

DJANGO WEXLER

# Ship of Smoke and Steel

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*Book One: The Wells of Sorcery Trilogy*

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*A Tom Doherty Associates Book  
New York*

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

SHIP OF SMOKE AND STEEL

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# 1

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It's time to get to work.

I move quickly, losing myself among the crumbling tenement blocks of the Sixteenth Ward. The streets smell of salt water and rotting fish, piss and misery. Huddled shapes crowd against the pitted brick, fearful faces staring. This is my Kahnzoka, my filthy, stinking city, and these are my people.

I walk a complex route, to make sure I'm not followed. When I'm convinced there's no one on my tail, I head to the building that houses my current bolt-hole and climb to the fourth floor. There's a strand of raw silk stuck between the door and the frame, looking like nothing more than a cobweb, but my eyes find it and I let out a breath. It reassures me nobody's been here since I left. I unlock the door, step inside, and shoot the heavy iron bolt.

The apartment is a tiny rattrap, not much more than a place to eat and lay out a bedroll. It only has one window, and I've shrouded it with thick curtains. There's no furniture other than a heavy wooden chest; this is just a hideout, not a place to live. It's not the only one I keep. There are always times when you need somewhere to go to ground.

I tug at the strip of fabric that belts my *kizen*, and when it gives way I struggle out of the tight formal wrap with a sigh of relief. I kick off the stupid little shoes that go with it, and reach up to free my hair. Unbound, it hangs ragged to the back of my neck. I breathe deep, enjoying the freedom to move.

One long scar traces a path from my collarbone, between my breasts, across my belly to my hip. Another crosses it, running

horizontally over my ribs. There are more on my back, on my thighs. But they're all *old* scars, from *before*. History.

I kick open the chest with one bare foot and dress quickly. Leather trousers, a wrap for my chest, and a linen tunic, with a leather vest over that thick enough to turn a blade. It leaves my arms free, the way I like it. Heavy black boots, the bottoms still flecked with dried mud. The boots are a compromise. They slow my footwork, but anything lighter risks stepping on nails or something worse in the filth of the lower wards.

There are no weapons in the chest. I don't need any.

Hagan and Shiro are waiting at the agreed-upon spot, at the southwest corner of Rotdodger's Square. They've claimed a space among the beggars by virtue of the long knives sheathed at their belts. As usual, they're arguing about something.

"Oh yeah?" Hagan says. He's eighteen, my age, tall and wiry, with brown hair that hangs nearly to his eyes, and a neatly trimmed beard. "Like who?"

"You know Chiya's?" Shiro is sixteen, shorter and built like a beer barrel, with a wild puff of dark hair.

"Of course I rotting know Chiya's."

"You know Binsi, then? Tall girl, waist I could put my fingers around, tits out to—"

"I know that she costs more than you make in a year, you rotting liar."

"That doesn't matter, 'cause I never have to pay." Shiro grins in that way he has, which makes people want to punch him. The crooked angles of his nose show they haven't always restrained themselves.

"That is the most utter garbage I have ever heard," Hagan says. "I don't believe it for a minute."

"You can believe whatever you—"

He stops when Hagan punches him on the shoulder. Not a serious punch, just to get his attention. They turn to face me, and both give a little bow.

“Boss,” Hagan says. “Was starting to think you weren’t coming.”

“I got a little held up.” I survey the crowd. At this hour, they’re mostly women, the able-bodied men off at their labor on the docks. They wear practical tunics, hair tied back under colorful cloths, off to work or to haggle for the daily meal. No *kizen* here.

“Nothing terrible, I hope?” Shiro says. He’s new and a little too eager to please, like a puppy. Sometimes I wonder if he takes me seriously. If not, he and I are going to have a talk.

“Just business,” I tell him. “Anything moving around here?”

“The usual,” Hagan says. “Nothing to show they’re worried.”

“Let’s go worry them, then.” I slap him on the shoulder, and push off through the crowd. The two of them fall in behind me.

To an outsider, and maybe even to most of the people who live here, the lower wards look like chaos. A sea of humanity sandwiched between the harbor on one side and the upper wards on the other, living in ramshackle houses built to no particular plan, crooks and brothels and stores all mixed together.

If you were to see all this, and you were an enterprising sort, you might think it was the perfect place to set up shop. You might start, say, a gambling parlor in the gutted-and-rebuilt wreckage of an old countinghouse, fleecing the stupid, the gullible, and the drunk of coins they can’t afford to lose. And you might think you owed your profits to no one but yourself, because the Emperor’s tax collectors don’t show their noses around here.

You’d be wrong. There are people who will get very upset with you. Not because you’re taking money out of the pockets of the poor—since that’s their business, too—but because you aren’t paying the proper tithe. They’ll start by sending you a message, nice and polite. If you’re stupid enough to ignore that, then someone like me will kick down your door.

That’s the other reason I like the boots. They’re good for kicking down doors.

The broken-down countinghouse is two stories, made of crumbling red brick, but the roof and much of the second floor are gone. The largest surviving section is the old strongroom, a windowless block at the back of the building. Someone has added a new door,

an ill-fitting thing nailed together from scavenged planks, with a slot to let someone look out.

I hope, as I pivot on one foot, that someone's at the slot and that they're not quick. My boot connects with a splintering *crunch* and there's a grunt that tells me my wish has been granted. The door opens a couple of inches, a broken bar visible in the gap. A second kick sends it slamming all the way ajar, catching a large man standing behind it in the shins. Already clutching a bloodied nose, he goes down in a heap, swearing.

There's not much to the place. A few tables, benches and chairs, big jugs of rice wine and small colored bottles of liquor stacked against one wall. It's too early for them to be open, so I assume the six people inside—seven, if you count the door guard with the broken nose—are employees. I size them up automatically. Two men are obvious toughs, broad-shouldered bruisers with short swords in their belts and scarred knuckles. One woman with a hook nose and a crossbow against the rear wall. Another woman in the corner also looks like muscle, dressed in battered leather, maybe a knife fighter or a grappler.

The last two, a man and a woman, are sitting. The woman's in a *kizen*, not a real silk one but a cheap linen imitation, bright with gaudy dye, her face heavily painted. The man beside her has a silk shirt and a fur-lined collar. He wears a sword but doesn't look like he knows how to use it. I read the pair as the brains of the outfit and his girl, probably not a threat. So figure four against three. Five if Broken-Nose stops blubbing.

"Watch the one behind us," I tell Shiro, under my breath. He still needs minding. Hagan, a veteran, has already done the same fast analysis of the room and catches my eye. I nod, minutely, to the woman with the crossbow, and he nods back.

"One of you," I say to the room at large, "is Ohgatani Firello." I fix the fur-collar man with my gaze. "I'm guessing it's you, but I've been wrong before. Anyone else volunteering?"

The woman in the *kizen* looks ready to dive underneath the table. Fur-Collar pushes her aside, angrily, and stands up.

"I'm Firello," he says. "Who in the Rot are you?"

"I think you can probably guess," I say. "But in case you're forgetful, there's money owing. You got a note saying there would be consequences if you didn't pay. I suppose you can call me consequences."

"Charming." He eyes the broken door. "And this is your idea of a polite visit?"

"Yup." I give him my best smile. I've been told it's unsettling.

"Who exactly are you claiming to represent?"

His eyes dart around the room, taking the temper of his guards. After the initial surprise, they've relaxed slightly, confident in their numbers. I can tell at that moment, from the set of their shoulders and the smiles on their faces, that I'm going to have to kill them all. But we'll play it out, for form's sake.

"Does it matter?" I tell Firello. "What's important is that I hold this turf in trust, which makes it my responsibility when someone moves in on it. If I let people get away with that, I might as well slit my own throat."

"Really." Firello's eyes narrow. "Rotscum. I think you've got no backer but the pair of limp-dicks behind you and you've been getting away with talking tough for years."

"From your point of view, does it make a difference?"

Firello smiles. "It means that if we slit your throats, nobody's going to care about three rotting kids going missing in the slums." One corner of his mouth rises. "Though I might save you to sell on to the brothels."

I'm trying to decide if it's worth wasting any more breath on this exchange when Shiro steps forward. His face has gone white with rage. I suppose he's not as used to the posturing and dick measuring that seem to be required on these occasions. His hand is on his knife.

"You have no idea who you're talking to," he says. "We—"

I'm already turning, because I know what happens next. Six people in front of us, one behind us. Shiro was supposed to be keeping his eyes on the one, and he's not. I don't need to see Broken-Nose start moving, because I can read it in the eyes of the other thugs. But I'm not *that* fast, not quite, and Shiro has stepped too far away from

me. He cuts off in mid-sentence as Broken-Nose's knife slides into his kidney, point slicing clean through his leather vest. His eyes go wide, that moment of surprise before the pain hits.

Broken-Nose yanks his knife back, turning to face me. I can see he's surprised to find me already moving toward him, and he begins to backpedal. He's even *more* surprised when a blade of crackling, spitting green energy, emerging from my wrist, goes in through his eye and out the back of his head, his skull offering no more resistance than a rotten melon.

There are nine Wells of Sorcery, the pathways of magic the ancients burned into the fabric of the world. Most people can't touch any of them. Those who can reach at least one are called *mage-born*. Most of them can only draw a trickle of power, from one or two of the Wells; they are the *touched*. A few can manage more, enough to matter, enough to kill; they are the *talents*. And a handful, the *adepts*, have full access to the power of their Well.

That's me. My Well is Melos, the Well of Combat. War.

I should not exist. Adepts don't frequent the Sixteenth Ward. They certainly don't turn up at a rotscum gambling joint as gang enforcers.

So I can understand why Broken-Nose was (briefly) surprised.

Suddenly everyone is going for their weapons. Hagan's the fastest, snatching a triangular knife from his belt and whipping it in a perfect throw at the thug with the crossbow. She half-turns, taking it in the shoulder instead of the throat, but it startles her, and the bow clatters to the floor.

The two bruisers draw their swords. The woman in the corner has a knife in each hand, moving warily. Firello is fumbling for his sword, and I write him off as a non-threat. I step away from Broken-Nose's collapsing body and ignite my other blade. It snaps into existence with a distinctive *crackle-biss*, about two feet of stuttering, shimmering energy, its brilliant bright green color characteristic of Melos power. The blades begin at the backs of my wrists and run parallel to my forearms, as though I'd strapped on a pair of

glowing swords like bracers. They have no weight, but I can feel the heat of them, the power running across my skin in lines of crackling magic. Those lines get brighter and hotter the more energy I draw on. For an adept, it is entirely possible to burn oneself to death by drawing too much, as I can attest from painful experience.

Most people don't know how to fight a Melos adept. This clearly includes bruiser number one. He raises his sword in a useless overhand swing that does nothing but give me plenty of time to react. Accordingly, I'm not there when it comes down, stepping to one side, but my left-hand blade is in position. His own momentum does most of the work of severing his hand neatly at the wrist. Hand and sword hit the floor with a clatter, green lightning playing briefly over the severed stump as he stares in horror.

I've already moved on. His friend, bruiser number two, swings his sword in a flat arc, a slightly better move, especially when you're used to fighting people smaller and weaker than you. I'm *very* used to fighting people bigger and stronger than me, however, so I angle my parry, the steel edge scraping across the Melos blade with an earsplitting *scree* and a shower of sparks. He overcorrects, lurching backward, and it's no great trick to step forward and plant the end of my other blade in his throat. His stumble turns into a fall, his hands coming up to claw at the wound. Green lightning crackles across him for a moment, quickly swallowed in a spew of crimson foam.

Hagan, to my left, is facing off against the knife-wielding woman and not doing well. They've both got blades in hand, but he has a long, shallow cut down one arm, blood dripping from his elbow, and his face is locked in grim concentration. As I close, something *thrums* through the air, just behind me. Crossbow bolt. I step between Hagan and Knives, who gives ground at the sight of my blades.

"Take care of Crossbow!" I tell Hagan, and he nods and spins away. Knives takes a second step backward. There's uncertainty on her face—I figure her loyalty to Firello is a little shaky at the moment. I could probably talk the fight out of her, but we're past that now. If the Immortals get rumors there's a Melos adept on the loose, I won't last very long, so the only people who have seen my blades are either my trusted associates or dead. Knives is not my associate.

She has a wide stance, natural with a weapon in either hand. I bull right down the middle, straight at her, which she is not expecting. Her knives come in, reflexively, aiming for my sides. They get within an inch of my skin before Melos power erupts, a storm of wild green energy that stops the knives dead, as though they'd struck a steel breastplate. I feel the surge as a wash of heat across my skin, radiating outward from where the blows struck.

Meanwhile, my Melos blade has punched into her stomach, the tip emerging between her shoulders. She hangs there for a moment, suspended, and then vomits a gush of blood. I dismiss the blade, letting her crumple, then ignite it again with a *crack-hiss*.

On the other side of the room, the thug with the crossbow is on the floor, one of Hagan's knives in her back. She's crawling away, but he's already on top of her. Hagan has worked with me a long time, and he knows the rules. He lifts her head up by the hair and slashes her throat with a quick, efficient motion, and she shudders and goes still.

The bruiser with the missing hand is curled up around the wound. I silence him with a quick thrust as I walk past, and that leaves Firello and his girl. He's got his sword out, but his hands are shaking.

"Okay!" he shouts. "Okay! I get it. Blessed's Blood! We can make a deal—"

I don't feel like talking to him. What's the point? My left-hand blade strikes his sword, knocking it aside, and my right takes his head off. The spray of blood patters on the floor.

The girl collapses to her knees, her makeup streaked with tears.

"Please," she says, voice so quiet it's hard to hear over the crackle of my blades. "Please. I didn't do anything. I just serve drinks, I swear. You don't need to kill me. Please."

Hagan shoots me a questioning look. I glare at him. He should know better by now.

"Please," the girl says.

"Sorry."

The Melos blade punches into her side, under her left armpit. I slip it between the ribs to find the heart. The quickest death I know. It's all I can offer.

A lot of my colleagues, those who hold territories for the bosses, like to make up happy stories about their jobs. They're defending the people of their wards, they say, protecting them in exchange for a reasonable fee. I prefer not to dress it up. *This* is what I do. I hurt people for money. I hurt them until they pay, or I kill them if they won't, so that the next batch know better.

It's all right. The money goes to Tori, her perfect house, her obedient servants. Her gentle, sheltered life, miles from the stink of blood. She deserves it. She's smart, and kind, and loving, and she'll grow up among nobles and live a perfect life. She's not a monster, like I am. She can be generous and gentle. All I can do is hurt people.

Shiro is still moaning, but he's a dead man. I can see that at a glance. By the way Hagan kneels at his side, though, I can tell he's going to be difficult about it.

"We need a bandage for this," he says, staring at the wound. Blood has glued Shiro's shirt to his skin, and still flows in shallow spurts. "Can you tear up some cloth?"

"Why?" I say. "So he can bleed out tonight, or die a week from now when his bowels fester?"

"Isoka!"

"You know it's true. Look at him. Unless you have a tame Ghul adept you haven't told me about, he's done."

Hagan bites his lip. His hands are shaking. "You're saying we should just leave him here?"

"No, I'm saying we should slit his throat and be done with it. It's a mercy."

He winces as though I've hit him. "I . . . I can't—"

"You were quick enough to finish the woman with the crossbow." I frown. Hagan is usually more reliable.

"It's not the same! He was—*is* my friend. I can't just—"

"Then get out of the way."

Hagan looks at me for a moment, then stands. I kneel beside Shiro. His eyes are closed, and I don't think he's conscious. Thank the Blessed One for small favors, I suppose. My blade slides into

his side, and he shudders and goes still. I stand up and let my power fade away, the Melos energy dispersing into shimmers of green lightning. It feels like stepping from a stifling room into a cool breeze, heat streaming off my skin.

“Let’s go,” I tell Hagan.

“There’s probably money here,” Hagan says, looking away from Shiro’s corpse. “You don’t want to look for it?”

“To the Rot with the money. We’re here to send a message.” I wave one blood-spattered hand at the bodies. “This is the message.”

Hagan gives a jerky nod. I watch him surreptitiously as we leave through the busted door and slip back onto the Sixteenth Ward’s busy streets. My other eye is on the crowd, but if anyone pays us special attention, they take care not to stray too close. In the upper wards, if a body was discovered, the Ward Guard would come out and pursue the murderer. Down here, the guards barely bestir themselves to clean up the corpses, and not until after they’re picked clean.

Still, it’s a good idea to get off the streets. There’s another hide-out ready, halfway up a decaying block of shabby tenements. I’ll lay low there until morning. Quite a few of the Sixteenth Ward’s vagrant children are on my payroll, and they’ll watch to see who finds the bodies and who those people tell about it. It’s possible that the people in that room were the whole of Firello’s organization, but it’s equally possible he had another partner or two who might come over all revenge minded. If so, I’d like to know about it. I didn’t go from street rat to ward boss by taking unnecessary chances, and even Melos armor is no protection from a knife in the throat while you’re sleeping.

The bolt-hole is another empty, grubby room, with a rag-curtain window looking into a central courtyard the residents use as a garbage dump. There’s a sack with fresh clothes, a clay jug of weak wine, another of water, and paper-wrapped parcels of food. Hagan stops in the doorway, one hand clutching the wound on his arm, breathing hard.

“Well.” I look down at myself, the bloodstains already drying to dirty brown. “That could have gone better.”

Hagan snorts and mutters something. I turn to look at him.

“Are you okay?”

He looks up, face hardening. “Fine, boss.”

“I’m sorry about Shiro.” I’m not, but the lie won’t hurt. “But he got emotional and paid the price. You know I warned him about that.”

“So did I,” Hagan said.

I frowned. “Was he your brother or something?” It’s not like we hadn’t lost men before. It happens. When you’re in the business of hurting people, sometimes they hit back.

“I haven’t got a brother,” Hagan said. “He was just . . . a friend.”

I shrugged. Who rotting knows what goes on in people’s heads? Friendship wasn’t a luxury I’d ever been able to afford. Life had taught me that lesson early on: there was Tori, there was me, and then there was everyone else.

“How’s your arm?” I ask. “You look pretty bloody.”

“Nothing serious.” He pokes at the wound and winces. “I’ll be all right.”

“Go get cleaned up. I’ll see you in the morning, once we know we’re clear.”

Hagan forces a smile. “Yes, boss.”

I strip, wadding up my shirt and trousers, and do what I can to scrub the blood from my skin. It’s something, but I won’t feel really clean until I can get to a bathhouse for a proper soak. Once I’m in fresh clothes, I demolish the supper in the sack—rice balls, a roast chicken, sweet preserved cherries—and start in on the wine. It’s all simple stuff, but with my body coming down from the combat high everything tastes good.

The dim light from the window turns redder as the sun slides down the sky. Jug in hand, I wander over and stare. From here I can see the harbor up close, pier after pier jammed with vessels, their bare masts like a strange, dead forest. I’ve heard that Kahnzoka is one of the greatest ports in the world, rivaled only by the Jyashtani capital of Horimae. Farther out are ships under sail, from single-masted junks to enormous square-rigged traders. The sleek triangular

sails of an Imperial Navy galley, black trimmed with gold, cut through the riot of color like a shark through a school of fish.

I feel keyed up, jittery, unable to relax, like I've missed something and I can't quite put my finger on it. I'm like this, after a fight. It helps if I have someone to fall into bed with, a quick rut to burn off the extra energy. I thought about asking Hagan to stay—I've tumbled him a time or two—but he didn't seem like he was in the mood.

Wine's not as good, but I'll take what I can get. I bring the jug to my lips and swallow, as the last of the sun slips below the horizon and the light begins to fade from orange to black.

I dream of the people I've killed.

I don't know why. I don't feel bad about killing them. But their faces appear behind my eyelids when I sleep, standing around me. They're not threatening, not come to take vengeance from beyond the grave. Just . . . waiting, as though I should have something to tell them.

Firello is there, and his girl, and his guards. Shiro's there, too. He looks at me, silently, expectantly.

"Get lost," I tell them. "I don't know what you want from me, but you're not going to get it."

They just stare. No expressions, no sadness or pain. Just . . . expectation.

"This is a dream," I tell them. "You're all dead."

They don't react.

I struggle to wake up, to open my eyes. And it seems like it works, for a moment. Only it doesn't, because I'm still dreaming.

I'm lying on the thin, lumpy sleeping mat, empty wine jug near my hand. A slight breeze through the rag curtain raises goose bumps.

Above me there's a faint light. Tiny glowing pinpricks hover and dance, like dust caught in a sunbeam, leaving trails of luminous gray in their wake. They writhe like a bucket of eels. I raise my hand, and the gray trails shift, as though pulled toward my fingers.

Dreams. I close my eyes again, hoping for a more pleasant one.