness behind the doors, he did not show it. He advanced to within a few feet of where she stood shivering in the green shadows of the monstrous statue, those blue eyes puzzled and wary, as if trying to understand what he saw. Then he held out his hand and made as if to speak.

Abruptly, Gil woke up—but not in her bed.

For a moment she didn't know where she was. She threw out her hand awkwardly, startled and disoriented, as those suddenly wakened are, and the cold fluted marble of the pedestal's edge bit savagely into her palm. The night's damp cold knifed her bare legs, froze her naked feet on the pavement. The cries of fear from the night-gripped city came to her suddenly clearer on the wind, and with them the elusive scent of water. For an instant, the shrieking horror of what lay behind the door was like a gripping hand at her throat, and then it sank, whirled away like leaves in the face of shock and confusion and even greater horror.

She had waked up.

She was no longer dreaming.

She was still there.

All the eyes were on her now; startled, uncertain, even afraid. The warriors, still gathered at the top of the broad polished steps, stared in surprise at this thin young woman, dark-haired and scantily clad in the green polka-dot cowboy shirt that she habitually wore to bed, who had so suddenly appeared in their midst. Gil stared back, clutching for support the sharp edge of the marble behind her, weak with shock and frantic with bewilderment and dread, her legs shaking and her breath strangling in her throat.

But the wizard was still there, and she realized that it was impossible to be truly afraid when she was with him.

Quietly, he asked her, "Who are you?"

To her own surprise she found the voice to answer. "Gil," she said. "Gil Patterson."

"How did you come here?"

Around them the black wind blew stronger from the doors, rank and cold and vibrant with brooding abhuman lusts. The Guards murmured among themselves, tension spreading along the lines visible as the humming quiver of a tautened wire—they, too, were afraid. But the wizard didn't stir, and the mellow, scratchy warmth of his voice was unshaken.

"I—I was dreaming," Gil stammered. "But—this—I—it isn't a dream anymore, is it?"

"No," the old man said kindly. "But don't be afraid." He raised his scarred fingers and made some movement in the air with them that she could not clearly see. "Go back to your dreams."

The night's cold faded as the cloying haziness of sleep blurred sound and smell and fear. Gil saw the Guards peer with startled eyes at the blue, flickering shadows that she knew were all they could now see. Then the wizard spoke to them, and they followed him as he strode across the deserted pavement of the court, facing into the black winds and the nameless menace of the doors. He raised his sword, a long two-handed blade, and it sparked in the darkness like summer lightning. Then, as if an explosion had rocked the vaults below the building, the doors burst open, and blackness poured forth over them like smoke.

Gil saw what was in the darkness, and her own screams of terror woke her.

Her hands shook so badly she could barely switch on the bedside lamp. The clock on the table beside her bed said two-thirty. Drenched in sweat and colder than death, Gil fell back against the pillow, whispering frantically to herself that it was only a dream—only a dream. *I am twenty-four years old and a graduate student in medieval history and I will have my Ph.D. in a year and it's stupid to be afraid of a dream. And it was only a dream. It's all over now and none of it was real. It was only a dream.*

She told herself this, staring out from the fortress of worn sheets and cheap blankets at the convincing familiarity of her own apartment—the Levi's lolling out of the half-closed dresser drawer, Rooster Cogburn glowering down from a poster on the wall, the absent-minded litter of textbooks

tissues, pennies, and dog-eared paperbacks that strewed the threadbare shag of the rug. She thought about the early hour of today's seminar, glanced again at the clock and the lamp, and considered seeking sleep and darkness. But though she was, as she had said, twenty-four years old and almost Ph.D., far too old to be troubled by the fears felt in a dream, she rolled over after a short time and groped *Wayfaring Life in the Middle Ages* from the floor beside her bed. She found her place in it, and by act of will forced herself to become fascinated by the legal status of the King's Highway in fifteenth-century England.

She did not trust herself to sleep again until it was almost dawn.

Oddly enough, Gil remembered nothing of the dream until nearly a week later. And what she did remember, driving home from the university in the tawny-golden brilliance of a California September afternoon, was the wizard's voice, wondering where she had heard it, the warm timbre of it and the characteristic break in tone, the velvet smoothness sliding into roughness and then abruptly back.

Then she remembered the eyes, the city, the shadows, and the fear. And she realized, turning her red VW down Clarke Street toward her apartment building, that it wasn't the first time she'd dreamed about that city.

The odd thing about the first dream, Gil recalled, maneuvering into a narrow parking space on the perennially crowded cul-de-sac, was that, though there had been nothing at all in it to cause her fear, she had been afraid and had waked up chilled with a lingering sense of dread.

She had dreamed of wandering alone in a vaulted chamber, so huge that the lines of shadowed and curtained arches supporting the low, groined ceiling had vanished into darkness all about her. Dust had stirred mustily beneath her bare feet, had coated the disused junk and dilapidated boxes piled between and among the pillars, and had fogged the distant glow of a yellow flame that she was following to its source, a little tallow-dip lamp burning beside the dark sweep of a red porphyry Stair. All around her, as cloaking as the dust, as ubiquitous as the shadows, was that sense of lurking fear, of being watched from the darkness by things that had no eyes.

The pallid flame had gleamed dully on the broad red steps and had thrown back the half-seen shape of monumental bronze doors at their top, but had drawn no reflection from the leaden blackness of the basalt floor, in spite of the fact that the floor was as smooth as glass, polished by the passage of countless feet; how this could be in the deeps of the vaults she did not know, and it was clear from the dust that few if any came here now. The floor was old, far older than the walls, though how she knew this Gil was not sure—older, she thought, than the city over her head, or any city of mankind. In the midst of that dark pavement, right before the lamplit steps, one single slab of the floor was new, heavy of pale gray granite, its surface rough against the worn, silken smoothness of the rest of the floor, though it, too, was covered with that age-long mantle of dust.

In the darkness above her a door creaked, and light wavered across the many arches. Gil slipped

back into the shadow of a pillar, though she knew it was only a dream, and knew that people here could not see her because they did not exist. A woman, a servant by her dress, came padding down the steps with a basket on her arm, holding a lamp up above her head; at her heels lumbered a hunchbacked slave, peering around him at the darkness out of shadowed, wary eyes. The woman led the way unconcernedly down the Stair, across the smooth dark floor, turning aside to avoid walking on the odd granite slab, although her goal—a bin of dried apples—lay directly opposite the foot of the stairs, and the odd slab was in no way raised above the level of the rest of the floor. The hunchback made an even wider circuit, moving from pillar to pillar, woofing and clucking quietly to himself and never taking those sharp, fear-filled eyes from the pale stone.

The woman loaded her basket and handed it to the hunchback to carry. She started back toward the steps and paused, irresolute, clearly telling herself not to be a silly, superstitious goose, that there was no reason to be afraid, not of the darkness that pressed so close around her, and certainly not of a six feet by twelve of pavement that was gray instead of black, granite instead of basalt. But in the end she took the long way around, to avoid walking on that odd slab.

*That's why it's rough, when the rest of the floor is so weirdly smooth,* Gil thought. *No one walks on it. No one has ever walked on it.*

*Why?*

But even the sense that the two dreams were somehow connected held only a kind of passing curiosity for her, until the third dream. They did nothing to disturb the fabric of her daily existence. She continued to spend hours in the university library, searching scholarly articles and moldering Middle English town records, jotting information on index cards that she later sorted out at the kitchen table back in the Clarke Street apartment, trying to make sense of what she knew. She graded undergraduate papers, sweated over her grant proposal, and had her dealings with friends and lovers—the routine of her life—until she dreamed of that beleaguered city again.

She knew it was the same city, though she looked down on it now from above. She found herself standing in the embrasure of a tall window, in a tower, she thought. So bright was the moonlight that she could discern the patterns of the courtyard pavement far below, see the designs worked into the wrought-iron lace of the gates, and make out even the shadows of the fallen leaves, like a furring of dust on the ground. Raising her eyes, she could catch, across the peaked maze of rooftrees, the glimpse of distant water. In the other direction, the black shoulders of mountains loomed against the hem of a star-blazing sky.

In the room behind her a solitary tongue of flame stood above the polished silver of the lamp on the table, and by its small, unwavering glow she could distinguish the furnishings, few and simple, each exquisitely wrought out of dark wood and ivory. Though the design and motifs were alien to her eyes, she could recognize in them the creative height of a well-founded tradition, the product of

sophisticated and tasteful culture.

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And she saw that she was not alone.

Against the chamber's far wall stood the room's largest piece of furniture, a massive ebony crib with its scrolled railings veined in mother-of-pearl that caught the dim lamplight. Above it, all but hidden in the massed shadows, a tall canopy loomed, with an emblem picked out in gold: a stylized eagle striking, beneath a tiny crown. This emblem was repeated, stitched in pinfire glints of bullion, on the black surcoat of the man who stood beside that crib, head bent and silent as a statue, looking down at its sleeping occupant.

He was a tall man, handsome in an austere way. Some silver showed in his shoulder-length brown hair, though Gil would not have put his age much above thirty-five. From the soles of his soft leather boots to the folds of the billowing robe that covered surcoat and tunic, the man's clothing was rich, a piece with the subdued grandeur of the room, dark, plain, flawlessly tailored of the most expensive fabric. The gems in the hilt of his sword flickered like stars in the lamplight with the small movements of his breath.

A sound in the corridor beyond made him raise his head, and Gil saw his face, haunted with the expectation of terrible news. Then the door beside him opened.

"I thought I should find you here," the wizard said. For one moment Gil had the absurd notion that he was speaking to her. But the man in black nodded, his face setting into lines worn by grim concentration on a problem beyond solving, and his long, slender hand continued to stroke the inward-curving circles of the rail of the crib.

"I was on my way down," he apologized, his voice muffled, his face turned half away. "I only wanted to see him."

The wizard closed the door. The movement of the air made the single lampflame shudder, the flickering color briefly gilding sunbursts of wrinkles around his eyes, showing that same expression of weariness and strain. Gil saw that he, too, wore a sword, belted over the pale homespun of his robe. The hilt of it was not jeweled, but was worn silky with years of use. He said, "There is no need. I doubt they will attack again tonight."

"Tonight," the man in black repeated somberly. His bitter eyes were a hard smoke-gray, like steel in the dense shadows of the little room. "What about tomorrow night, Ingold? And the night after? Yes, we pushed them back tonight, back down under the earth where they belong. We won—here. What about in the other cities of the Realm? What have you seen in that crystal of yours, Ingold? What has been happening elsewhere tonight? In Penambra in the south, where it seems now even the governor has been slain, and the Dark Ones haunt his palace like foul ghosts? In the provinces along the valley of the Yellow River to the east, where you tell me they hold such sway that not a man will leave his house after the sun goes in? In Gettlesand across the mountains, where the fear of the Dark Ones is so great that men will stay within their doors while the White Raiders ride down off the plain."

to burn and loot among them at will?

“The Army cannot be everywhere. They’re scattered in the four corners of the Realm, most of them still at Penambra. We here in Gae cannot hold out forever. We may not even be able to hold the Palace, should they come again tomorrow night.”

“That is tomorrow,” the wizard replied quietly. “We can only do what we must—and hope.”

“Hope.” He said it without scorn or irony, only as if it were a word long unfamiliar, whose very sound was awkward upon his tongue. “Hope for what, Ingold? That the Council of Wizards will break this silence of theirs and come out of hiding in their city at Quo? Or that, if and when they do, they will have an answer?”

“You narrow hope when you define it, Eldor.”

“God knows it’s narrow enough as it is.” Eldor turned away, to pace like a restless lion to the window and back, taking the room in three of his long strides. He passed within a foot of Gil without seeing her, but Ingold the wizard looked up, and his eyes rested briefly, curiously, on her. Eldor swung around, his sleeve brushing Gil’s hand on the windowsill. “It’s the helplessness I can’t stand,” he burst out angrily. “They are my people, Ingold. The Realm—and all of civilization, if what you tell me is true—is falling to pieces around me, and you and I together cannot so much as offer it a shield to hide behind. You can tell me what the Dark Ones are, and where they come from, but all your power cannot touch them. You can’t tell us what we can do to defeat them. You can only fight them, as we are must, with a sword.”

“It may be there is nothing we can do,” Ingold said, settling back in his chair. He folded his hands, but his eyes were alert.

“I won’t accept that.”

“You may have to.”

“It’s not true. You know it’s not true.”

“Humankind did defeat the Dark, all those thousands of years ago,” the wizard said quietly, the flickering of the light doing curious things to the scar-seamed contours of his weathered face. “As to how they did it—perhaps they themselves were not certain how it came about; in any case, we have found no record of it. My power cannot touch the Dark Ones because I do not know them, do not understand either their being or their nature. They have a power of their own, Eldor, very different from mine—beyond the comprehension of any human wizard, except, perhaps, Lohiro, the Master of the Council of Quo. Of what happened in the Time of the Dark, three thousand years ago, when the Dark rose for the first time to devastate the earth—you know it all as well as I.”

“Know it?” The King laughed bitterly, facing the wizard like a beast brought to bay, his eyes dark with the memory of ancient outrage. “I remember it. I remember it as clearly as if it had happened to me, instead of to my however-many-times-great-grandfather.” He strode to stand over the wizard, shadowing him like a blighted tree, the single lamp flinging the great distorted shape of him to blend

with the crowding dimness of the room. “And *he* remembers, too.” His hand moved toward the crib, the vast shadow-hand on the wall its dark echo, toward the child asleep within. “Deep in his baby mind those memories are buried. He’s barely six months old—six months, yet he’ll wake up screaming rigid with fear. What can a child that young dream of, Ingold? He dreams of the Dark. I know.”

“Yes,” the wizard agreed, “you dreamed of it, too. Your father never did—in fact, I doubt your father ever feared or imagined anything in his life. Those memories were buried too deep in him—perhaps there was simply no need for him to remember. But you dreamed of them and feared them although you did not know what they were.”

Standing in the cool draft of the window, Gil felt that bond between them, palpable as a word or touch: the memory of a gawky, dark-haired boy waked screaming from nameless nightmares, and the comfort given him by a vagabond wizard. Some of the harshness left Eldor’s face, and the grimness faded from his voice, leaving it only sad.

“Would I had remained ignorant,” he said. “We of our line are never entirely young, you know. The memories that we carry are the curse of our race.”

“They may be the saving of it,” Ingold replied. “And of us all.”

Eldor sighed and moved back to the crib in reflective silence, his slim, strong hands clasped lightly behind his back. But he was not now looking down at the child asleep. His eyes, brooding away into the shadows, lost their sharpness, focusing on times beyond his lifetime, on experience beyond his own.

After a while he said, “Will you do me one last service, Ingold?”

The old man’s eyes slid sharply over to him. “There is no *last*.”

The lines of Eldor’s face creased briefly deeper with his tired smile. He was evidently long familiar with the wizard’s stubbornness. “In the end,” he said, “there is always a last. I know,” he went on, “that your power cannot touch the Dark Ones. But it can elude them. I’ve seen you do it. When the night comes that they rise again, your power will allow you to escape, when the rest of us must die fighting. No—” He raised his hand to forestall the wizard’s next words. “I know what you’re going to say. But I want you to leave. If it comes to that, as your King, I order you to. When they come—and they will—I want you to take my son Altir. Take him and flee.”

The wizard sat silent, but his beard bristled with the set of his jaw. At last he said, “For one thing you are not my King.”

“Then as your friend, I ask it,” the King said, and his voice was very low. “You couldn’t save us. Not all of us. You’re a great swordsman, Ingold, perhaps the greatest alive, but the touch of the Dark is death, to a wizard as well as to any other. Our doom is surely upon us here, for they will come again, as sure as the ice in the north, and there can be no escape. But you can save Tir. He’s the last of my line, the last of Dare of Renweth’s line—the last of the lineage of the Kings of Darwath. He’s the only one in the Realm now who will remember the Time of the Dark. History itself has all but



forgotten; no record at all exists of that time, bar a mention in the oldest of chronicles. My father remembered nothing of it—my own memories are sketchy. But the need is greater now. Maybe the King has something to do with it—I don't know.

“But I know, and you know, that three thousand years ago the Dark Ones came and virtually wiped humankind from the face of the earth. *And they departed away again.* Why, Ingold, did they depart?”

The wizard shook his head.

“He knows,” Eldor said softly. “He knows. My memories are incomplete. You know that; I've told you a dozen times. He's a promise, Ingold. I'm only a failed hope, a guttered candle. Somewhere in his memory, the heritage of the line of Dare, is the clue that all the rest of us have forgotten, the key that will lead to the undoing of the Dark. If I ever had it, it's buried too deeply; and he's the only other one. Him you must save.”

The wizard said nothing. The quiet flame of the lamp, pure and small as a gold coin, reflected in his thinking eyes. In the stillness of the room, that tiny gleam was unmoving, the pool of waxy gold that lay around the lamp on the polished surface of the table as steady and sharply defined as a spotlight. At length he said, “And what about you?”

“A King has the right,” Eldor replied, “to die with his kingdom. I will not leave the final battle. Indeed, I do not see how I could. But for all the love you have ever borne me, do this thing for me now. Take him, and see him to a place of safety. I charge you with it—it is in your hands.”

Ingold sighed and bent his head, as if to receive a yoke, the gold of the lamplight limning his silver hair. “I will save him,” he said. “That I promise you. But I will not desert you until the cause is hopeless.”

“Do not trouble yourself,” the King said harshly. “The cause is hopeless already.”

Deep below the dark foundations of the Palace a hollow booming resounded, like the stroke of a gigantic drum, and Gil felt the sound vibrate through the marble of the floor. Eldor's head jerked up and around, his long mouth hardening in the smooth gold and shadows, his hand flinching automatically to the hilt of his jeweled sword, but Ingold only sat, a statue of stone and darkness. A second booming shivered the weight of the Palace on its deep-found piers, as if struck by a great fist. Breathless in the closeness of that peaceful room, three people waited for the third stroke. But no third stroke fell; only a cold, creeping horror that prickled Gil's hair seemed to seep into the silence from below, the wordless threat of unknown peril.

Finally Ingold said, “They will not come tonight.” Through his weariness, his tone was certain. “Go to the Queen and comfort her.”

Eldor sighed; like a man released from a spell that had turned him to stone, he shifted broad rawboned shoulders to relax the tension from his back. “The landchiefs of the Realm meet in an hour,” he excused himself tiredly, and rubbed at his eyes, his fingers grinding the dark smudges that ringed

them. "And I should speak with the Guards before then about moving provisions out of the old vault under the Prefecture, in case our supply lines are cut. But you're right, I should go to see her... though first I should speak with the Bishop about bringing Church troops into the city." He began to pace again, the restless movement of an active man whose mind forever outran his body. Ingold remained seated in the carved ivory chair with its little gilded deer-hoof feet, and the flame before him moved with Eldor's motion, as if it, too, were drawn by the restless vitality of the man. "Will you be at the council?"

"I have given all the help and advice I can," Ingold replied. "I shall remain here, I think, and try again to get in touch with the wizards at Quo. Tir may not be our only answer. There are records in the Library at Quo, and traditions handed down from master to pupil over millennia; knowledge and the search for knowledge are the key and the heart of wizardry. Tir is an infant. By the time he learns to speak, it may be too late for what he has to tell us."

"It may already be too late." The flame bowed with the soft closing of the door behind Eldor.

Ingold sat for a time after he had gone, brooding silently on that pure small slip of fire. The glow of it played across his shadowed eyes, touched the knuckles of his folded hands—blunt-fingered powerful hands, nicked all over with the scars of old sword cuts and marked on one heavy wrist with an age-whitened shackle gall. Then he rubbed his eyes tiredly and looked straight into the deep hollow of shadow where Gil stood, framed by the intricately screened filigree of the pillars beside the window. He beckoned to her. "Come here," he said gently, "and tell me about yourself. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid." But as she took a hesitating step forward, the lamplight darkened, and the whole room was lost to her sight in the foggy mazes of sleep.

Gil told no one about the third dream. She had spoken of the second one to a woman friend who had listened sympathetically but hadn't, she felt, understood. Indeed, she didn't understand it herself. But the third dream she mentioned to no one, because she knew that it had been no dream. The certainty troubled her. Maybe, she told herself, she would tell her friend about it one day, when enough time had passed so that it was no longer important. But for now she locked it away, with several other irrelevant matters, in her secret heart.

Then one night she woke from a sound sleep standing up. She saw, as her eyes cleared, that she was in a sunken courtyard in that deserted city. The great houses surrounded her like lightless cliffs and moonlight drenched the square, throwing her shadow clearly on muddy and unwashed flagstones under her bare feet. The place was deserted, like a courtyard of the dead. Where the ghastly silver light blanching the facade of the east-facing house, she saw that its great doors had been blown off their hinges from within and lay in scattered pieces about her feet.

From out of that empty doorway, a sudden little wind stirred, restless and without direction.

turning back on itself in a small scritch of fallen leaves. She sensed beyond the blind window and vacant doors of that house a sound, a fumbling movement, as if dark shifted through dark, bumping eyelessly at the inner walls, seeking a way out. She swallowed hard, her breath quickening in fear, and she glanced behind her at the arched gateway that led out into the deserted street beyond. But the gate was dark, and she felt a clammy, unreasoning terror of walking beneath the clustered shadows in the high vault of the enclosed passage.

The wind from the house increased, chilling her. She edged her way back toward the dark gateway, feeling herself beginning to shiver, her feet icy on the marble pavement. The silence of the place was terrible; even the screaming flight of that first night would have been more welcome. Then she had been in a crowd, though unseen; then she had not been alone. Silent and terrible, the lurker waited at the threshold of that dark house, and she knew that she must flee for her life. She would not be able to waken out of this dream; she knew that she was already awake.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she had the brief impression of something moving, low to the ground, in the shadows by the wall. Swinging around, she saw nothing. But she thought that the darkness itself was reaching out toward her, damping even the moonlight.

Turning, she fled, her black shadow running on the ground before her in the ivory moonlight. Broken stone and iron gashed her bare feet as she plunged into the black arch of the gate, but the pain was swallowed in icy fear as thin, aimless winds tugged at her—as she sensed, rather than saw, something move in the utter blackness over her head. She stumbled into the street outside, her bleeding feet leaving red blotches on the wet slime of the cobbles, running, running in heart-bursting panic through the empty boulevards of the city that she now saw lay half in ruins, the silent pavement cluttered with rubble and new-stripped human bones. Shadows, black and as staring as walls of stone, confronted her with new horrors at every turn; gargoyle shapes of terror lurked under every eave and fallen roof-tree. The only sounds in all that empty city of freezing night were the moist, pattering slap of her bare feet on stone and the gasp of her laboring breath, the only movements her own frenzied flight and that of her jerking, leaping shadow, and, behind her, the drifting movement of wind and darkness pouring after her like smoke. She fled blindly down black canyons, feet numb, legs numb, stumbling over she knew not what, knowing by instinct in which direction the Palace lay, knowing that Ingold the wizard was there and that Ingold would save her.

She ran until she woke, sobbing, clutching her pillow in the dark, soaked with cold terror-sweat, her body aching with exhaustion. Only gradually did the filtered moonlight register the familiar things of the Clarke Street apartment, alien to her wondering eyes, as if both worlds were now equally here. She forced her gasping breath to slow, forced her mind to think; her legs smarted; her feet were like ice beneath the covers. In a confused clutching at the straws of sanity she thought, *That's why I dreamed of having cold feet; because my feet are cold.* She groped for the light with trembling fingers, turned it on, and lay there shivering, repeating to herself the desperate, unbelieving litany: *It was on*

*a dream, it was only a dream. Please, God, let it be only a dream.*

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But even as she whispered, she felt the sticky wetness matting her numb toes. Reaching down unwillingly, to warm them, she brought her fingers back streaked with fresh blood, from where she had cut her feet on the broken stone in the gateway.

Five nights later, the moon was full.

Its light woke Gil, startling her out of sleep into a split-second convulsion of fear, until she recognized the night-muted patterns of familiar things and realized she was in her place on Clark Street. Waking suddenly in the night, she was seldom sure anymore. She lay still for a time, listening open-eyed in the darkness, waiting for the quick flood of panic to subside from her veins. When moonlight lay on the blanket beside her, palpable as a sheet of paper.

Then she thought, *Dammit, I forgot to put the chain on the door.*

This was purely a formality, a bedtime ritual; the apartment had a regular lock and, moreover, the neighborhood was a quiet one. She almost decided to forget the whole thing, roll over, and go back to sleep; but after a minute, she crawled out of bed, shivering in the cold, and groped her peacock kimono from its accustomed place on the floor. Wrapping it about her, she padded silently into the dark kitchen, her feet finding their way easily. Her hand found the light switch by touch in the darkness and flicked it up.

The wizard Ingold was sitting at the kitchen table.

Absurdly, Gil's first thought was that this was the only time she'd seen him in decent lighting. He looked older, wearier, the brown and white of his homespun robes faded and stained and shabby, but he was essentially the same fierce, gentlemanly old man she knew from her dreams: the advisor of the dark King; the man whose face she'd seen reflected in the foxfire glow of his sword, striding down to meet the darkness.

*This is stupid, she thought. This is crazy.* Not because she was seeing him again—for she had known all along that she would—but because it was in her apartment, her world. What the hell was he doing here if it wasn't a dream? And she knew it wasn't. She glanced automatically around the kitchen. The supper dishes—and the previous night's supper dishes—were piled unwashed on the counter, the table top invisible under a litter of apple cores and index cards, cups of moldering coffee, and sheets of scribbled notebook paper. Two of her old T-shirts were dumped over the back of the chair on which Ingold sat. The seedy electric clock behind his head read just past three. It was all so squalidly depressing to be anything but real—she was definitely neither asleep nor dreaming.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

The wizard raised shaggy eyebrows in surprise. “I came to talk to you,” he replied. She knew his voice. She felt that she had always known it.

“I mean—how did you get here?”

“I could give you a technical explanation, of course,” he said, and the smile that briefly illuminated his face turned it suddenly very young. “But would it matter? I crossed the Void to find you, because I need your help.”

“Hunh?”

It was not the kind of response best suited to what she’d read of dealing with wizards, but Ingold’s eyes twinkled with fleeting amusement. “I would not have sought you out,” he told her gently, “if I didn’t.”

“Uh—” Gil said profoundly. “I don’t understand.” She started to sit down opposite him, which involved clearing two textbooks and the calendar section of the *Times* off the chair, then paused in a tardy outburst of hospitality. “Would you like a beer?”

“Thank you.” He smiled, and gravely studied the opening instructions inscribed on the top of the can. For a first time, he didn’t do badly.

“How could you see me?” she asked, sliding into her chair as he shook the foam off his fingers. “Even when it was a dream, even when no one else could—King Eldor and the Guards at the gate—you could. Why was that?”

“It’s because I understand the nature of the Void,” the wizard said gravely. He folded his hands on the table, the blunt, scarred fingers idly caressing the gaudy aluminum of the can, as if memorizing its shape and feel. “You understand, Gil, that there exists an infinite number of parallel universes meshed in the matrix of the Void. In my world, in my time, I am the only one who understands the nature of the Void—one of a bare handful who even suspects its existence.”

“And how did you learn about it, much less how to cross it, if no one else in your world knows?” Gil asked curiously.

The wizard smiled again. “That, Gil, is a story that would take all night to do justice to, without advancing the present situation. Suffice it to say that I am the only man in perhaps five hundred years who has been able to cross the curtain that separates universe from universe—and having done so, was able to recognize the imprint of your thoughts, your personality, that had been drawn across the Void by the mass vibration of worldwide panic and terror. I believe there are a very few others in your world who, for whatever reason, be it psychic or physical or purest coincidence, have felt, from across the Void, the coming of the Dark. Of them all, you are the only one with whom I have been able to establish contact. It was seeing you, speaking to you, and then having you materialize not only in thought but in body, that made me understand what is happening with regard to the Void.”

Outside, a truck rumbled by on Clarke Street, its sound muffled with distance and the night. Somewhere in the apartment building, a toilet flushed, a faint echoing gurgle along the pipes. Gil stared down at the table for a time, her eye automatically noting her own jagged black handwriting spelling out cryptic notes with regard to the upkeep of fourteenth-century bridges, then looked up again at the wizard calmly drinking beer across from her, his staff leaned against the wall at his side.

She asked, "What is happening with the Void?"

"When I spoke with you in Gae," Ingold went on, "I realized that our worlds must lie in very close conjunction at this time—so close that, because of the psychic crisis, a dreamer could literally walk the line between them and see from one into the next. This is both a rare and a temporary occurrence, a one-in-a-million chance for two worlds to drift so close. But it is a situation that I can use to my advantage in this emergency."

"But why did it happen now, at the time of crisis?" Gil asked, the harsh electric glare rippling the embroidery of her gaudy sleeves as she leaned forward across the table. "And why did it happen to me?"

He must have caught the suppressed slivers of uneasiness and fear of being singled out in her voice; when he replied he spoke gently. "Nothing is fortuitous. There are no random events. But we cannot know all the reasons."

She barely hid a smile. "That's a wizard's answer if I ever heard one."

"Meaning that mages deal in double talk?" His grin was impish. "That's one of our two occupational hazards."

"And what's the other one?"

He laughed. "A deplorable tendency to meddle."

She joined him in laughter. Then after a moment she grew quiet and asked, "But if you're a wizard, how could you need my help? What help could I possibly give you that you couldn't find for yourself? How could I help you against—against the Dark? Who is, or what is, the Dark?"

He regarded her in silence for a moment, judging her, testing her, watching her out of blue eyes whose surface brightness masked a depth and pull like the ocean's. His face had grown grave again, settled into its sun-scorched lines. He said, "You know."

She looked away, seeing in her unwilling mind monolithic bronze doors exploding off their hinges; seeing shadows that ran behind her, inescapable as ghostly wolves. She spoke without meeting his eyes. "I don't know what they are."

"Nor does anyone," he said, "unless it's Lohiro, the Master of Quo. It's a question whose answer I wish I had never been set to seek, a riddle I'm sorry I have to unravel."

"What can I say of the Dark, Gil? What can I say that you don't know already? That they are the sharks of night? That they pull the flesh from the bones, or the blood from the flesh, or the soul and spirit from the living body and let it stumble mindlessly to an eventual death from starvation? That they ride the air in darkness, hunt in darkness, and that fire or light or even a good bright moon would keep them away? Would that tell you what they are?"

She shook her head, hypnotized by the warm roughness of his voice, caught by the intensity of his eyes and by the horror and the memory of even more appalling horrors that she saw there. "But you know," she whispered.

“Would to God I did not.” Then he sighed and looked away; when he turned his head again, there was only that matter-of-fact self-assurance in his face, without the doubt, or the fear, or the loathing what he knew.

“I—I dreamed of them.” Gil stumbled on the words, finding it unexpectedly more difficult to speak of that first forerunning dream to one who understood than to one who did not. “Before I ever saw them, before I ever knew what they were. I dreamed about a—a vault, a cellar—with arches going in all directions. The floor was black and smooth, like glass; and in the middle of that black floor was a slab of granite that was new and rough, because nobody ever walked on it. You said they came from—from beneath the ground.”

“Indeed,” the wizard said, looking at her with an alert, speculative curiosity. “You seem to have sensed their coming far ahead of its time. That may mean something, though at the moment I’m not sure... Yes, that was the Dark, or, rather, the blocked-up entrance to one of their Nests. Under that granite slab—and I know the one you’re talking about—is a stairway, a stairway going downward into incalculable depths into the earth. It was with the stairways, I believe, that it all began.

“For the stairways were always there. You find representations of them in the most ancient prehistoric petroglyphs: vast pavements of black stone and, in the midst of them, stairs descending to the deepest heart of the earth. No one ever went down them—at least, no one who came back up again—and no one knew who built them. Some said it was the titans of old, or the earth-gods; old records speak of the places as being awesome, full of magic. For a long time they were considered to be luck favored by the gods—the old religion built temples over them, temples which became the centers of the first cities of humankind.

“All this was millennia ago. Villages grew to towns and then to great cities. The cities united, states and realms spread along the rich valleys of the Brown River, on the shores of the Round Sea and the Western Ocean, and in the jungles and deserts of Alketch. Civilization flowered and bore its fruit: wizardry, art, money, learning, war. Records of that time are so scarce as to be almost nonexistent. Only beguiling fragments of chronicles remain, mostly in the Library at Quo, a teasing sliver of a civilization of great depth and richness, of sublime beauty and wisdom and truly foul decadence, a society that parented first wizardry and then the Church and the great codes of civil law.

“I am virtually certain that some kind of tradition existed then regarding the Dark Ones, simply because the word for them was in the language. *Sueg*—dark—*isueg*—an archaic, personalized form of the same word. But they were only a vague rumor of shadow on the edges of the oldest legends—the misty memory of hidden fear. And if there was such a tradition, it did not connect them with the stairways themselves. So they remained, rooted in the abysses of time, an ancient mystery buried in the heart of civilization.

“Of the destruction of the ancient world we have no coherent account. We know that it happened within a matter of weeks. That what struck, struck worldwide, we also know—a simultaneous siege

horror. But the horror and the confusion were so overwhelming that virtually no record was preserved and since defense against the Dark generally entailed uncontrolled use of fire as a weapon, we lost what little information we might have had about their coming. We know that they came—but we do not know why.

“Unable to fight, humankind fled and retreated to fortified Keeps, behind whose massive walls they led a windowless existence, creeping forth by day to till their fields and hiding when the sun went down. For three hundred years, absolute chaos and terror held sway on the earth, because there was no knowing where or when the Dark would come. Civilization crumbled, fading to a few glowing embers of the great beacon light that it had once been.

“And then—” Ingold spread his hands, showing them empty, like a sideshow magician. “The Dark no longer came. Whether the cessation was sudden or gradual, we cannot be sure, for by that time few people were literate enough to be keeping accurate records. Little villages had grown up outside the Keeps; in time, new little villages appeared on the crumbling ruins of the ancient cities whose very names had been forgotten through the intervening years. There were wars and change and long spaces of time. Old traditions faded; the very language changed. Old songs and stories were forgotten.

“Three thousand years is a long time, Gil. You’re an historian—can you tell me, with any accuracy, what happened three thousand years ago?”

“Uh—” Gil cast a hasty scan over her memories of *Ancient Civilizations 1A*. Marathon? Stonehenge? Hyksos’ invasions of Egypt? As a medievalist, she had only the foggiest impressions of anything prior to Constantine. What must it be like, she wondered, for the average Joe Doakes who hadn’t been to college and didn’t like history much anyway? Even something as hideous as the Black Death, an event which had grossly and permanently impacted western civilization, was only a name to eighty percent of the population—and that was only six hundred years ago.

Ingold nodded, his point made. It occurred to Gil to wonder how he had known that her subject was history, but he went on, as she was beginning to find was his habit, without explaining. “For many years I was the only one who knew anything about even the old tales of the Dark. I knew—I learned—that the Dark Ones were not utterly gone. Eventually I learned that they were not even much diminished in numbers. And I heard things that made me believe that they would return. Eldor’s father had me banished for speaking of it, which I thought small-minded of him, since sending me away could not reduce the danger—but perhaps he thought that I was lying. Eldor believed me. Without his preparations, I think we would all have perished the first night of their rising.”

“And now?” Gil asked softly.

“Now?” The night was far spent; the lines of weariness etched into his scarred face seemed to settle a little deeper. “We are holding out in the Palace at Gae. The main body of the Army under the command of the Chancellor of the Realm, Alwir, the Queen’s brother, has been in Penambra, when



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