

THEY CALL ME MALAK

by Kat O'Reilly

I'm a thief. Or I was. I don't know where I was born or who my mother was. I've always been running. First from the orphanage, then from everyone. Everywhere. I don't know why anyone cares. The orphanage is the first place I remember, though.

For the record, I hate magic. I hate magic-users even more.

The price some people are willing to pay for things stolen from the magic-users is too much to resist. Plus, my philosophy is that the problem with resisting temptation is that it might not come again.

My goal was to get as much from the magic-users as I could carry and bring it to Cor Cathair, to a good fence. One that wouldn't cheat me. I know the ones in the smaller towns

would. Maybe not so much in Rivermead or Gallowton, but why settle for small change when I can get the big money in Cor Cathair?

I left Fùran, in the far east of Cordaire, before daybreak. I left the village the same way I got there: I climbed over the wall. Don't want the city guards to get a good look at me. Don't want to be connected with the stuff that's come missing while I've been in town.

All the more reason to go to the capital.

Usually, I don't leave a town until it's no longer safe for me to stay. I stayed in one town long enough to get some schooling. The law said kids had to go, so the first day I was in town, I found myself escorted to the Temple of Cor where the schooling was done. Not like I needed it, though.

But that doesn't really have any bearing on what I'm telling you now. I could fit in wherever I decided to go without it. That's how I'm able to get in around the magic-users and filch their things.

I thought I had made a clean break from Fùran. Next thing I knew, someone was behind me, yelling, "Stop, thief!"

Ha! Like anyone is going to stop just because of that? Not me!

I've lived equally in the villages and the forest, so I took to the trees. Outside of Fùran, the trees are close enough I could go from tree to tree without having to go back to the ground. But when I did, he was there.

"Well, well, what have we here?" the magic-user said. "A squirrel or a girl?"

He is one of the few who know I am a girl, not a boy. I make an effort to hide what I've got, what little there is.

I stayed in the half-crouch I had landed in. "You tell me," I said.

His eyes narrowed. I remember their blue-gray flash like he imbedded it in my head, like he'd always be watching me. For all I know, that could be true.

I stood up. I wasn't as tall as him, but I'm not one to hide, to be afraid of anyone. Anything. Much less a magic-user.

"Give me what you took of mine and I will let you go."

"Fat chance of that!" I shot back. "Not with them—" I jerked my thumb over my shoulder, pointing behind me. "—coming like that."

He shrugged as if they didn't matter. He waved his hand and said something I couldn't understand and it was quiet.

I turned around to look and there was no one there but the two of us. "Give you what's yours and I can go?"

He nodded, folding his arms, with his hands inside the sleeves of his robe. All I could think about was hidden pockets and how much loot I'd be able to hide in sleeves like his.

I shrugged, acted like I didn't care and dropped the knapsack I carried. He cringed. I laughed and reached inside, careful to hide what else was there. Bringing out the last thing I put in the sack, I held it out for the magic-user to take.

I could have sworn his hand shook as he took the small bundle. It was wrapped in cloth. Silk. I didn't know what it was. I watched as he opened it.

He took out a small stone and turned it over, examining the gem in the growing light. He sighed with relief—at least, that's how I took it—and carefully wrapped it up again, securing it somewhere inside one of those sleeves big enough to hide a nobleman's carriage.

"Go away, Malak," he said.

"How do you know my name?"

“I know,” he said, as if that explained everything. Maybe it did. He was a magic-user.

“Go away, Malak. Next time you come to Fùran, the guards behind you won’t be an illusion.”

Since he was letting me go, I walked around him and started down the road. I hadn’t gone more than a few steps when the area I was walking in wasn’t familiar to me at all. No more than the woods around Fùran had been.

The old bastard ported me to somewhere far away from Fùran! Now I had to start again, and fast! The city walls were in sight. Less than a mark away, walking at the pace I was.

“You! Boy! Get out of the way!” someone behind me shouted.

I ignored the sound of the horses’ hooves behind me. I knew I should move, but he went around me. I’d seen kids get run down by horses pulling carriages like that. Once a fat merchant laughed.

That fat merchant might still be fat, but he’s not quite as rich as he was before.

Don’t look surprised. I told you, I’m a thief. I’m good at what I do. I like it. I started because I had to eat. But I stayed with it because I’m good.

I’m the best.

The magic-user had put me just outside of Rivermead. More than halfway across Cordaire. What I had in my sack would sell for a lot of money. But if I’d been able to walk all the way, like I had planned, there would’ve been a lot more.

I swear I can feel that magic-user in my head, watching me, now. I know the difference between wizards and sorcerers and mages and the like. But they’re all magic-users. I only call ‘em as I see ‘em.

And they call me Malak.

The shopkeeper toyed with the clasp on his money pouch.

“You know you can get double that,” I pointed out.

“Don’t know ’bout that,” he said. “Not many people want magic here.”

I snorted. “Ya gotta open your eyes, then.” In the market, I’d seen fully a dozen people going to the fortuneteller, looking for amulets, searching for magic.

“What do you know about it?” He glared at me.

“I know what I see. And there’d be a lot of people wanting that once they know you have it.”

“And how will they know I have it?”

I rolled my eyes, wishing I had gone to a different shop. “I’ll tell ’em.”

The shopkeeper looked like he wanted to argue more, but he opened the money pouch and paid me. I counted as he did.

“That’s not what I asked for,” I said as he slid the coins across the counter.

“Take it or leave it,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

I looked at the pile of coins. Not what I’d asked for, but it was more than he first said. I snatched the coins up and put them in my own pouch before he changed his mind. I picked up my sack and left. This was one shop I would never come back to.

I looked for the city watch—the freiceadan—as I left. The stuff in my sack wouldn’t do me a bit of good if I went to jail. A few coins from what the shopkeeper paid me would get me passage on a boat from Rivermead to Cor Cathair. I’d be in the capital already if not for that magic-user.

“Git out th’ way, boy,” someone said from behind me. A stick or staff poked me in the back. “Yer blockin’ traffic.”

Traffic be damned. I had a decision to make. Should I leave now or stay one night and see what there is to be had that I can sell in the capital?

“Ye don’t want t’ be doin’ that, lad,” the person said again. I couldn’t tell just by the voice if it was a man or a woman?

“What d’ you know of it?” I asked.

“I know th’ freiceadan’d like t’ see ye in jail.”

I turned around. This had to be a magic-user. “How do you know?” I asked, forgetting to sound like I belonged there.

The old crone’s mouth gaped in a toothless smile. “I know. Git down to the docks an’ buy passage t’ leave town if’n ye know what’s good fer ye.”

Even I knew enough not to mess with crones, so I did what she said. It was easy to find which ships were going to the capital. The ones on the far side of the docks prepared to head out to sea. The ones on the near side were bound for Cor Cathair.

I hid behind a stack of crates, out of the freiceadan’s sight, and watched the activity for a while. I almost laughed out loud. Many of the sailors dressed a lot like me. I could pose as one of them and get on that ship without paying, regardless of what the crone said. I’d still be out of Rivermead. That’s what counted, right?

I’d stolen a lot of things in my time, but I’d never stowed away on a ship before. I grabbed a bag like the others were doing and walked up the gangplank to the ship. After I put the bag where it belonged, I walked back farther into the hold where the light didn’t reach.

I’m not afraid of the dark. Never have been. Cor willing, I never will be. A thief who’s afraid of the dark goes hungry.

I stayed put until the ship started moving. I felt pretty sure no one would come down into the hold after that. I didn't go far, though. No sense in daring someone to come find me. A few marks into the journey, the door opened, spilling light into the hold.

Two sailors entered to do inventory. One carried a torch to give light back in the darkest corners.

I moved farther back as they neared my hiding place.

"Hear that?" the one nearest me said.

"Jes' a rat," the other replied.

I tried to be still. My foot started to cramp.

"Aye, a dock rat." He took the torch from the other and held it high.

I blinked against the flare of the light.

"Huh." He gave the torch back to his companion and continued the inventory.

I relaxed, thinking they hadn't seen me. I sat with my back against a crate as they finished.

A while later, my belly growled. I crawled over to my sack, feeling my way in the darkness. I always kept some fruit or soldiers' rations in there. And don't make the mistake of thinking I paid for either one of them. I already told you, I'm a thief. The best.

I'd dozed off but jerked awake when the door to the hold opened again. I knew we weren't in Cor Cathair yet. That wouldn't come until midday the next day. With the limited view I had of the sky, I didn't think it was even midnight yet.

"C'mon out, little rat," a voice crooned.

Shit.

"C'mon out an' play nice now."

He had seen me and let me think he hadn't. Double shit.

"Whatcha want?" I asked, standing up carefully.

"You know what I want," he said, closing the hold door, plunging us into darkness until he fumbled and lit a candle.

Cor, help me! I thought. I've never been one to pray or given much thought to god. It looked like that was a serious mistake on my part.

"If'n ye'd been a good little rat an' bought passage like the crone said, ye'd be safe in yer bed."

"How d' you know 'bout the crone?"

"Ev'ryone knows 'bout crones." He grinned. His missing teeth looked even more sinister in the meager light of the candle.

"Whatcha want?" I repeated.

He sat the candle on a crate and stalked toward me.

I backed up as far as I could and nearly slipped on the material of my sack that still lay open on the floor.

"Does the little rat play games?" he taunted.

I backed against the side of the ship. I had nowhere else to go.

"Tell ye what, little rat," he said, untying his trews with one hand. "Do what I tell ye an' I won't tell the captain yer here." The ties were all that kept the too-large trews up. They fell to his knees when he released the ties. He started to fondle himself. "Ye put that pretty little mouth here an' I'll see that ye make it t' Cor Cathair on the ship an' not in the water."

I felt a moment of panic. I couldn't swim. Then I remembered how I had gotten on the ship in the first place. I bent down like I was going to do what he said. Instead I got my knife out of my boot.

"I don't like that game," I said. "Tell ye what, sailor scum, leave me alone an' I'll let ye keep yer calg." I held the knife at the point where he fondled himself. I felt a breath of a memory, of using magic, and I knew I could defend myself from him even without the knife. I crushed the memory down. I hated magic.

He became still. His breathing increased. He was scared. Then he started to laugh. "Ye think ye'd best me, little rat...."

"Nay," I corrected him. "I know I would. I'm smaller an' faster. Ye might hurt me, but I'd win. Besides—" Now I laughed. "—how do you think I got on this ship? The captain thought I was one o' his crew."

He started to wilt, literally. He bent to pick up his trews.

I moved the knife.

Instead of pulling up his trews, he lunged for me.

I didn't move. I didn't do anything. He put himself on the blade of my knife. That's how it had to have happened. It's not a big blade, but big enough. It tore a big hole in his belly. I didn't want it to happen, but it did, so it's done.

He went back above deck. I never saw him again.

His blood stained my knife and on my shirt. I'd have a hard time getting past the freiceadan like that. I didn't need that kind of attention.

I got down to the docks the same way I'd gotten on the ship. I looked around, hoping I could outrun the guards. I took a few steps before I heard it.

“Git out of the way, boy, yer blockin’ traffic.”

I chanced a look over my shoulder. The crone!

She winked and turned around, beckoning me to follow.

I don’t know how she got to Cor Cathair. Maybe she booked passage on the ship. Maybe she could use magic to get from one place to another.

I shuddered. I hate magic-users. That includes crones. But if she could get me off the busy docks without running into any of the freiceadan, I’d walk off the dock into the water if she told me to.

Well, maybe not that.

With more than a few reservations, I followed her. We went into an alley. At the end of it, where I knew there hadn’t been a door before, one appeared. We stopped in front of it.

“How...?” I started.

“Don’t question it, boy,” she said, opening the door.

“I’m no boy,” I said, wondering why I corrected her since being mistaken for a boy had helped me out more than once.

“I know. Now, change that shirt. You’ll find one on the bed in the first room upstairs. Don’t open any other doors. Just that one. We’ll get to the others later. Then come back here and we’ll see what you’ve got in your bag that I can use.”

I tried not to stare at her. She was no dumb crone. She spoke better than many of the nobles I’d heard.

“Don’t stand there like a burraidh. Go on.”

I’d never been called a fool, whether in the Old Tongue she used or in the King’s Tongue. It startled me out of my surprise and I did as she said.

Again.

That was getting to be a habit. One I couldn't afford.

#

My bag lay open on the counter in front of the crone when I went back downstairs.

"Hey! You can't do that."

"Why not? You want to sell it, don't you?"

"Yeah, but..."

"But what? Speak up."

"I had someone already to sell them to."

"Daryn?"

"You know him?"

"Aye," she said, turning a crystal point over in her gnarled hand. "And I know the freiceadan have him. Oh, he's still buying things, but then he'll give your name to the guardsmen and you'll be in jail."

I shuddered. "I'd rather not be there."

"Then you'll work for me," she said.

I shook my head. "I hate magic. I hate magic-users."

She clicked her tongue. "It'd be a shame to see you working for the guards and getting no pay when you could work for me and get paid good, have food to eat, and a place to sleep."

"You'd do all that?"

She nodded. "You can start tomorrow, Angel. Today you need to get acquainted with the shop."

I couldn't help it. I nearly jumped out of my skin. No one ever called me Angel. Never. Not since....

I shook my head. I wouldn't go there. That was one memory best left buried, just like the memories of me using magic.

“Call me Malak.”

The crone laughed. “Like I said. You start tomorrow, Angel.”

Isn't it strange how a fallen angel can come to hate magic as much as I do? And the damn crone knew it.

But that's why—how—I'm no longer a thief. The crone won't allow it. And I'm learning. I'm learning not to hate magic quite so much. That doesn't mean I like it, though.

BIO: Kat O'Reilly is an Oklahoma-based author whose first novel will be out in the fall of 2012. She has won awards for her short stories and poems. For more information, visit her page at <http://www.jen-nipps.com/katoreilly.html>.