SHADOW BLACK

SEBASTIEN DE CASTELL

HOT KEY BOOKS

THE SPELLSLINGER SERIES

SPELLSLINGER
SHADOWBLACK
CHARMCASTER

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SOULBINDER

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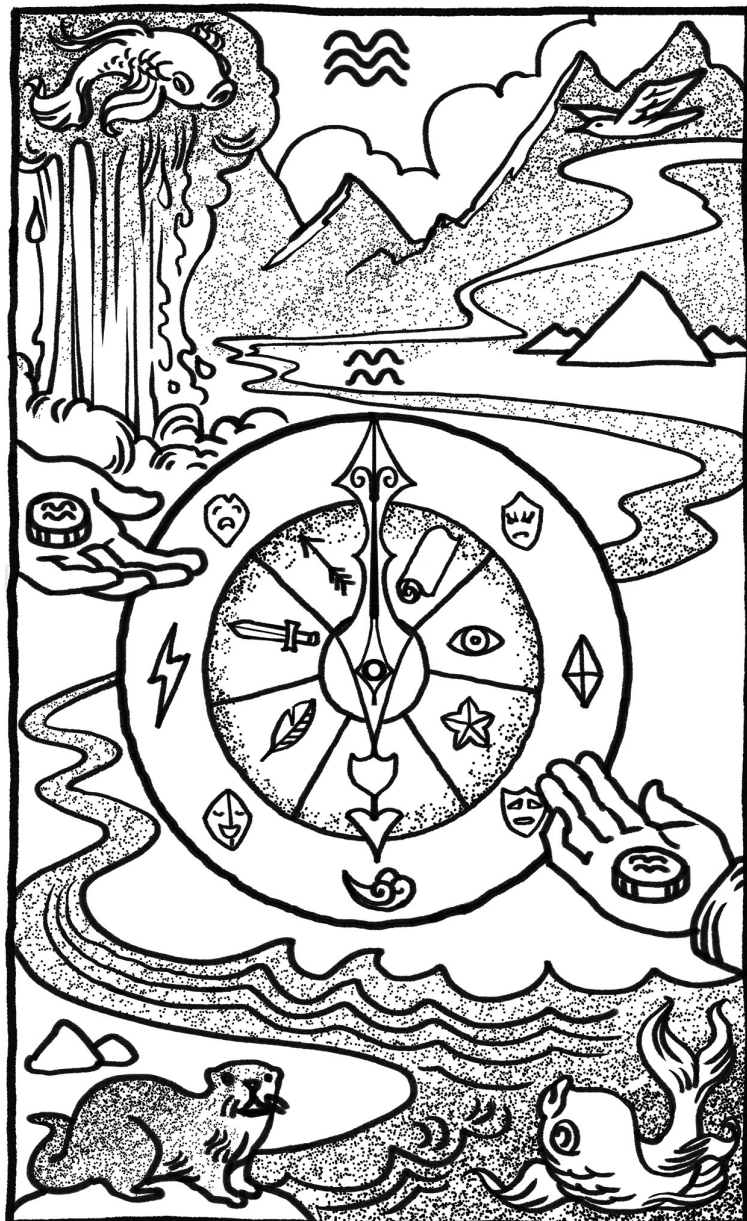
To Doctor Sukanya Leecharoen of the Royal Angkor International Hospital in Cambodia, whose wit and kindness turned what began as an agonizing affliction into a strangely entertaining experience.



WAY of WATER

The way of the Argosi is the way of water.

Water never seeks to block another's path, nor does it permit impediments to its own. It moves freely, slipping past those who would capture it, taking nothing that belongs to others. To forget this is to stray from the path, for despite the rumours one sometimes hears, an Argosi never, ever steals.

1

The Charm

'This *isn't* stealing,' I insisted, a little loudly considering the only person who could hear me was a two-foot-tall squirrel cat who was, at that moment, busily picking the combination lock that stood between us and the contents of the pawnshop's glass display case.

Reichis, one furry ear up close to the lock as his dextrous paws worked the three small rotating brass discs, chittered angrily in reply. 'Would you mind? This isn't as easy as it looks.' His tubby little hindquarters shivered in annoyance.

If you've never seen a squirrel cat before, picture a mean-faced cat with a big bushy tail and thin furry flaps of skin between his front and back legs that let him glide through the air in a fashion that somehow looks both ridiculous and terrifying. Oh, and give him the personality of a thief, a blackmailer and, if you believe Reichis's stories, a murderer on more than one occasion.

'Almost done,' he insisted.

He'd been saying that for the past hour.

Thin lines of light were beginning to slip through the gaps between the wooden slats in the pawnshop's front window and beneath the bottom edge of the door. Soon people would

be coming down the main street, opening their shops or standing outside the saloon for that all-important first drink of the morning. They do that sort of thing here in the borderlands: work themselves into a drunken stupor before they've even had breakfast. It's just one of the reasons why people here tend towards violence as the solution to any and all disputes. It's also why my nerves were fraying. 'We could have just broken the glass and left him some extra money to cover the damage,' I said.

'*Break* the glass?' Reichis growled to convey what he thought of that idea. 'Amateur.' He turned his attention back to the lock. 'Easy . . . easy . . .'

A click, and then a second later Reichis proudly held up the elaborate brass lock in his paws. 'See?' he demanded. '*That's* how you pull off a proper burglary!'

'It's *not* a burglary,' I said, for what must have been the twelfth time since we'd snuck into the pawnshop that night. 'We *paid* him for the charm, remember? He's the one who ripped *us* off.'

Reichis snorted dismissively. 'And what did you do about it, Kellen? Just stood there like a halfwit while he pocketed our hard-earned coin. That's what!'

To the best of my knowledge, Reichis had never actually *earned* a coin in his life. 'Shoulda ripped his throat out with your teeth like I told you,' he continued.

The solution to most thorny dilemmas – to squirrel cats anyway – is to walk up to the source of the problem and bite it very hard on the neck, preferably coming away with as much of its bleeding flesh as possible.

I let him have the last word and reached past him to pull open the glass doors and retrieve the small silver bell attached

to a thin metal disc. Glyphs etched along its edge shimmered in the half-light: a quieting charm. An *actual* Jan'Tep quieting charm. With this I could cast spells without leaving the echo that allowed bounty hunters to track us. For the first time since we'd fled the Jan'Tep territories, I felt as if I could almost – *almost* – breathe easy again.

'Hey, Kellen?' Reichis asked, hopping up on the counter to peer at the silver disc I held in my hand. 'Those markings on the charm – those are magic, right?'

'Kind of. More like a way to bind a spell onto the charm.' I turned to look at him. 'Since when are you interested in magic?'

He held up the combination lock. 'Since this thing started glowing.'

A set of three elaborately drawn glyphs shimmered bright red along the cylindrical brass chamber. The next thing I knew, the door was bursting open and sunlight filling the pawnshop as a silhouetted figure charged inside and tackled me to the floor, putting an abrupt end to a heist that, in retrospect, could have done with more planning.

Four months in the borderlands had brought me to one irrefutable conclusion: I made a terrible outlaw. I couldn't hunt worth a damn, got lost just about everywhere I went, and it seemed like every person I met found some perfectly sensible reason to try to rob me or kill me.

Sometimes both.

2

The Way of Fists

Getting punched in the face hurts a lot more than you might expect.

When somebody's knuckles connect with your jaw, it feels like four tiny battering rams are trying to cave in your mouth. Your own teeth turn traitor, biting down on your tongue and flooding the back of your throat with the coppery taste of blood. Oh, and that crack you hear? It sounds a lot like what you've always imagined bone breaking would sound like, which must be why your head is already spinning a quarter-turn clockwise, trying to keep up with your chin before it leaves the scene of the crime.

The worst part? Once your legs recover their balance and your eyes flicker open, you remember that the devastating opponent beating you senseless is a skinny freckle-faced kid who can't be more than thirteen years old.

'Shouldn'a stolen my charm,' Freckles said.

He shuffled forward, causing me to lurch back instinctively, my body having apparently decided it preferred the embarrassment of collapsing in on itself over the risk of getting hit again. Laughter erupted all around us as the crowd of

townsfolk who'd come out of their shops and saloons to witness the fight began placing wagers on the outcome.

No one was betting on me; my people might be the best mages on the continent, but it turns out we're rubbish in a fist fight.

'I paid you for that charm,' I insisted. 'Besides, I put it back in the case! You've got no cause to –'

Freckles jerked a thumb up to where Reichis was perched on the swinging sign outside the pawnshop, happily inspecting the silver bell on the charm. Every time Freckles hit me, Reichis rang the bell. This is the sort of thing squirrel cats find hilarious. 'You think I spent all night picking that lock just so you could give the charm back?'

'You're a damned thief,' I told the squirrel cat.

Freckles's face went an even brighter shade of red; he must've thought I was talking to him. I keep forgetting that other people don't hear what Reichis says – it all just sounds like a bunch of grunts and growls to them.

Freckles gave a yell and barrelled into me. The next thing I knew, I was on the ground with the wind knocked out of me and my opponent pinning me down.

'Best get on your feet, kid,' Ferius Parfax suggested in that frontier drawl of hers. She was leaning against the post where we'd tethered our horses, black hat dipped low over her forehead as though she were taking a nap. 'Can't dodge when you're flat on your back.'

'You could help, you know,' I said. Well, that's what I *would* have said if I could've got any air into my lungs.

Ferius was my mentor in the ways of the Argosi – the mysterious, fast-talking card players who went about the world

doing . . . well, nobody had yet told me exactly what it was they did. But Ferius was *supposed* to be helping me learn how to survive as an outlaw and stay clear of the bounty mages who were hunting me. She did this mostly by dispensing such brilliant axioms as, 'Can't dodge when you're flat on your back.' That one annoyed me almost as much as her calling me 'kid' all the time.

'Told you to forget about the charm, kid,' she said.

I might have heeded her warning if she hadn't then started up on some Argosi nonsense about 'the way of water' that irritated me so much I'd ended up taking advice from a squirrel cat whose solution to everything – when it didn't involve ripping someone's throat out with your teeth – was thievery. So really it was both of their faults that I'd ended up on the ground with Freckles on top of me doing his best to knock me senseless.

One thing I've learned about non-magical fighting is that you need to protect your face, which I was trying to do. Unfortunately my opponent just kept swatting my hands away and then proceeded to punch me again. *Ancestors, how does this kid hit so hard?*

Freckles shifted his hips, shimmying forward as he grabbed my wrist and wrapped one of his hands around my index finger. 'Everyone knows the price for thievin',' he said as he slowly bent it back.

Panic overtook me even before the pain. Every Jan'Tep spell requires forming precise somatic shapes with your hands. You can't do that with broken fingers.

I bucked my hips as hard as I could and desperation gave me just enough strength to throw Freckles over the top of me, sending him face first into the dirt. I quickly flipped

myself over and got to my feet. Freckles was already waiting for me. 'Gonna bleed you,' he said.

Gonna bleed you. Three words that perfectly summed up the hot, arid hellhole they call the Seven Sands: a patchwork desert that wasn't much more than an endless dusty quilt stained with backwoods little towns filled with people who were rough, mean and gave up any pretence at being civilised at the drop of a hat. Not that most of them could afford a hat.

Freckles, evidently concerned that I hadn't heard him the first time, declared even louder, 'Gonna bleed you real good.'

My hands dropped to my sides – a reflex developed from a life spent learning magic rather than getting into physical altercations: you can't cast a spell if your hands are balled up into fists like a barbarian's. I relaxed my fingers, letting them reach into the powder pouches attached to the sides of my belt. Just a pinch was all I needed: a dash of red, a smidgen of black. Toss them in the air, form the somatic shapes with my hands, utter the one-word incantation, and Freckles would get a taste of what he'd been dishing out to me up till now.

Most Jan'Tep mages have bigger and better spells than I do, but I make up for my lack of ability with fast hands. I'm what my people derisively call a spellslinger – a mage who combines whatever paltry magic he can muster with every trick he can learn to stay alive. In my case that means a bit of breath magic mixed with a touch of exploding powders. Individually they don't amount to much, but put them together with perfect timing and you can create a blast that'll tear through an oak door like it was wet paper. So yeah, Freckles was about to get the surprise of his life.

'No magic, kid. Remember?' Ferius said.

Oh. Right.

The reason I'd wanted that quieting charm in the first place was that every time I cast a spell, it sent out a sort of mystical echo that let hextrackers – mages who specialise in hunting down other mages – follow our trail. Since avoiding them was kind of my life's ambition at this point, Ferius had insisted I stop relying on magic to get myself out of trouble. Problem was, Freckles was coming at me again, fist cocked and ready to send me to my ancestors.

'You win,' I said, putting up my hands and backing away. 'I'll give you back the charm and you can keep the money.' Possibly not my proudest moment.

'Gonna take the charm, gonna take the money,' Freckles said. Then he gestured to where Reichis was perched on the sign. 'Gonna skin that animal of yours too. Make a hat out of his fur or maybe just light him on fire and watch him run till he can't run no more.'

Those words sent a cold, hard knot twisting in my stomach. Not long ago I'd witnessed a mage using ember magic to set fire to Reichis's tribe. That image was still burned into me, and so was the look of glee on the killer's face. It was a lot like the one Freckles wore right now.

Ferius says fear and anger are two sides of the same coin. Freckles had just flipped mine.

A stabbing pain started to build in my left eye, like a headache, only a lot worse. I tried blinking it away, but the ache kept getting stronger. The morning sun faded, but the shadows remained, grew, became bloated as the world darkened all around me, the way it does when dreams drift into nightmares. Only I was fully awake.

'Get a hold of yourself, kid,' Ferius warned. She'd seen this happen to me before, but her warning came too late, because

now her voice sounded as if it were coming from far away, like she was just a memory of someone I once knew.

Freckles's laugh, on the other hand, kept getting louder and louder in my ears. His smile got bigger and bigger, contorting his appearance. When I get like this, all I can see are the ugly parts of people. The mean parts. It was as if I were watching Freckles turn into the worst version of himself he could ever become: the one who liked to hurt things, the one who would giggle as he set fire to Reichis.

The rage inside me got so bad I stopped feeling the pain in my eye and didn't even notice that I'd dug my hands back into the pouches at my sides until I saw the particles of red and black powder floating in the air in front of me. Just before they collided, my hands formed the spell's somatic shape: bottom two fingers pressed into the palm in the sign of restraint; fore and middle fingers pointed straight out, the sign of flight; and thumb pointing to the heavens, the sign of, 'Ancestors, please don't let me blow my hands off.'

'*Carath*,' I said, my lips perfectly enunciating each syllable. A fiery bolt of rage and fury shot out – not enough to kill, but more than enough to hurt. The red and black flames entwined in the air like two angry snakes and flew right past Freckle's shoulder, scorching the outer wall of the pawnshop. It would have been an impressive display of power if that had been my target. Turns out that getting hit in the head is really, really bad for your aim.

The pain in my eye disappeared all at once, and the dark visions assailing me faded, leaving behind the plain, dusty street and the dismayed faces of the onlookers. The attacks come and go quickly like that, leaving me shaken and stumbling – not exactly the best condition to be defending yourself.

Whatever shock and outrage Freckles had felt, he quickly set it aside. Before I could get my arms up to protect my face, he delivered a sharp right hook just above my left cheek. His fist came away with a trace of blood on it. His look of smug self-satisfaction turned to confusion when he noticed smudges of pale beige *mesdet* paste on his knuckles. He glanced back at me, and I guess that's when he saw the black markings encircling my left eye like twisting vines made from pure darkness.

'Shadowblack,' he whispered.

The word spread through the crowd like fire on dry leaves.

'The demon plague!' one of the onlookers declared.

Most of them drew back in horror, but Freckles was evidently made of sterner stuff. He didn't even sound scared when he said, 'Figures a thief would be devil-cursed.'

If they'd given me a chance to explain, I could have told them that the shadowblack wasn't actually a plague or even a curse, but more of a mystical disease that afflicted a small number of my people and wasn't, to the best of my knowledge, contagious. I would've left out the parts where it gradually drives you insane with maddening visions until your magic becomes a danger to everyone around you and that any Jan'Tep mage who crossed my path was duty-bound to kill me.

None of that mattered though, because by then Freckles had grabbed me by the throat with both hands. I yanked at his wrists, desperate to break free, but his grip was too strong. My throat spasmed, fighting for breath. The world started to shrink around me. It occurred to me then that there's probably an ingenious way to get out of a chokehold.

I should really learn it sometime.

3

The Red Price

I couldn't have blacked out for more than a second, because just before my head hit the ground, my eyes opened and I saw Freckles flying backwards away from me. At first I thought maybe I'd somehow triggered a new and highly useful spell, but then I saw Ferius gripping the collar of Freckles's shirt and realised that all that had happened was that she'd hauled him off me.

Too bad. I could've really used more magic.

I coughed up dust, and the next thing I knew, my opponent was flat on his back a few yards away and Ferius was standing between me and some big, broad-shouldered thug, who was probably a close relation of Freckles's because he shared both his skin condition and his attitude.

'Best you move away, woman,' he said, peering down at her through squinty little eyes. 'A devil owns that boy's soul and I'm gonna send him to the Dark Place.'

The Dark Place. The borderlands are full of sophisticated spiritual expressions like that.

'Now, friend,' Ferius said, 'let's not get all excited over a plain old birthmark.' She lent her next words the perfect mix of scolding and amusement. 'Imagine all you enlightened and educated folks fallin' for that old superstition.'

Calling these people 'enlightened and educated' was highly optimistic, but a few of them liked the sound of it. A woman in the crowd took a small step forward and peered down at me. 'If it's just a birthmark, why does he hide it?'

Ferius walked over to me and reached down to rub some of the paste away, revealing more of the twisting circular markings. 'Cos it's unsightly, that's why. Boy's sensitive about his looks!' She started laughing uproariously.

The crowd found her light-hearted mirth infectious. I don't know how she does it, but Ferius always knows just what to say to sway people to her point of view.

Well, most people, anyway.

Squinty jabbed a finger in my direction. 'I say he's got the demon plague, and even if he don't, that stuck-up little Jan'Tep tried to steal from my kin. Now he's gotta pay the red price.'

In the Seven Sands, 'the red price' means roughly the same thing as 'gonna bleed you'.

'Seems to me Kellen already paid plenty for that trinket,' Ferius said, nodding up to where Reichis was still perched on top of the shop sign, delightedly examining his silver bell. 'Then your boy went and asked for more.'

'Don't matter. A thief is a thief, and the red price says he's gotta lose his fingers.'

Ferius offered him one of her easy smiles. 'Good sense says to leave things be. Right now what everyone's going to remember is that your boy fought off a fella twice his size. That's a good story. A proper one to tell your friends when you're tossin' back a drink at the saloon.'

Squinty grinned back at her. 'It's gonna be an even better story when I show them your boy's finger bones.'

A sour taste rose up in my mouth. I'd been terrified at the

prospect of Freckles breaking my fingers; having them cut off would mean I'd never cast a spell again for the rest of my life.

Ferius lowered her voice so that only the big man and I could hear her words. 'Don't think it'll be nearly as impressive a tale when your friends point out that after you tried to take an innocent boy's fingers, you got your ass kicked by a woman barely bigger than your left arm, do you?'

For a moment there, it looked like Squinty was giving her words careful consideration, but then he rolled up his sleeves before squeezing his big, meaty hands into fists, making the knuckles crack. 'No quarter just because you're a lady.'

'Oh, I'm no lady, so don't you worry about that.' Ferius removed her black frontiersman hat and set it on the ground, sending a tumble of red curls down to her shoulders. 'You want to dance with me, friend? Tell you what –' she tapped a gloved finger on her jaw – 'you give me your best shot, right here. Then, if you're still not satisfied that things are settled, well, I'll take my turn and we'll see where that leads us.'

The crowd started whispering excitedly, and more coins changed hands, but they weren't betting over *whether* Ferius would win or lose, just on how quickly and how badly.

In the short time I'd known her, I'd never seen Ferius Parfax back down from anyone or anything. Maybe that had something to do with her being an Argosi, but I tended to think it was just that she was crazy. Problem was, so was this guy, and he looked as if he could tear her head off.

I rolled onto my side and got my hands under me, preparing to get back on my feet.

Ferius gave a subtle twitch of her fingers, signalling me not

to interfere. 'Whenever you're ready,' she told Squinty. Her right foot was behind her as she leaned forward, giving the big man a clear shot at her jaw.

He glanced back as though he were going to share a joke with his friends, then suddenly came round with a punch that could've knocked down an eight-foot tamarisk tree.

All along I'd just assumed that Ferius was going to dodge or duck or otherwise avoid the blow, that maybe she'd planned to come up underneath it and deliver a swift kick to Squinty's groin or a jab to his throat, but he was too fast. She took that punch square on the jaw, her head spinning to the right, shoulders and the rest of her body following along until she was turned right around and facing me.

She just stood there, looking lost, as if she'd been knocked unconscious but her body hadn't figured it out yet. I dug my hands into the pouches at my sides. If Squinty tried to hit her again, I was going to blast him into oblivion and deal with the consequences later. I doubted he'd need to though, because I'd never seen anybody get hit as hard as Ferius had just been hit.

All of a sudden the corner of her mouth rose up and she winked at me.

Before I could even breathe a sigh of relief, Ferius Parfax turned back to the man who'd struck her and said, casual as can be, 'Let's call that a practice round. You want to go one more time before it's my turn?'

Squinty looked as if he'd just swallowed his own tongue. 'How . . . ? How did you . . . ?'

Ferius reached down and picked up her hat. 'Now, I appreciate you goin' so gentle on me. Maybe since you're feeling generous, you could just let us be on our way now?'

An uneasy stillness fell over the street. The crowd watched and waited for someone to make a move. A few more bets changed hands, and more than one onlooker loosened a knife from its sheath. Squinty had friends ready to take his side. Too bad we didn't have anybody on ours. All the while the big man just kept looking at Ferius, and she at him. Reichis chittered down from his perch, 'Why do they keep staring at each other like that? Are they going to mate now?'

The last thing you want to do in a situation like this is giggle like an idiot, but that's just what I did. Everyone glared at me, all except for the two combatants. I couldn't see what was in Ferius's eyes, but whatever it was made Squinty reconsider his position on the subject of the red price. 'Reckon you've learned your lesson,' he mumbled. 'Give back the charm and you can go on your way.'

'Deal,' Ferius said. She walked over and untethered our mounts. 'Kellen, kindly tell the squirrel cat to get down here and return the man's little trinket.' She turned and led the horses along the street towards the edge of town.

I was still trying to make sense of what had just happened when Reichis leaped off the sign, spread his paws wide and let the thin furred membranes between his front and back limbs catch the breeze. The crowd broke out in gasps and worried whispers, a few of them holding their hands up in front of their chests, fingers intertwined in the shape of tiny houses. Must have been some kind of folk sign against evil. People get superstitious around Reichis sometimes.

The squirrel cat glided smoothly to the ground, the gracefulness of his landing diminished by the angry glare he gave me as his dextrous paws went about unclasping the silver charm from the little bell. 'If you'd just ripped that kid's

throat out like I told you, we'd be eating his eyeballs right now.' He tossed the charm on the ground behind him and then tinkled the bell at me. 'I'm keeping this.'

He took off after Ferius, leaving me sitting in the dirt and dust, surrounded by a crowd of people who were no doubt wondering if it might not still be worth trying to cut off my fingers.

'Best you not come round here again, Shadowblack,' someone said.

A few others grumbled their agreement.

I nodded and slowly pushed myself up to my feet.

Sixteen years old and already I had a price on my head in half the places I'd ever been. No money, no skills, and without that charm I'd be announcing my location to every mage in the borderlands any time I cast the one spell I was any good at.

Oh, and my travelling companions were an Argosi gambler who never gave me a straight answer and a homicidal squirrel cat whose favourite food was human eyeballs.

Welcome to the life of an outlaw spellslinger.

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