

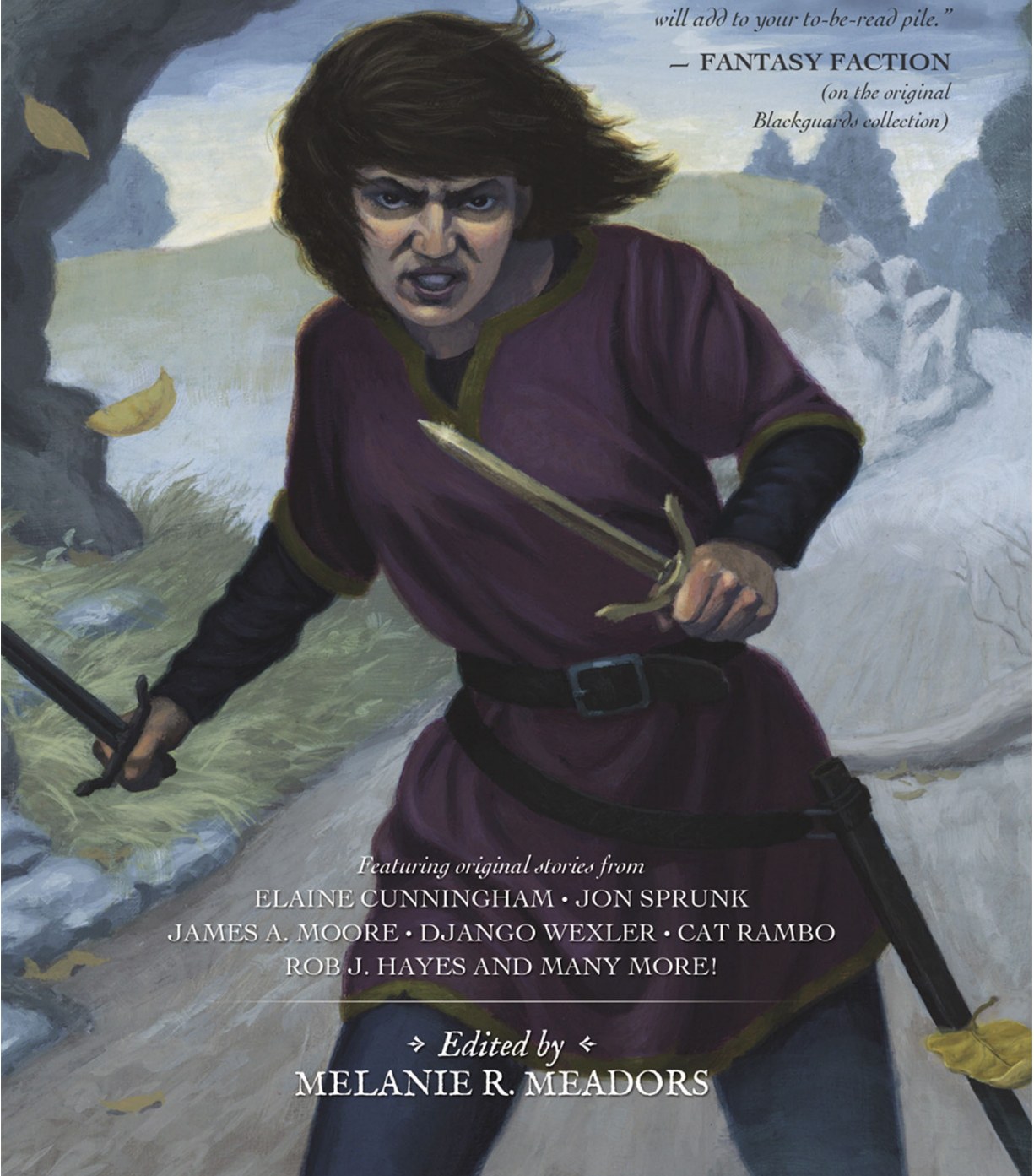
A B L A C K G U A R D S A N T H O L O G Y

# SCOUNDRELS

*"If you enjoy grimdark, if you enjoy stories of villains and antiheroes surviving by their wits and their subtlety, these stories will not only provide you with hours of enjoyment, but will add to your to-be-read pile."*

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*(on the original  
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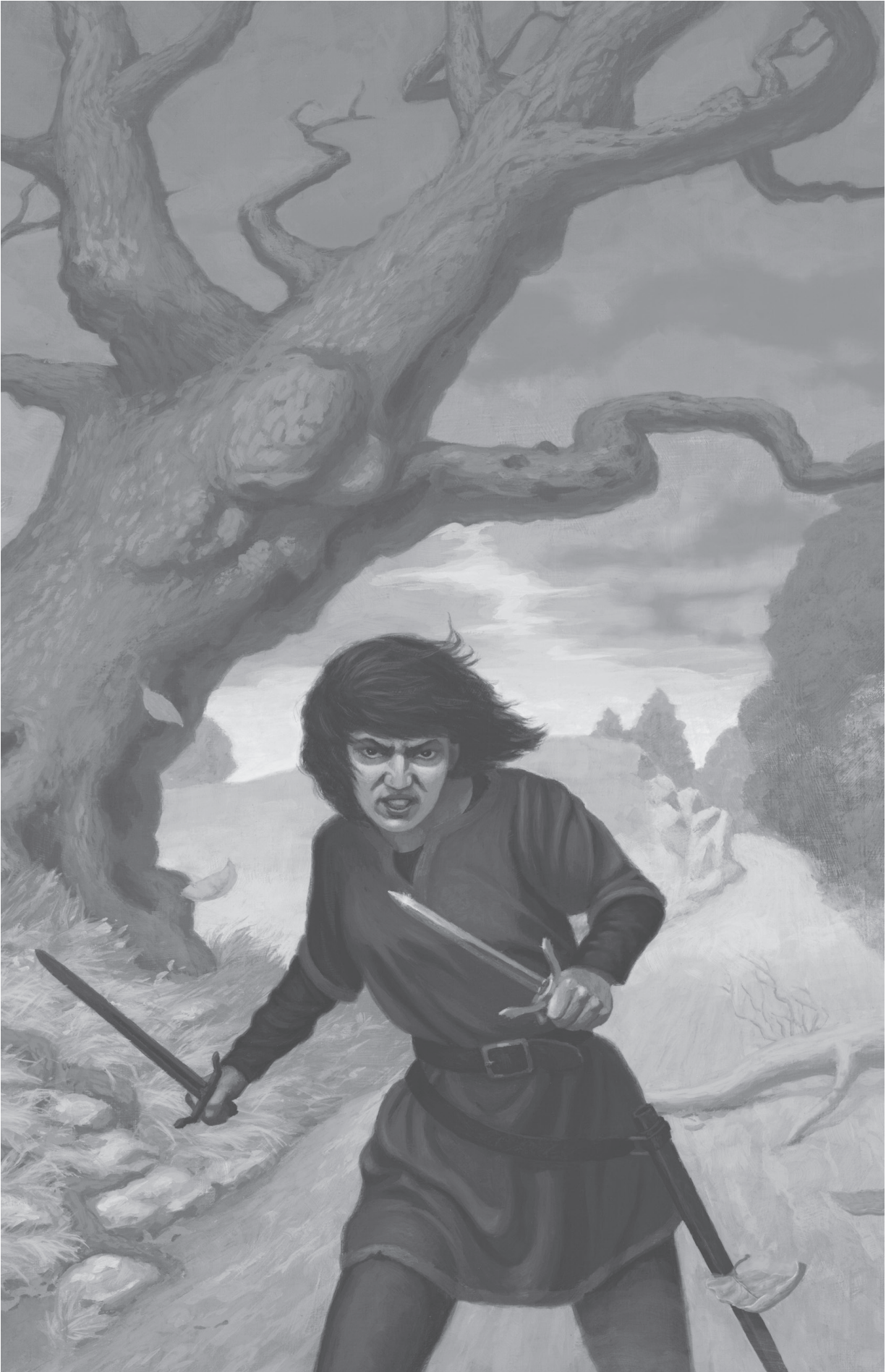


*Featuring original stories from*

ELAINE CUNNINGHAM • JON SPRUNK  
JAMES A. MOORE • DJANGO WEXLER • CAT RAMBO  
ROB J. HAYES AND MANY MORE!

⇒ *Edited by* ⇐  
MELANIE R. MEADORS







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# HONEST TRADE

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*Elaine Cunningham*

**M**Y NAME IS Selena Dove, and I'm a whore. If you're the sort of person who's offended by that, you're welcome to double my fee and call me a courtesan. By any name, whoring is honest work, money earned for services rendered. Sure, it's a little south of respectable and not strictly legal, but at least it's not punishable by death. That's more than I can say for my true vocation.

I was plying both my trades the night the vizier's guard raided the White Raven. Sunset colors still painted the sky and the first star had yet to appear, but I was already hard at work, entertaining a new client and stealing secrets with every touch. I'm a sorceress, and that's my one and only magical ability: I can read a man's secrets with my fingertips.

As impressive as that might sound, I've found most people's secrets really aren't worth knowing. For example, the elite soldier in my bed had never actually used the sword he'd dropped on my bedchamber floor. Apparently Sano—which was not the name he'd given me—owed his position to a former patron, a wealthy older widow who'd talked

up his “swordsmanship” with great conviction and a straight face. Now he was stuck with a fighter’s reputation and living in dread of the day when he might actually have to earn his pay.

An elegant revenge, in my opinion, on a bed-swerving young fool whose list of playmates included one of the pasha’s wives. And as if *that* wasn’t stupid enough, he chose Nifridia, of all people. She used to work at the White Raven—an excellent qualification for a spare wife to have, in my opinion, but that particular whore is meaner than a stepped-on viper. I would have been mildly insulted a man so lacking in discernment would seek me out, had I not known a few things about the path that had brought him to my bed.

It was one of those nights when the sand in my bedside hourglass seemed to trickle down one grain at a time, so I wasn’t sorry when our resident ravens sounded the alarm.

Every brothel in Ankorish keeps birds for this very purpose. Most of our clients think these feathered sentries are here for decoration, or as a coy reference to the human “birds” for hire in such establishments. Fortunately, our ravens are smarter than most of our patrons, and when they break into raucous song, you know it’s time to roll your gentleman friend out of the bed and throw him his trousers.

Sano responded with the alacrity of a man well accustomed to such interruptions. He got one leg into his trousers and hopped about as he struggled with the second, which had been turned inside out in his haste to disrobe just moments before. “What is it?” he demanded between hops. “What’s wrong?”

I held up one finger to warn him to silence as I slipped over to my balcony window.

Several men crept down the alley toward the “secret stairs” to the balcony, oblivious to the raven cawing from the railing. They did not, as I had expected, wear the gaudy crimson and bronze of the pasha’s



soldiers, but rather the plain gray tunic of the vizier's guard.

That was interesting, and by "interesting" I mean the evening had just become a lot more complicated. For one thing, my client was a member of the vizier's guard, but he had no knowledge of the coming raid. Or if he did, he was better at keeping secrets than any man I'd ever met.

"Huh. We haven't been raided in over a year," I said. "I wonder what they want."

Sano's handsome face registered fear, not surprise. Apparently he wasn't expecting a raid of any kind.

"The pasha's men?"

"Looks like. And there's a woman with them. That couldn't possibly be... Nifridia? Why would she return to the Raven?"

My client's fear changed to panic, which proved he wasn't as foolish as he appeared.

"Dung heap!" he swore. "She can't find me here!"

"And she won't," I assured him as pulled aside a tapestry to reveal an alcove that hid a tall pile of books and a door to a narrow stair. "This leads to a cellar we share with the perfumery next door."

"Good. That's good," he babbled as he fumbled with the fastenings of his sword belt. "What shall I do then?"

"Buy me a bottle of scent. Something with patchouli."

I gave him a kiss, a candle, and a little shove. After he'd stumbled out of sight, I nudged one of the books with my foot so that it would peep out from under the tapestry. That accomplished, I pulled a thick silk rope that looked like a bell pull, but which actually lowered a hidden panel and a ladder to the brothel's roof.

There's a practical purpose to the skylight window in my ceiling. Actually, more than one, if you count the coins earned from the occasional rooftop spectator. Tonight I joined their ranks; crouched by the

window, I watched as the vizier's men burst into my place of business.

It didn't take them long to discover the hidden stairs. They clattered down the steps and several moments later they charged out of the perfumer's shop and down the street. Sano was with them. Most likely he'd played stupid, a role for which he'd been born. "A pale woman? Young, with white hair? She went that way..."

Since I wasn't sure what to make of this, I took off in the opposite direction, running across the rooftops of the school of magic and toward the home of Fazzimir, also known as the Ears of Ankorish. Or just Ears, if you're feeling informal.

Fazzimir is a big man in Ankorish, in every sense of the word. He's an information broker grown fat and wealthy on the secrets he extorts from me. Since magic of any kind is forbidden to women—and by "forbidden" I mean that any woman with even a hint of magical aptitude is considered an abomination that must be destroyed for the good of society—I didn't have much choice.

I found the blackmailing rat bastard seated at a table in his counting room, shifting coins from one pile to another. He looked surprised to see me, which was useful information.

He quickly adjusted his expression from slack-jawed shock to mild disapproval. "You're early, cousin."

We really are cousins—we have a grandmother in common—but you wouldn't know it to look at us. Fazzimir is the picture of a wealthy Ankorish merchant, with bronzed skin and a bigger belly than most men can afford to sustain. I'm built like a willow branch. I'm also a bloodwraith, which is a rude term for someone born with white hair, pale skin, and silver eyes. A living ghost, in other words. You might be surprised to learn how many people find that notion intriguing. So, while I'm not a beauty in the ripe rounded fashion preferred hereabouts, I know how to make novelty work for me.

I took the seat across from him without waiting for an invitation and slapped down the prepaid appointment card Fazzimir had conveniently lost in a game of cards.

“Sano came to the White Raven, as you arranged.”

“Yes? And?”

“He knows nothing about a runaway elf princess,” I said, giving Fazzimir the information he’d charged me with discovering. “Assuming she even exists, you can be sure the vizier isn’t harboring her.”

“Perhaps she is kept hidden away, somewhere beyond reach of the guards?”

“Trust me, if there was a woman in the vizier’s palace, Sano would have sniffed her out. That man is as randy as a dog with two cocks.”

Fazzimir nodded absently, his dark eyes unfocused and his brow furrowed with the effort of figuring out how his plan had gone wrong.

Since he was distracted, I reached for one of the gold coins on the pile he’d just counted. His immediate inclination was to slap it out of my hand, but he managed to pull up just short of touching me.

A sour expression twisted his plump face. “You’re not as clever as you think, cousin.”

“The same could be said of you. A runaway elf princess? Seriously? We heard that legend as children.”

Fazzimir shrugged. “Legend or not, any information that supports such rumors could be valuable. The vizier is an elf. There are many who resent his very existence, much less his influence with the sultan.”

“Including the local pasha.”

The flicker in Fazzimir’s dark eyes was telling. He knew that Sano was dipping his quill in the pasha’s inkpots, and no doubt he’d made sure the pasha knew it, too. That old rumor about the runaway elven princess was nothing but an excuse to get me into bed with Sano and swept up in an arranged raid.

“The pasha is a faithful servant of our lord the sultan,” he recited piously, “and a friend to everyone, man or elf, who supports our lord.”

“Then who’s your client?”

He sneered. “How long would *you* stay in business, if you dropped names like a seabird befouling a dock?”

I ceded the point with a nod. Fazzimir and I had more in common than either of us liked to admit. We knew far too much about each other, and I assumed at some point he would decide the risk of using me outweighed my usefulness. Tonight’s arrest would have solved his problem. When whores run afoul of the law, our memories are magically wiped clean to protect the secrets of former clients, not to mention the occasional rat bastard cousin.

What Fazzimir doesn’t realize is that I can get nearly as much information from an object he’s recently handled as I would from touching him directly. He also doesn’t know about Nifridia, who came to the pasha’s attention by getting swept up in a similar raid. Since I can out-whore that woman without breaking a sweat, I wasn’t worried about being dragged to the pasha’s palace. Any man who weds fifteen women places a high value on novelty, and I offer more than the usual portion of that. The secrets I could glean from bedding the pasha could set me up for life.

But now that I’d avoided arrest, Fazzimir would find another way to be rid of me. I needed to find out what that was.

I baited my hook with the juiciest worm I could imagine. “Assuming I could discover a damning secret about the vizier—a real one, not some moldy tavern tale—what would that information be worth?”

His eyes lit up, as well they should. The vizier was the most powerful mage in the kingdom. Meddling in his affairs was not just insane, but suicidal, which would solve Fazzimir’s problem rather neatly.

“That information would be worth your freedom,” he said bluntly.

“On the day you bring it to me, you may consider our arrangement ended.”

“My freedom and your silence,” I countered. “In perpetuity.”

“That was implied.”

“Not good enough. I want your solemn word you will never reveal my secret by words spoken, sung, or written, nor through magic, nor by gesture. Furthermore, you will swear to never again use my secret to force me into servitude.”

Fazzimir rolled his eyes. “My lawyers should be so thorough. Done.”

Though I didn’t believe him for a moment, I fashioned the delighted smile he would surely expect.

“Done and done. Here’s my hand on it.”

He scoffed. Ignoring my outstretched hand, he pushed three small bronze coins across the table.

“Nice try. Take these, and leave the gold piece.”

As I gathered up my pittance, I gleaned from the coins the reason for Fazzimir’s long-expected betrayal: He’d been offered marriage to one of his clients’ daughters, a girl who’d fallen pregnant by another man. A fine opportunity to move up in the world, but one that required closing less respectable doors behind him. Firmly.

Oh, and I also learned the names of several clients willing to pay a small fortune for any information that might topple the vizier. I should have realized Fazzimir had ambitions along those lines when he dredged up the runaway princess story. His ideas are not so plentiful that he can afford to use any one of them for a single purpose.

What I did not learn, unfortunately, was his plan for me, as he had yet to contrive one. And that meant that my life would continue along the path it had taken for nearly three years.

At that realization, something broke open inside me, a crack in



the sepulcher I'd build for a dream long dead. When Fazzimir reached for a bronze bell on his desk, its ghost poured out and filled me with a scream of silent, impotent fury.

The nearby magic school provided Fazzimir with a ready supply of cheap labor—magic wielding guards, mostly. A young man clad in a student's lapis blue robes strode into the room before the last jangling peal faded away.

His assessing gaze slid over me. I answered with a stony stare.

Three years ago, my response to a handsome young mage would have been very different. When I first came to Ankorish, I bedded every mage and magic student who crossed my path, and at bargain rates, in hope of learning what they knew. But I can only steal secrets, not knowledge. The only magic I'll ever possess is my one sorcerous trick. I have accepted that; Fazzimir is still unconvinced.

"Challenge her to the Handstorm," Fazzimir ordered.

The youth looked startled, as well he might. "But she is a woman."

"She is a mage," he snapped. "More powerful than any woman has a right to be. See to it you don't lose the challenge."

The young mage seized my hand. Power surged through me—sharp, painful jolts followed by wracking waves. It felt as if I were drowning in a vat of lightning eels, all of them sharp-toothed and hungry.

The worse thing about this ordeal was it should have been easy to stop. The spell was a common schoolboy challenge, the magical equivalent of arm-wrestling. When force was met with force, the combined spells created harmless flashes of light and sound, but this magic was never intended to go unanswered.

Pain distorts time, so I couldn't begin to say how long the torment lasted. Either this mage was more powerful than most, or Fazzimir had decided upon a direct solution to the problem I presented. I was

on the floor, still twitching, before I realized the mage had released me.

“I didn’t tell you to stop,” Fazzimir snarled.

“You wanted to see how well she could perform the Handstorm. Clearly, she has never learned the spell,” the mage said, each clipped word ringing with controlled fury. “Anyone who could respond would have done so.”

“She is stubborn.”

“That may be true, but it’s irrelevant. Once learned, the spell becomes an involuntary response.” He turned to me. “A thousand pardons, little dove. Is there anyone I can summon? Or perhaps I can escort you home?”

I waved him away. The effects faded quickly, as usual. In the time it took for Fazzimir to terminate the mage’s employment and the mage to observe that Fazzimir was a scrofulous camel prick, I’d regained the use of my limbs and my wits. By the time the door slammed behind the young mage, I had a plan. Desperate and perhaps suicidal, but I’d run out of other options.

Brushing aside the curtains that fluttered over me, I reached for the windowsill and pulled myself to my feet. On the street below, a dozen of the pasha’s soldiers marched past on their way to the White Raven.

I glanced at the rising moon. The pasha’s men were right on schedule. They would not be pleased to find their quarry missing, but that was Fazzimir’s problem.

“The streets are crowded tonight, and I’m not quite up to rooftops. I should probably leave by the wine cellar tunnel.”

He grunted and flapped one hand dismissively.

I walked down two flights of stairs and into the kitchens, making no effort to avoid the servants. Most of them nodded politely as I passed. The pastry chef, a favorite client of mine, winked and tossed me a cardamom-scented roll, richly studded with dates and still warm

from the oven. I caught it and blew him a kiss.

Munching, I brushed past the grim-faced sommelier who stood like a sentry at the stairs to the wine cellar.

“Slouch a bit,” I advised him. “You’ll look less like a soldier.”

The startled flash in his eyes was gratifying. The vizier’s man had been in Fazzimir’s household for nearly a year. After tonight, I saw no reason to pretend I didn’t know this.

I hurried down the steps into the vast, brick-walled cellar and past long racks filled with dusty blue bottles. The cellar ended in a mural composed of tiny tiles. With the ease of long practice, my fingers found the seven tiles that unlocked the door and pressed them in rapid sequence. A panel swung open, and in the darkness beyond, faint blue flames flickered to life, revealing the two rows of wall torches that marked a narrow, curving passage. Magic of all sorts was easy to come by in Ankorish, as long as you possessed coins and a cock. Someone like me couldn’t hope to buy a potion, much less cast a spell.

My jaw set in renewed determination, and I all but ran through the tunnel. It ended with another mural and a hidden panel that led into a greengrocer’s root cellar. I emerged from the cellar into a moonlit alley littered with broken crates and rotting fruit.

The shadows stirred, and three gray-clad men stepped into the light. I scooped up a handful of muck and hurled it at the vizier’s men.

My aim was good—I got the nearest man full in the face. While he gagged and clawed at disgusting sludge, I shoved him into the man behind him. Luck was mine; they both slipped and went down. The third man lunged at me. I dodged his grasping hands and took off running.

When necessary, I can run like a rabbit. I would have gotten away if I hadn’t run face first into a sandstorm.

That’s not the sort of thing one expects to encounter on Silk Street.

It's on the edge of the market district and busy by day, but after sunset it's nothing but empty tents lining a cobbled street. Behind those tents, however, is a warren of alleys. I could duck into any one of them and leave the guards pondering which option to explore.

I hadn't gone more than three steps into the street before a whirlwind of golden motes leaped from the paving stone. My first startled gasp drew the glowing, spinning magic deep into my lungs.

If the gods are good, I will never again hear anything half as loud as that whirlwind. I now know what a dragon's roar must sound like—assuming you were inside the dragon's mouth at the time. The deep thrumming shriek filled me to the marrow of my bones with vibrating agony, a crescendo that grew until I was certain I would explode into pieces no bigger than the swirling motes. Darkness, when it came, was a welcome escape.



I AWAKENED TO the sensation of a cool breeze on my face and a silken couch beneath me. Opening my eyes just a crack, I peered out through the veil of my long white lashes.

The vizier sat across from me, and his unfocused gaze indicated his thoughts were occupied with something far more interesting than a captured whore. His age was impossible to tell, but he looked far too young to have risen so high in the world.

Elves are seldom seen in Ankorish, so I had no fair standard to judge this one's beauty. A human with his long limbs and narrow frame would look emaciated, but it suited him, as did the sharp angles of his face and features. His face was nearly as pale as mine, and unfashionably beardless, but then, that was to be expected from an elf. Beautifully dressed in layers of dove-gray silks, he fit in almost every particular my image of what an elf ought to look like. The only