



Steadfast: (Elemental Masters #8)

By Mercedes Lackey

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Mercedes Lackey's magical Elemental Masters series recasts familiar fairy tales in a richly-imagined alternate Victorian world

Katie Langford had been part of her family's acrobatic troupe working in a small traveling circus—until a terrible fire killed her parents. Years later, still with the circus but stuck in an abusive marriage, Katie fled from her increasingly dangerous husband to Brighton. As a seaside resort town, Brighton's music halls meant no circus needed to visit. It was as safe a place as she could find.

Lionel Hawkins was a professional magician who had a permanent job at the Palace Music Hall in Brighton. His shows never failed to enchant the ever-changing crowds, for his magic was more than just tricks. Lionel was an Air Magician, and he wasn't the only one at the Palace who had magical abilities. Jack Prescott, the Palace doorman who had lost a leg in the Boer Wars, had preternatural awareness of all flame, which had saved the Palace from burning on more than one occasion.

When Katie answered the Palace's call for a new assistant with stage experience, it seemed like all her problems were solved. But it soon became clear that Katie was a Fire Magician like Jack and that something had blocked Katie's access to her own abilities—a dangerous situation for everyone around her. Fire, the most volatile of all the elements, was a power that could easily turn deadly when fueled by strong emotion. And Lionel and Jack could tell that Katie was hiding something. Something that frightened her. Something that could set their whole world ablaze if they couldn't help her master her Element in time.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the Elemental Masters series:

“The Paris of Degas, turn-of-the-century Blackpool, and the desperation of young girls without family or other protection come to life in a **story that should interest a broad readership.**” —*Booklist*

“All in **fine fairy-tale tradition**.... It’s grim fun, with some nice historical detail, and just a hint of romance to help lighten things.” —*Locus*

“The action and dialogue flow freely, mingling with beautiful descriptions of European countryside and just a hint of romance.... A **well-developed heroine and engaging story.**” —*Publishers Weekly*

“The fifth in the series involving the mysterious Elemental Masters, this story of a resourceful young dancer also delivers a new version of a classic fairy tale. **Richly detailed historic backgrounds** add flavor and richness to an already strong series that belongs in most fantasy collections. Highly recommended.”

—*Library Journal*

“Lackey’s fantastical world of Elementals, plus her delightful Nan and Sarah, create an amusing contrast for Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and John Watson.... The **mix of humor, history, fantasy, and mystery** is balanced in a way that any reader could pick up the book and thoroughly enjoy it from beginning to end.” —*RT Reviews*

“The Elementals novels are **beautiful, romantic adult fairy tales**. Master magician Mercedes Lackey writes a charming fantasy.” —*Worlds of Wonder*

“Ms. Lackey is a **master in fantasy**, and this visit to an alternate historical England is no exception. Vivid characterization and believable surroundings are flawlessly joined in a well-detailed world.” —*Darque Reviews*

“I find Ms. Lackey’s *Elemental Masters* series **a true frolic into fantasy.**”

—Fantasy Book Spot

About the Author

Mercedes Lackey is a full-time writer and has published numerous novels and works of short fiction, including the best-selling Heralds of Valdemar series. She is also a professional lyricist and a licensed wild bird rehabilitator. She lives in Oklahoma with her husband, artist Larry Dixon, and their flock of parrots. She can be found at mercedeslackey.com or on Twitter at @mercedeslackey.

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Katie Langford woke with a start, heart pounding, the sweat of terror soaking her clothing. It took her a moment of paralyzed fear to realize that she was not in the circus wagon, she was not about to be beaten by her husband again, and at least for this moment she was safe. Safe, sleeping on a sort of shelf-bed in old Mary Small’s *vardo*, protected by the menfolk sleeping outside. She could hear their snores from underneath her, sheltered by the great Traveler wagon, and from the bender tents around the wagon.

She took slow, careful breaths as her heart quieted, and she felt her emotions fall back into the curious state of numb apprehension that she couldn't seem to work her way out of. She wondered if she would ever feel normal again—or happy?

Probably not until I know that Dick is dead.

She listened to the snores. Mary Small had outlived her husband, but her sons and grandsons were many, and since Mary had declared that the half-blooded Katie was to be sheltered and protected, her sons would see to it that their mother's word was followed. This was . . . interesting. Her mother might have married a *gadjo*, she might be *didicoy*, and Katie herself might know no more than a few words of the Traveler tongue, but still, it seemed that for Mary Small, blood was blood.

Perhaps it was something more than that, for Mary had declared she was *drabarni*, she had magic, and so she was to be doubly protected.

Katie could not for a moment imagine where Mary had gotten that idea. Magic? The only magic she had ever seen was sleight of hand and outright fraud. Her mother had told her stories of magic . . . but if Katie'd had anything like what had been in those stories . . .

My parents would be alive, she thought, and swallowed down tears. *If I'd had that sort of magic, they would be alive.*

Katie breathed slowly and carefully in the spice-redolent darkness of the *vardo*, waiting for the tears to pass, the numbness to settle in again. It was only three days ago she had taken everything portable she had of value and fled the circus—but it seemed an entire lifetime ago. She still could hardly believe that she'd had the temerity. *That* Katie, who'd resolutely taken everything that was due her and run, seemed a stranger to her. After months of being married to Dick, she had turned into a terrified mouse of a creature, afraid to put a single finger wrong. Where had that courage come from? She still didn't know . . . but it hadn't lasted for more than the few hours it took to put some distance between her and the circus.

Once it had run out, then she'd settled into the state of dull anxiety she lived in now. But she had kept going, understanding that after having run, being caught would be—a horror. She didn't dare even think about what Dick would do to her if he caught her.

It had been only a day since she had stumbled on the Traveler encampment—literally ran right into it, since the *vardos* of the Small clan were Bow Tops, painted to blend in with the woodland rather than stand out like the bright red and gold Reading *vardos*. The entire two days before, she had been running, mostly along country lanes and paths through forest, changing her direction at random. Her husband Dick—and more especially, Andy Ball, the owner of Ball's Circus—would most likely assume she would head for one of the nearest towns rather than take to the countryside. They didn't know her at all, nor had they ever made any effort to know her. They would assume she was like the other women of the circus, who knew only the wagons, the tents, and the towns.

Dick would be furious, not only because she, his possession, had dared to run from him, but because she had picked the lock on his strongbox and taken every bit of the money *she* had earned. Or at least, every bit that was left after his drinking; she took only what should have been her salary, and there was still money left in the strongbox when she closed it again.

It was not as if he actually needed her money. The truth was, he generally didn't have to pay for drinks, though he was quite a heavy drinker. Locals in the pubs would buy him rounds just to see his tricks, like unbending and rebending a horseshoe, or tying an iron bar into a knot. He didn't have to pay for whores, either, with farmer's lasses throwing themselves at him.

She wouldn't have cared about that. She *didn't* care about that. She'd only married him because he'd been craftily kind to her after the horrible fire that killed her parents, and because Andy Ball said she had to marry a strong man to protect her now, and who was stronger than the Strong Man himself? She'd been so paralyzed with grief, mind fogged, so alone . . . Andy had been so insistent . . . it had seemed logical. Most marriages among circus folks were arranged, anyway—an acrobat daughter sent into a family of ropewalkers, or off to learn trapeze work. So she'd gone along with it, and found herself married to a man who at first was impatient with nearly everything she did, then increasingly angry with her, then who knocked her around whenever something displeased him.

Of course, it hadn't been bad at first. A slap here, a push there—circus folk were not always the kindest to each other and plenty of husbands and wives left marks on each other after fights. Circus folk drank, and there were often fights.

She'd gone in despair to Andy Ball, who had shrugged, and said "Then take pains to please him, he's your husband, you must do as he says. I told him if he broke your bones, he'd be answering to me, so stop your whingeing." And for the longest time, she had believed that it was her fault. After all, her mother and father had never done more than shout at each other. And none of the other circus wives were ever treated as she was. She'd been too ashamed to talk to any of the other women about it, especially when he began to really beat her.

Why had Andy urged the marriage on her? Because Dick wanted her and he was handing her over like some reward for loyalty? Because he was afraid to lose his chief dancer and contortionist?

She'd been part of a three-man acrobatic act; her mother, her father, and herself. It had been like that for as long as she had been alive. With her family gone, besides her dancing in the circus ballet, and her contortions in the sideshow, Andy had come up with a new act for her. She became part of Dick's strongman act, with tricks like standing on her hands while balanced on Dick's palm, and shivering the whole time, afraid he'd drop her. She would have liked to join some other act, but Dick forbade it. "You'll work with me or no one," he said, in that tone of voice that made her shake and imagine that no one meant he'd strangle her in her sleep.

It was only when she'd been bathing in a stream—she usually did that alone, to hide the bruises—and some of the other women had come on her unexpectedly that she had finally been forced to confront the truth. They'd been alarmed, then angry, then—afraid. Because while, one and all, they told her that *this wasn't right*, they also told her she would have to somehow get away on her own. No one dared challenge Dick. He could snap any other man's neck without thinking about it.

At least their words had snapped her out of the fugue of despair and fear, and gave her the courage and the strength to run. The opportunity had come when a lot of rich men had descended on Dick and plied him with drink far stronger than he was used to. He'd been so dead drunk that nothing would have awakened him, giving her plenty of time to pack up all her belongings, steal the money, and get a good head start on him. As a child she'd been a woods-runner, and in summer, her parents had often spent entire weeks camped out, hidden, on someone's private land, living off it. Unlike Dick, she didn't need a town to survive. But she was counting on the idea that he would think she did.

It had been while she was following a path through the woods on some lord's enormous estate that she had stumbled on the Travelers. The old woman had started with surprise as she appeared in their midst. She'd snapped out a few commands from the porch of her *vardo* in the Traveler tongue, and one of the young men had seized Katie's wrist before she could run.

"Don't be afraid," he'd told her, in a lightly accented, warm voice that caressed like velvet. "*Puri daj* has seen you are of the blood. She says you are *drabarni*, and that you are afraid and running. We will hide you."

The accent, and the words, straight out of her childhood, when her mother had whispered Traveler words to her, had somehow stolen her fear away—and besides, at that point she was exhausted and starving. Cress, a few berries, and mushrooms she had gathered had not done much for her hunger. The old woman had directed that she be brought to the fire, given an enormous bowl of rabbit stew, and draped with a warm shawl. She'd fallen asleep where she was when the bowl was empty. They'd woken her enough to guide her into the *vardo*, where she'd fallen asleep on a little pallet on the floor. When night fell, one of the women had awakened her and pulled down this shelf-bed, which she had climbed into to fall asleep immediately again. It was narrow and short, and must have been intended for a child, but she was small and it fit her.

Today she'd been given things to do—mending Mary Small's clothing, since the old woman's eyes were too dim to thread a needle now—and wash pots and dishes, freeing another of the women to go out and forage in the forest. The men went out and came back with food and word that the circus folk had passed through the village, asked if anyone had seen a girl like her, and moved on without stopping to set up.

"They're in Aleford," one of the boys, last in, had reported. "Set up there. Moving on in the morning." He had eyed her, then. "What did you do, that made you run?"

"My husband beat me," she had told him, the first time she had told anyone but Andy Ball, the shameful words surprised out of her. He had told her never to tell. He had told her she deserved it. Even now, it was almost easier to believe he was right, he'd said it so often.

"Ah," the boy had said, and spat to the side. "A curse on a bully that strikes a woman, unless with wanton ways or shrewish tongue she drives him to it."

"The *drabarni* is neither wanton nor shrew," Mary had proclaimed from the porch of the *vardo*, though how on earth she could know anything about Katie . . .

Her words settled things, it seemed, for the boy spat to the side again and repeated his curse, without the conditions this time.

"What is it you do with the circus?" someone else asked. So far none of them but Mary had told her their names, but it was one of the four other women in this clan.

To answer that, she showed them, bending over backward and grabbing her ankles with her hands, straightening up again and going into a series of cartwheels so fast that her skirts never dropped to show her legs at all. "And I dance," she had added simply as she finished back where she had started and clasped her hands in front of her.

"Good," Mary had nodded. "Then you can do that while the boys play music. And we will teach you your mother's dances. You have the Gitano look about you and we are Gitano. Now it is time to eat."

And now she was spending her second night under the canvas top of Mary's *vardo*, which seemed to be the place they had decided she was to stay. At this point she was content to do what they told her to. It wasn't only her body that was exhausted, it was her mind.

A rumble of thunder in the distance suggested what it was that had woken her; a moment later a gentle rain pattered down on the canvas top of the *vardo*. There was a curtain she could use to draw across the front of her shelf, and she did so. A moment later three of the boys came up the stairs, their bedrolls over their shoulders. They squeezed themselves together on the floor, and before she would have believed it possible, they were asleep again, on their sides, arranged like spoons in a drawer.

And the rain lulled Katie back to sleep, secure in the presence of her protectors beyond the gently waving curtain.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Robert Black:

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Michael Torres:

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