

Dark Debts
Prologue
by Doranna Durgin

412Tz, spring

Kerraii should have known it was coming.

It was too quiet that morning. Not peaceful, just...quiet. An eerie quiet that slowly pervaded her senses, persistent and subtle.

No thrushes in the forest undergrowth, rustling in last year's fallen leaves. No kinglets flittering in the lower branches, scolding each other with their tiny voices. No kingbirds in the sky above, swooping after the little hawks that dared to invade kingbird territory.

None of that in the spring Wylden woods, where young Kerraii went in search of early goldenseal. Just a wrongness, with the bright sky full of scudding white clouds and the silence around her as she licked her fingers clean of the honey flake-layer comfit she'd brought with her.

Maybe if she'd realized it sooner, she could have done something to change what came next. But she was young and absorbed in her task, her thoughts lost in anticipation of the evening's impending courtship fete for her sister Willeta. Kerraii had yet to complete the door tabard she'd woven, using wool carefully plucked from the bushes, courtesy of the free-roaming village-tended sheep. Gift of the heart and hand, collected from the land, dyed with herbs chosen not only for color but for their symbolism and attributes.

A goldenseal infusion sprinkled over the completed tabard would make the finishing touch. Kerraii knelt in the thick, spongy duff of the forest floor, the spicy smell of disturbed groundcover a pleasant tingle in her nose. One of three plants she would harvest, leaving the others to flourish and replenish. Later this year she'd be back for the prophet's bell--

Warning came in a rustle of leaf brushing leaf, the kind of noise the thrushes should have been making--except it came too high off the ground to be any thrush.

Kerraii froze, drawn from her quiet thoughts. Her keen ears, having failed to attend the not-noise, picked up on the wrongness of this one. She froze, long black hair spilling over her shoulder--suddenly, finally, just as alert as she should have been.

The silence held. Kerrai eased to her feet, trying to reconcile her wariness with the fact that within these woods--safe, home--she had little to fear. Around her were the generously spaced, high-trunked trees of a mature forest, with bushes scattered between and sunlight barely filtering through to dapple the leaf-littered ground. For twenty years she'd run these woods, knowing every path, spotting every twitch of a whisker beside her. Surely there was nothing--

She caught a sudden glimpse of black and silver, the merest flash of yellow. A new whisper of sound reached her ears, unfamiliar sound. She frowned, feeling the first trickle of real fear before she even understood what she heard.

Suddenly she knew..and just as suddenly, it was too late.

Screaming.

Screaming in the distance, from her village.

For an instant, she only stood there, goldenseal crushed in her clenched hand. And then...she ran. Long of leg, sure of foot, she sprinted for the village, thinking fire but not smelling it, thinking treefall but knowing the wind was calm. Raiders, said a little voice in her head, one with truth in it as she leaped a cluster of tree roots, whirling to pull a lock of her trailing hair from the reaching grasp of a hazel bush.

Raiders. Oh yes, she ran.

Raiders. She came to a gasping stop at the edge of her village and saw it was so. The screaming, the running, the bloodshed...strangers stirred chaos and death in her village, elves dressed as she'd never seen before. Bright armor covered their sweeping black tunics; weapons flashed in their hands. And worse. One warrior, lightly armored over his black tunic and pants, bent over a villager in a strange posture. The villager was no more than an unidentifiable pair of legs and lower torso from Kerrai's vantage point; he kicked and struggled--and then went limp. The elf straightened with a manic gleam in his eye and blood dripping from his mouth and off his chin, looking oddly refreshed and invigorated. The other raiders wreaked havoc among her people, herding them, prodding them...killing them.

Kerrai clung to a tree, too stunned to move and helpless to stop the attack. The village spread before her, its main longhouse built among the trees in a sweeping curve of combined households. Living trees provided its form and guided its design; each generation had improved it, adding touches of subtle beauty, integrating the longhouse more completely with its

surroundings. It was meant to last forever.

With the screech of wood torn asunder, the end of the longhouse crumbled before her disbelieving eyes.

Kerraii's fingers clenched the smooth bark of the ironwood tree beside her; horror gripped her so hard it turned to disbelief. It isn't happening. It can't be. Elves in black and silver harrying her people, hulking green creatures in brown leather armor charging out from behind the collapsing longhouse...it can't be.

The black-clad elves shoved her people toward the center of the village, trampling the carefully tended plantings. Kerraii saw her mother and cried out, a protest lost in the noise of the assault. Black-clad elves...dark elves, she realized suddenly. Necropolis Elves.

Another dark elf flung her younger brother Oaklen into the forming knot of people before the longhouse; Oaklen fetched up against the shins of one of the hulking green creatures. Zombies. It showed him no mercy for all that he was only ten years old--instead it slapped him away again, leaving a trail of blood down her Oaklen's face.

She began to understand. The villagers were being rounded up, snatched from their daily tasks and their peaceful lives. Shoved and sorted into groups. Elders apart from younglings, those in their prime apart from them all--confirming her worst fears, the ones she hadn't even yet allowed herself to consider. The ones about which no one ever talked yet about which everyone knew.

Slave raid.

And with that she finally began to think again, to consider her options. She was swift and graceful; even strong. But she was not trained for other than her husbandry of the land. Certainly not trained to the defense of her people, with only a small harvesting knife at her belt.

Yet she could not run.

As she hesitated, her body taut with the promise of action, Oaklen broke away from the growing huddle of battered villagers. Always a rowdy child, always a gleam of interest or intent or even mischief in his eye...the villagers likened him to Kerraii when she'd been young and untamed. And now he betrayed them both, simply by being the one person among them all, enemy or friend, to spot Kerraii. He broke away and ran for her, taking no notice of the sickly green hulk behind him.

But the bare-fisted Zombie saw her brother well enough. Graceless and lurching, it nonetheless gained quick ground, coming in from an angle--

Kerraii grabbed her little knife and poised to throw herself at the creature.

Hands clamped down on her arms, crushing them against her body in a cruel and painful grip. Her knife fell from numbed fingers; from her other hand, finally, fell the crushed goldenseal.

"Now that," a sinister voice hissed in her ear, "would be a waste of good material."

Kerraii jerked against the grip, more terrified for Oaklen than for herself; just in those few words, in the possessive tone of her assailant's voice, in the way he crushed her arms to her body to restrain her without badly damaging her, she understood that she was his prize, not his victim.

But the abhorrent Zombie behind her brother had no apparent cunning in its expression, no ability to discern value. It wanted only to stop him and as it latched onto his arm, Kerraii broke her silence with a full-throated scream, struggling futilely in the painful grip of her captor. She succeeded only in bruising her elbows against the high relief of the man's metal chest armor--and in drawing the attention of her huddled friends and family. Until now they'd seen neither her brother's escape or her own presence, but now they reacted in horror, crying out to her, making aborted attempts to reach Oaklen. Another Zombie slapped down her sister's lifemate even as the Zombie holding Oaklen dealt him a few harsh crunching blows from a meaty fist.

Oaklen's head snapped back; his body went limp. The Zombie shook him a few times for good measure and tossed him carelessly back toward the group. Oaklen bounced a few times and came to a sprawling stop, his neck at such an unnatural angle that Kerraii instantly realized he was dead.

Willeta had just enough freedom to throw herself down on him, to extend a reaching hand out to Kerraii, tears coursing down her cheeks. And Kerraii reached back with everything that was in her. By the Land, she reached out, throwing her heart, throwing her love and grief...but not moving an inch within her captor's grip.

"Kerraii!" Willeta cried.

And Kerraii hung trembling in the man's grip, her muscles and mind untrained for fighting, her will battered by sights and sound, her persistence waiting for that better moment--

"You'll not be with them anymore. Not ever," the man said--still behind her, still unseen

other than the glimpses she'd gotten of black and silver and even a little yellow, just like those glimpses in the woods by the goldenseal. This one was more than just a soldier--quieter, swifter...stronger. For all he spoke to her in the Wylden tongue, he was no Wylden elf. Dark Elf. One hand released her, instantly twining into the long black hair at the back of her neck, pulling hard...but with significance. "Black hair, black eyes... You'll earn me favor with Sarnen." Then he gave her a little shake. "Unless you cause too much trouble. Then he'll never have the chance to admire your beauty. I'll kill you myself and leave you by the side of the road for the 'spawn to nibble in our wake. Do you understand that?" His voice came like thick, clotted cream, far too close to her ear.

For a moment, Kerrai's mind raced. She thought of escape and she thought desperately of returning to her family, to share their fate.

He gave her another little shake. "Do you understand?"

Kerrai hesitated. Then she said, at first barely audible but with growing strength, "Yes. I'll do as you say." For now.

But as he shoved her away from her sister, her family, her village, she had a sudden dire fear that it might take a very long time for now to become no more.

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