

A B L A C K G U A R D S A N T H O L O G Y

BRIGANDS

Featuring original stories from
BRADLEY P. BEAULIEU • JEAN RABE • LIAN HEARN • ANTON STROUT
AND MANY MORE!

↳ *Edited by* ◀
MELANIE R. MEADORS & ALANA JOLI ABBOTT



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BRIGANDS: A Blackguards Anthology
Outland Entertainment | www.outlandentertainment.com
Founder/Creative Director: Jeremy D. Mohler
Editor-in-Chief: Alana Joli Abbott
Publisher: Melanie R. Meadors
Senior Editor: Gwendolyn Nix

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Stories originally published in *Blackguards*, edited by J.M. Martin, Ragnarok Publications, 2015.
New edition curated and edited by Melanie R. Meadors.

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Published by Outland Entertainment
5601 NW 25th Street
Topeka KS, 66618

Paperback: 978-1-9476-5939-1
EPUB: 978-1-947659-55-1
MOBI: 978-1-947659-59-9
PDF-Merchant: 978-1-947659-41-4
Worldwide Rights
Created in the United States of America

Editor: Melanie R. Meadors
Cover Illustration: Daniel Rempel
Interior Illustrations: Oksana Dmitrienko, Orion Zangara, & David Alvarez
Cover Design & Interior Layout: STK•Kreations

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IRINDAI

Bradley P. Beaulieu

CEDA FOUND BRAMA by the river. She watched from within a stand of cattails, where she was hunkered low, cool river water lapping at her ankles.

Brama was playing in the water with a dozen other gutter wrens—playing!—apparently without a care in the world after he'd nicked her purse. She felt the anger roiling inside her like a pot boiling over. He'd probably come straight here to brag to his friends, show them what he'd done and challenge them to do the same, then demand tribute like some paltry lord of mud and fleas.

The lot of them were playing skipjack along the Haddah's muddy banks. One by one, boys and girls would run to the lip of the bank and leap onto a grimy piece of canvas pulled taut as a skin drum by seven or eight of the older children, who would then launch them into the air. They would flail their arms and legs mid-flight, screaming or yelling, before splashing like stones into the Haddah, water spraying like diamonds in the dry, desert air.



Her lips curling in disgust, Çeda watched as Brama was launched in turn. He barked like a jackal and flew through the air to crash into the water, arms and legs spread wide. After, he waded back to the canvas and relieved one of the others so they could make a run of their own—the same pattern he'd followed every other time he'd jumped into the river.

When he reaches dry ground, Çeda told herself.

Moving with a pace that would keep her position concealed, Çeda pulled out a locket on a silver chain from inside her dress. She pried the locket open, its two halves spreading like wings to reveal a dried white petal with a tip of palest blue. After taking the petal out, she clipped the locket closed and placed the fragile petal beneath her tongue. Spit filled her mouth. A shiver ran down her frame as the flavor of spices filled her. Mace and rosemary and a hint of jasmine and other things she didn't have words for.

The petal had been stolen from the adichara, a forbidden tree that bloomed only once every six weeks under the light of the twin moons. When gathered on such nights, they were imbued with breathtaking power. Part of her hated to use even one of the petals on Brama, but her anger over what he'd done was more than strong enough to smother any distaste.

As the effects of the petal spread, granting a barely contained verve to her limbs, she stuffed the locket back inside her dress and scanned the river. Colors were sharper now. She could *hear* more as well, not just the children in the river but the very breath and rattle of the city. It took effort in the early moments of imbibing the petals to concentrate, but she was used to doing so, and she focused her attention on those near and around Brama. A clutch of children were playing downriver, some trying to spear fish, others wading and laughing or splashing one another. Most likely they wouldn't interfere. There was one who

gave her pause, though, a dark-skinned Kundhunese boy with bright blue eyes. He stood apart from the others, and seemed to be watching Brama and the children with almost as much interest as Çeda. She would swear she'd seen him before, but just then she couldn't remember where or when it might have been.

She worked at the memory, scratching at it, but like a stubborn sliver it only sank deeper in her mind, and soon Brama was handing over his section of the canvas to a girl with a lopsided grin.

The moment Brama gained the bank, Çeda parted the cattails and marched forward. "Brama!"

He turned, staring at her with a frown. Her identity was still hidden by her white turban and veil, so he wouldn't know who she was, but she could see in his eyes that he recognized the flowing blue dress she'd been wearing early that morning.

He scanned the area to see if anyone else was with her. "What do you want?"

"There's something you stole from me," she called, "and I mean to have it back." Çeda didn't know Brama well. He was a boy who liked to traipse about Sharakhai's west end, bullying some, shying away from others. He was an opportunist, and a right good lock-slip if rumor was true. She might have gone all her days and never thought twice about Brama but that morning he'd stolen something from her: a purse she was meant to deliver for Osman—a shade, as it was known in Sharakhai. It was as simple a task as Osman had ever given her—hardly more than a prance across the city—and she'd bungled it, but she'd be damned by Bakhi's bright hammer before she'd let a boy like Brama get away with it.

Brama's eyes flicked to the children in the river. They were watching, not yet approaching, but it wouldn't take long before they came to back him up. The moment his eyes were off her, Çeda drew her

shinai, her curved wooden practice sword, from its holder at her belt. She didn't like walking around Sharakhai with a real sword—girls of fifteen, even tall as she was, attracted notice bearing steel—but few enough spent more than a passing glance at a girl wearing a shinai, especially in the west end where children practicing the dance of blades could be found on any street, alley, or open space one cared to look.

Brama's eyes were only for Çeda now. He looked her up and down, perhaps truly noticing her frame for the first time. She was tall. She had more muscle than he might have noticed earlier. She was holding a sword with a cozy grip—a *lover's* grip, the bladewrights called it, the kind that revealed just how intimate a sword and its master were with one another—and with the magic of the petal now running through her veins, Çeda was itching to use it.

Brama's friends were stepping out of the water now, and it seemed to lend him some confidence, for he swelled, not unlike like a man who'd had one too many glasses of araq might do, or the dirt dogs in the pits often did when they knew they were outmatched. He stuffed one hand down his still-dripping pants and pulled out a short but well-edged knife. "I've got nothing of yours"—he smiled as the other children fanned around and behind Çeda—"so why don't you run off before that pretty dress of yours is stained red?"

Brama had muscle as well, but it was the rangy sort, the kind that felt good to thump with the edge of a wooden sword. "You stole a purse, cut from my belt as I strode through the spice market."

"A thousand and one gutter wrens wander that market day and night. Any one of them might have stolen your purse."

"Ah, but it *wasn't* any one of them." She lifted the point of her shinai and thrust it toward Brama's chest. "The nick from your little knife wasn't nearly as clean as you thought, Brama Junayd'ava. I saw

you running like a whipped dog down the aisles, and I *know* you heard me calling.”

She thought he might be put off by the use of his familial name, but instead he squinted, as if he recognized her voice and was trying to place it. “I don’t know who it might have been, but you’re a fool if you think it was me.”

The circle around her was closing in now, some with river stones clutched in their scrawny hands.

Çeda took a half-step closer to Brama and dropped into a fighting stance. “This is your last warning, Brama.”

Brama merely smiled. “You should have run while you had the chance.”

Çeda didn’t wait any longer. She charged.

She brought her sword swiftly down against his hastily raised defenses. The wooden blade cracked against his forearms, then his rib cage, then his knee, not enough to break bones—though she could easily have done so—but certainly more than enough to send him crumpling to the ground.

Other children rushed in, but if her time in the pits had taught her anything it was how to maintain distance with the enemy, even many at once. She rushed past Brama’s fallen form, twisting and striking a girl every bit as tall as Brama across the face. Another came barreling after, but Çeda dropped and snapped her leg out, catching the girl and sending her tumbling off the bank and into the river.

The ones with the stones loosed them at Çeda as two more boys braved the range of her sword. One stone struck a glancing blow against her shoulder, another squarely against her ribs, but the effects of the petal deadened the pain. Four quick strokes of her shinai and the boys were howling away, shaking pain from their knuckles and wrists.

She was alone now. None would come near. Even the boy with a rock the size of a lemon held in each hand remained still as a statue, the fear plain on his face.

Brama lay at her feet, cringing.

“Where’s the purse?” she asked him.

His face grew hard, his teeth gritting away the pain. “I don’t have it.”

“That wasn’t what I asked you, Brama.” She grabbed a hunk of his hair—“I said, *where is it?*”—and slammed his head onto the ground.

“I don’t have it!”

Somehow, his refusal made her go calm as the night’s cool winds. She let go of Brama’s hair and stood, staring down at him with her shinai still held easily in her right hand. “When are you going to learn, Brama?” She raised her sword, ready to give him something to think about before asking him the question again, but she stopped when she heard a piercing whistle from somewhere along the riverbank. She turned, but not before laying the tip of her sword over Brama’s kidney, a warning for him to lay still.

A man with broad shoulders wearing laced sandals and a striped kaftan was standing near the edge of the river, staring at her. The sun glinted brightly off the lapping waves behind him, so she didn’t at first recognize him—and why by the gods’ sweet breath would he be here in any case?—but soon she *did* recognize him.

Osman.

The very man she should have delivered the purse to this morning. But she’d failed to, because of fucking Brama.

She was half-tempted to bring the sword down across Brama’s thieving little face. He flinched, perhaps sensing the brewing sandstorm within her, and that made her want to strike him even more, but she stayed her hand when Osman shouted, “Enough!” in that clipped

tone of his. And then she saw what he was holding in his right hand, dangling like a fish.

The purse. *Her* purse, a small, red leather affair, the very one he'd asked her to pick up and bring to him at the pits.

"Come," he said, and turned to walk along the dusty bank of the Haddah.

Çeda had no difficulty understanding the command was meant for her, so she left, but not before kicking dirt over Brama's quivering form. As she walked toward Osman, she realized the Kundhunese boy with the blue eyes was watching her intently.

Not Osman. Just her.

"Hurry up," Osman said.

She refused to run, but she quickened her pace until they were walking side by side. She glanced back only once, and found that the Kundhunese boy had vanished. She scanned the river, curious, but she was so intrigued by Osman's sudden possession of the purse that she gave up after too long. How by the hot desert winds could Osman have learned not only that the purse had been stolen but that Brama had been the one to do it? And after learning it, how could he have found it so quickly?

The answer came to her in little time, but before she could say anything about it, Osman said, "Why confront him?"

"What?"

"Why challenge Brama while he's playing with his friends along the Haddah?"

Çeda shrugged. "Because I had to know where the purse was."

"You knew where the purse was."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did. I saw you watching him as he hid his clothes and other things in the cattails. You could have taken it while they were splashing in the river."

He'd seen that, had he?

She tried on a dozen different answers, finally settling on, "He deserved it."

"A lot of boys like Brama deserve a beating, but you can't be the one to give it to them, Çeda. People in Sharakhai have long memories, and sooner or later, the city will end up the master and you the student, and I'll wager you're old enough to know how that lesson is likely to end."

"I thought you'd be grateful. It was *your* package I was protecting."

"First of all, the only time you'll find me grateful is when none of my packages go missing. Second, that was no favor you were doling out back there. Not for me, at least. You were nursing a wound to your precious ego. You fight in the pits, and if I'm being truthful, I've rarely seen someone with the gifts the gods themselves surely bestowed upon you, but don't think that trading blows with dirt dogs helps you at all in the shadows of this streets. You're shrewd enough when you put your mind to it, but you'd better start putting that quality to better use before I find that you've been given back to the desert."

Given back to the desert, a phrase that spoke of bleaching bones, of men and women forgotten and swallowed by the Shangazi's ever-shifting dunes... She was so angry she wasn't sure she wouldn't still give *Brama* back to the desert. "You do this to everyone, then?" Çeda asked as a wagon train rumbled past. "Set them up to see how they dance?"

Osman shrugged, not even looking at her. "I had to know what you'd do if you lost a package."

"And?"

"And what?"

"How did I do?"

"Poorly. It's the *package* I care about, Çeda. Let *me* decide who needs a beating and who doesn't. Understand?"

“Yes,” she said, forcing the words through her teeth.

Osman stopped walking. They were on a small lane now, a well-worn one used by laborers to head to and from Sharakhai’s sandy northern harbor. Men and women passed them by like the Haddah’s waters around a pair of particularly surly stones. “Tell me you understand.”

She stared into his eyes, ready to answer with another petulant, barking reply, but she stopped herself. This was no small thing he was asking. Osman might have been a pit fighter once, but he was a shademan now. He’d taken Çeda under his wing, but he would toss her to the dogs if he thought he couldn’t trust her.

She’d been foolish with Brama. She saw that now. She needed to watch out for Osman’s interests, not her own.

“I understand,” she said.

“Good, because there’s something a bit more delicate we need to discuss.”

“*That* doesn’t sound good.”

Osman shared a wolfish smile and bowed his head like old Ibrahim the storyteller did before beginning a tale. “How astute of you to notice.”

They passed out of an alley and onto the cobblestone quay surrounding the northern harbor. A line of eight sandships were just setting sail, their long runners carrying them swiftly over the amber sand toward the gap between the two tall lighthouses. “Two days ago,” Osman continued, leading them over a meandering rank of stones that marked the dry yard around the lighthouse, “a man named Kadir came to me. He works for someone who is... Well, let’s just say she’s a powerful woman, indeed. Kadir’s visit was regarding a package that was delivered to him three weeks ago, a package delivered by you.” Osman came to a stop short of the door to the lighthouse. Beside them lay an old mint garden that years ago had been well-tended but

had since lain forgotten, so that its contents looked little better than a forgotten pile of brown twine. “He also claimed that the contents had been poisoned.”

Suddenly Çeda felt very, very small. She felt under scrutiny, like a dung beetle crawling over open sand. “Poisoned?”

“Poisoned.”

“By whom?”

“That’s the question, isn’t it?”

“Well, it wasn’t me! I remember that package. It was delivered as you asked!”

“I know.”

“I didn’t tamper with it.”

“I *know*, or we’d be having a very different conversation.”

“Is this why you had Brama steal the purse?”

Osman shrugged while waggling his head. “I would’ve done it sooner or later in any case.” Çeda opened her mouth to deny it again, but Osman held up his hand. “Kadir wishes to speak with you. He believes he knows who sent the poison but would like to find more clues from you if there are any to be found.”

Çeda stared deeper into his eyes. “And you told him I would? What if he thinks I *did* poison the contents of that drop? What kind of fool would I be to simply walk into his arms?”

“As I said, he works for a powerful woman. If *she* thought you had done so, she wouldn’t have done me the courtesy of having Kadir ask to see you. He and I spoke for a long while. I believe him, Çeda, and you will be under my protection. You’ll be safe enough, though I’m sure it won’t be a comfortable conversation to have.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then Kadir doesn’t get what he wants and life goes on.”

“With no repercussions?”