

Warlord

by Michelle West

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[Four Corners Communication](#)

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Introduction

This is the first of the short pieces I've written that were set in the universe of the *Sun Sword* novels, and it features the domicis, Avandar. When I was asked to write a story for the anthology *Battle Magic*, I was hesitant, because although my books often contain battle scenes that take up hundreds of pages, I'm not actually fond of battle; they're always a struggle to write. I like the events and the interactions that lead up to a conflict; I like the ramifications and aftershocks that occur as a result of one. But it's like the moment of a gunshot; the shot itself isn't the point; it's what lead up to it and what happens after it that makes it compelling. Unless you happen to be the person being shot at, which of course is different.

But Avandar and his past, alluded to in the books, but never fully explored, have always interested me, and I agreed to write the story with the understanding that the mage was trained for war, but that the war itself would be more internal.

This is not all of his story; given the fact that he's lived for longer than any of my mortal characters combined, that would be impossible in this space of words. But it does give insight into his character that might not be as clear in the novels.

I think, in the interim between the conception of this story (and it was written before *Uncrowned King*) things have shifted a bit, because they do between conception and execution for me; they grow and they develop dimensions I didn't see when I first conceived of them.

Warlord

HE CAME down from the mountain on the day the sun rose between its peaks in a curtain of orange and crimson, a gesture of near-forgotten glory. He had some wealth with him, and in some quantity, although he had taken care to make certain it was easily carried and easily hidden. He dressed for the weather, although the cold never bothered him, and carried a pack—emptied—that observers might believe had once been filled with supplies. He wore no obvious weapons, although he might have chosen to arm himself with a sword had he taken the southward pass; to the Dominion, a weapon defined the status of a man and he was not above vanity, although the sword was no true weapon. He had his birthright, and with it, he had destroyed whole armies. Those fires were not banked.

It was time, again; time, but still too early.

He had woken the previous day, and the day before it, from the nightmare that had haunted his life for so many years now it had become, in some fashion, his closest companion—the only companion he was allowed. At dusk, having thrown off sleep by a monumental act of either will or cowardice, he would be wreathed in old ghosts, and the blood on his hands would glisten darkly as he listened to old cries.

The ghosts had driven him for years, and as always, he had retired to the finery of his mountain confines to wait out their long decline. Half-mad when he arrived—always that—clothing rent and torn, blood across his chest, his hands and the length of his face not covered by untended beard, he would plunge through the mystical wards that separated his mountain vastness from the cold, the wind, the snow, and the presence of any other man.

There, surrounded by the finery of lifetimes, awash in the reflection of magelight against crystal, gold and silk, he would recover from his wounds.

But the deepest of the wounds seldom left completely.

As a younger man, his rage had fueled the healing; as a younger man, it had been easier to foist the import—and impact—of his actions upon his enemies and allies. If, he would reason, they had not attacked or if they had done as they were ordered... But he had been younger, then.

The pain was easier to twist into rage, and rage was by far the more comfortable. Unfortunately, with age came a certain understanding, a certain self-knowledge, and a distinct self-loathing. A man so enraged was an easy pawn, and he intensely disliked being the servant of any other man.

Intensely.

But he was tired.

And the dreaming was different, this morn. Different because it had followed the course of three nights, unchanging; different in that the ghosts of the dead were escorted, were called back, by the visage of a woman in robes of blue.

He disliked gods on principle; they were, of a type, rulers, and made of men—men and their own flesh and blood—groveling servants. And they, in their time, had destroyed more than his life by their curse and their geas, by the edicts they had *no right* to pronounce upon him. It was no surprise that he recognized the hand of a god in the figure of the woman.

“It is time,” she said, her voice low and deep, yet still loud enough to be heard clearly over the terrified accusations of his dead, all his dead. “The battle that you’ve trained for all your life is about to start. They will find you; they have always found you in the past.”

He could not make out her face in the folds of cloth that framed it. Shadows, there, darkness of her own.

“And am I a pawn,” he said stiffly, “to be ordered into a life I’ve chosen to leave?”

“You have never,” she replied, “chosen to leave it. Never.” And so saying, she pulled a glowing orb from the confines of her sleeves. “Or perhaps you do not remember your beginnings.”

He lifted his hands. Pulled back. He knew what the orb was, although it had been a long, long time since he had seen one.

“You are weary,” she said, as the light faded, as the implied attack ceased. “And I understand weariness. Will you not, at last face the truth?”

“I have tried,” he said bitterly.

“Have you?”

“I have lost everything that I have ever cared for. I have surrendered all, again and again. And I am still as you see me. I am still as I *was*.”

“Perhaps,” she replied softly, “it is time to seek the truth of that fact. Go North, and East. Seek service.”

“Have I not served in my time?”

Her eyes were violet ice; he saw them, saw the hint of pale, icy cheek, the hint of moving lips in shadowed face. “You have never served any master but yourself. After all these years, do you not understand that truth?”

The first night, he might ignore the words, although he heard the truth in them clearly. And the second night. But the third night, he accepted the sign of Fate. He stirred himself, and left his mountain fortress far earlier than he would have chosen to otherwise depart it: The loss was still fresh, and the pain still too close, and the voice and face of the woman he had loved was still locked in accusation and madness whenever his memory was unkind enough to return to her.

* * *

“The life of those who serve is not an easy life, and if lived correctly—and it will be, by those of you who finish your apprenticeship—it is not a life of glory.” The man who spoke paused a moment. Frowned. “I realize,” he added stiffly, “that you are in your first year here. Manners, however, are not the preserve of the well-taught; they are a *requirement* within the guild halls.”

It was a threat, of course, and it worked; the unruly, unacceptable, thoroughly disgraceful lot of boys that the guildmaster had seen fit to send him fell silent as they contemplated life outside of the future employment the guild offered.

And that was the problem.

They saw it was a *job*, and while it was that, it was also more, this gifting of service, this dedication of life. It was a vocation.

Most of these boys wouldn’t make it past their first year. If they somehow managed that, it was unlikely they’d persevere beyond the first year of their apprenticeship. They were like young weeds, and it was his task to strengthen the garden; he’d grown used to the job over the years.

The door swung open, exposing his students to the faint noise of the hall. Just what they needed. Another distraction.

“Sir?”

Ellerson frowned at the familiar young man. When the boy didn’t cringe, the old man assumed it was important. He put on his this-had-better-be-good expression—although when he taught it was never that far away from his real one—and nodded at the interruption.

“I expect,” he said, as he walked across the room, “that you will be ready for the history test

when we resume.”

* * *

Although the classrooms in the guild hall were modest, the building itself hosted rooms that only the finest of the Ten’s mansions could boast; it was to these that clients came with their requests, seeking the service of a domicis. Most had temporary needs, and often of an exceedingly dull and transitory nature; they wished to impress a certain group of the right people for a certain season.

Ellerson was a practical man; he understood that the guild prestige derived partly from the money that men and women such as that were prepared to spend for the sake of appearances, and he treated them with courtesy and deference. But it was not in his nature to accept their offers.

Truthfully, it was not in his nature to accept any; he was of an age where he felt his service was suspect, and he had taken a well-deserved retirement after the lingering death of his last master.

All of which should have been beside the point, and none of which usually was. When he was summoned at all, he was offered a task by the guildmaster, and one refused the guildmaster only rarely. Always at some risk.

He found the door ajar. Waited a moment to see just how formal Akalia was being. But no attendant peered out; no one waited to greet him in the stuffy uniforms that younger journeymen were forced to endure when Akalia was entertaining clients of money and power.

Ellerson grabbed the door’s authoritative handle and pulled it open.

“Ah, Ellerson. We were waiting for you. Please, come in.” Akalia frowned slightly, pursing her well-weathered lips. Ellerson noted the expression, but he was frowning as well.

There was a man sitting in the armchair in front of Akalia’s ancient desk. The desk itself was spotless—hardly its usual state—and there was a decanter and three cut crystal glasses which were reserved only for the finest of the patriciate.

Or at least those who considered themselves among the finest. Ellerson had met many, many such men and women in his life. He had also offended quite a few.

“Before you start,” Akalia said quietly, raising a palm in a gesture that was part command, part surrender, “let me say that I realize that you are a) retired and b) far too curmudgeonly to be asked to serve a member of the minor or major nobility even if you weren’t.”

The man in the chair raised a dark brow in an otherwise perfect face. It was too perfect by

half for Ellerson's liking; too haughty and too well-formed, unblemished by the heat of the sun or a day's honest labor. It was also completed by the finest clothing he had seen in perhaps five years—give or take a year for the Princess Royale—and a modest collection of rings which, thrown together, were the only quirky thing about the man. They were not fine, the rings, or rather, not all of them were; they were a mishmash of styles and materials that clashed rather than complemented.

"Ellerson," Akalia said, looking dowdy and unkempt by the unavoidable visual comparison to her visitor.

Ellerson stiffened; he couldn't help it. Instinct shored up his shoulders, his chin, the line of his nose. "How may I be of assistance?"

"You might start," she said, just slightly less stiffly, "by being less formal. This is not an interview, Ellerson. This man is not a prospective master." *And if he were, I'd never invite you to meet him without several days of coaxing and preparation first.* The unspoken sentence was several degrees louder than the spoken one, and followed by a brief, perfect frown. She was good at that; she, too, taught unruly boys.

"Ah." Ellerson relaxed. Slightly. "Your pardon. Akalia knows I'm retired, but occasionally seems to forget. I am Ellerson of the guild. Whom do I have the privilege of addressing?"

The man rose. "Avandar," he replied. "Avandar Gallais." He did not bow; nor did he extend a hand. But there was a warming of expression that might not be missed if one were paying careful attention.

Ellerson waited; the time passed. At last, Akalia cleared her throat. "Avandar Gallais," she said quietly, speaking to Ellerson, although the older man hadn't taken his eyes off the visitor, "has come to...join the guild."

"Impossible," Ellerson said flatly.

"Impossible?" the visitor said, raising a dark brow. "I have failed at very little that I have attempted in my life, in spite of opposition."

"You see what I mean, Akalia?"

"Ellerson—"

"And I have offered, of course, to pay for the privilege of being taught the...guild's vocation. Service, I believe."

"Akalia."

“Your guildmaster seemed to think that my money was good, and my intent not obviously damaging.”

“*Akalia*, may I speak with you in private?”

”No,” Avandar Gallais replied, “I do not believe it would be suitable. I am...unused to having my future discussed when I am not present to mount my own defense.”

Ellerson said, coldly, “I-was-not-speaking-to-you. Should you, for reasons that completely escape me—and should any sane teaching member of this guild—find your petition acceptable, you will have to endure far worse than merely being discussed when you are not, as you put it, able to mount your own defense. Do I make myself clear?”

The air literally crackled.

Akalia’s face dropped into her hands.

Ellerson’s face froze into rigid, unpleasant lines. “If that is supposed to impress me,” he said, “it fails. You are certainly not the only mage domicis—or would-be one—to cross this threshold. Certainly the most arrogant, and the least suitable, but not the only, and not the first. Now if you are at all serious, I have two words of advice for you: Get out.”

To his surprise—and judging from her apprehensive expression, Akalia’s—Avandar Gallais did just that. Slowly, to be sure, and with the icy stillness that spoke of barely-checked anger. But he went.

* * *

“Why?”

As the guest absented himself, Akalia relaxed. “Why what?”

“Why do you want to accept him? There is no possible way that service is any part of that man’s calling. Forcing others to service—and quite probably unpleasantly—yes. But serving? Taking a master and making that life the only life? Akalia, not even you can believe this.”

“No,” she said softly. “I don’t.” She rose, then, and went to the windows nested between ancient, very fine shelves.

“He reeks of power. It clings to him in every possible way. Had he come to request the services of a guild member, there are three I would immediately suggest. I would also inform the three, should they choose to apply, that I would consider their chances of surviving their service to be vanishingly small.”

Akalia nodded absently.

“Akalia, I find your lack of response distressing.”

“I concur,” she said, again quietly.

“We have enough trouble finding acceptable students among the desperate rabble that come seeking some skill for employment. Would you put a man of this nature in this classroom?”

“No.”

“Then?”

She turned to face him, eyes hard. “I would pull you from your classroom Ellerson, and I would put him entirely in your care.”

“If he’s going to learn *in* the guild, he’ll follow the guild procedures. Is that clear? The students have to be house broken; I don’t care how old they think they are. Akalia—” Ellerson stopped. “It’s not just the money.”

“No.”

“And it’s not his status. You don’t recognize his name either.”

“No.”

“Then what? If you’re going to saddle me with this task—a task, mind, that I think will be impossible to successfully complete—I will at least be offered the courtesy of truth.”

“I had a dream, Ellerson,” she whispered. “I had a dream, three times.”

He lifted a hand to his face. “Gods,” he muttered. “You’re going to make the next four years of my life miserable for the sake of superstition.”

“Yes.”

He didn’t bother to ask her what she would do if he refused. “Very well. Avandar, you may return,” he said, quietly and dryly, to the empty air.

Avandar Gallais stepped into the room.

“And if I catch you doing that again, I’ll throw you out of the guild myself. I am your teacher, and if you are here to learn, you *will* learn. If it kills us both.”

Avandar raised a brow. “It won’t,” he said at last.

Unfortunately, Ellerson could hear the unspoken part of Avandar’s sentence as easily as he could Akalia’s.

* * *

Avandar attended classes. That was the first calamity.

At about the time the tabletop beneath his hands began to sizzle and blacken—causing an

offending young adolescent to think better of his comments about age and stupidity—Ellerson had already decided two things. First, that the classroom was not the suitable place for a man of Avandar’s abilities, and second, that Avandar was perhaps not as familiar with the laws of Averalaan as one grew used to assuming everyone was.

He excused Avandar, continued to teach the class, and when that was finished, dismissed the boys under his tutelage as if, indeed, he dealt with mages every day.

After that, he sought Avandar out.

The new students were given quarters within the guild halls, rooms with a bed, a window which varied in size depending upon whether or not the boy in question was expected to live on his own or in a grouping of such young creatures, and the usual shelves and desk that had endured for so long they were proof that carpenters really were forces unto themselves.

Avandar had been granted a privilege reserved for few first year students: A room of his own. And given the depth of the black singe marks on wood that seemed to have melted beneath his spread palms, Ellerson considered it wise. Certainly wiser than when Akalia had first suggested it.

He knocked.

Avandar opened the door.

“I suppose you know why I’m here.”

He stepped out of the way, letting Ellerson into the admittedly tiny space before closing the door upon them both. “Yes.”

“*You* are a man. *He* is a boy.”

“He is a lucky boy,” Avandar replied coldly. “In my youth I lost many...friends who learned the lesson he survived.”

“Mockery is not considered a capital offense.”

Silence.

Ellerson walked over to the pristine bed. “I’m old,” he said, by way of preamble, “And I refuse to have this conversation standing up.” He sat. Avandar did not; instead he walked moodily over to the window and turned half toward it. His profile was a shadow with elements of color; he looked neither in nor out. Significant, that.

“Why are you here?”

“To learn how to serve.”

It was not quite what Ellerson had expected to hear. “What do you think that means?”

Avandar turned toward him; his face was haloed by a sunlight harsh enough to shadow his features completely. Ellerson kept the smile off his face, wondering if Avandar had chosen his place by the window for just that purpose. *My eyes aren't what they used to be*, he thought; *but I don't need to see your face. I can hear enough of you in the words.*

“To suborn my will,” the shadow said. “To suborn my will to another's. To take orders with grace. To live in the shadow and glory of another man while taking credit for nothing.” Northern winters were warmer than his words. “To stand in shadow.”

“Avandar Gallais,” Ellerson said, his voice oddly gentle, “this is not the quest of a man of your nature, of your stature. I understand what you think you will learn from the guild. What I don't understand is why you want to learn it.”

“Why is not your concern.”

“Why is the only concern I will have for the next four years. Most boys come searching for money. The balance come because they're young and insecure and they'd rather attach themselves to greatness than take the risk of becoming great themselves. Some come because taking orders is easier than thinking of orders to give; some because they think the domicis are well paid house servants. Pedigreed. Expensive.

“In our first interviews, we attempt to discern the why; to place the boys where they are likely to have the most success in questioning their own motives. Not,” he added dryly, “that at this age there is much success in that.

“But you—you are a man who has attained his power.”

Ellerson straightened his shoulders. “You realize that we have no writ to protect you from accusations of rogue magery.”

“There are...mages among the domicis?”

Ellerson shrugged. “Being domicis does not convey immunity from the illegal use of magic.”

“This is not public property.”

“No. I see you have some inkling of the laws that you are breaking. Let me make it clear: There will be *no* unauthorized use of magic in these halls. Another such incident—even one—and you will find no teacher.”

Silk rustled as Avandar Gallais—if that was indeed his name—brought his arms up across

his chest.

“Why are you here?”

“I will not answer that.”

“Very well. Tomorrow we will avoid the classroom. I have errands to run on behalf of the guild; you will accompany me.”

“As...errand boy?”

“As that, yes. I do not find your method of dress appropriate for the station you are to assume. If you have difficulty choosing the correct clothing, you may come to my quarters after dinner.”

The man nodded.

Ellerson knew he'd burn in the Hells for eternity before asking for help.

* * *

Averalaaan was not a small city. It was not, in the estimation of most Imperial travelers, a city at all; it was a vast island of humanity, folding in and farther in upon itself, that harbored *everything* anyone might desire to see in a lifetime. Magery; money; the famed bardic College of Senniel; the Holy Isle upon which *Avantari* rose, circled by the three most important cathedrals in the land; Southern silk and Northern furs, exotic spices, gems, and the work of Makers.

The trees here were taller than all trees but those found in the deepings, where men seldom traveled, and if they were surrounded by cobbled stone and man-made stalls, by house and horse and cart and dog and donkey, they were no less grand for exposure.

Avandar Gallais did not condescend to notice them. Which meant either that he had visited the Common before—which Ellerson doubted—or that he refused to display the weakness of awe to anyone. It was interesting.

As they walked—more slowly than Avandar would have liked, judging from his slightly sour expression—Ellerson observed. Not Avandar, but rather the people who moved out of his way. Women stopped, or stared at him from under the shadow of umbrella or awning; some very few gawked, but not even the young were moved to act foolish. Men also moved; the elderly and the wise. Young boys pretended not to notice him.

There were men who smelled of power, and Avandar was one of them.

A domicis.

Ellerson put a hand up to his forehead to massage the wrinkles from it. They were

unbecoming.

In four years we hope to accomplish what with a young man? Civility, for one. A better understanding of the life of a domicis. A clear acceptance of the value of service, and of what service itself must mean.

This man did not need to learn civility; he understood it, and would practice it or not as flawlessly as he probably practiced his magic. Ellerson thought that a month would be long enough, and four years too short a time, to teach him what service *meant*.

He was lost in thought. As teacher, and not domicis, he took the luxury of such reflection. He would remind himself of this later.

But something caught his attention: the tone of Avandar Gallais' voice.

“And I tell you, ADarias, that you have approached the *wrong* man. Do I make myself clear?”

“You are not the mage who calls himself AGallais?”

“Have I not just said so?”

“Three times.” A man wearing House Darias colors drew himself up to his full height. “Three times. I seldom give a man a chance to lie to my face three times. But I am in...a tolerant mood.” He lifted an arm, this House crested man.

Something was wrong with the gesture. It was innately foreign. But the Houses were not constrained in who they chose as members; the Ten did not birth their family; they adopted it, choosing merit instead of bloodline to carry the name. At least that was the theory.

Four men stepped out of the crowd. They, too, wore Darias crests, but again, the crests were odd. More significant—much more significant—were the swords they unsheathed.

Ellerson cursed.

The Common was crowded. Too crowded for a fight of this nature. He himself had barely mastered the use of a sword—if master was a word that applied to his ability to lift a blade without losing fingers or toes to it—and he carried no weapon.

But he thought they might brazen or at least speak their way out of the difficulty until he saw the expression on Avandar's face.

A cool, an icy, smile. A gesture of welcome, almost of relief.

“I will tell you again, ADarias, that you are making a mistake. You are seeking a man. I am not that man. Let us say that in theory you are incapable of making such an irresponsible

mistake. Let us say, as your ego decides, that I am, for whatever reasons of my own, lying to you.

“If I were the man you were seeking, and I refused your request—a request which you have not made and which I have not heard—what do you think the wisest course of action would be?”

Ellerson couldn't see the ADarias' face, but he could hear, in the reply, the same chilly pleasure, the same recognition, that marred Avandar's features.

“This, of course.” He lifted his arms again, and this time there was no mistaking the utter wrongness of the gesture. Ellerson was a man who had learned over time to trust his instincts. He moved. “While I admit a certain surprise at your foolish reluctance, there really is only one course of action, Warlord. We couldn't leave you alive to join our enemies.”

Magic.

Fire.

Death.

* * *

The battlefield was alive with magic. The winds carried it. The fires burned with it. The swords—drawn under a sun not quite bloodied by its fall—reflected its light, glowing and burning where they struck. All around him, in the fresh air of a bloody spring dusk, the dying screamed, their words an accusation, a cacophony of voices that he could not recognize, they'd been twisted so badly by pain and fear.

The trees cast long shadows where they still stood; many of their thick, ancient trunks had been splintered by the movement of earth, sudden and sharp, beneath their great roots. He felt it coming, a distinct, a distant, surge of power beneath his feet. Bodies flew to either side, a press of momentary flesh, stilled where it fell—or swallowed by turning earth.

He smiled. Sometimes he chose to play games with his enemies. Sometimes he pretended to give them the advantage; sometimes he let them see fear where none existed. They were fools; they believed in their own power although they had heard—they had all heard—of *his*.

But today, he felt no such desire. Enough of toying. He had come to the city to cleanse himself of war, and the war had come—as it always came—to him. This time, it wore the guise of an old, old foe, and an older ally: Demon. *Kialli* and its kin; one greater, four lesser. Had he so chosen, he could have seen them from miles away, and, in truth, had he suspected their presence so strongly, he would have called the power forth instead of letting it slumber so uneasily.

But it woke; it always woke. That was his curse and his gift.

“Impressive,” the *kialli* said.

“Indeed,” Avandar replied, cool now. He lifted his hands, palms up. No one would have mistaken the gesture for a surrender. His fingers snapped down, making fists of his hands. The four lesser demons snapped just as easily, spraying blood—then nothing at all—into the crackling air.

The *kialli* lord drew his blood-red sword; its flames were dull in the harsh light Avandar’s magic cast.

“I tell you now,” the would-be servant said coolly, “that I have no battle with you. I am here for my own purposes, and until you cross them you are of no interest whatever to me.

“It is the last chance I will give you; you are insignificant otherwise. But choose, and choose quickly.”

The *kialli* were creatures of power and arrogance; there really was very little choice to be made. They closed, warrior-mage and demon, and where they touched they could not be seen for the crackle and glow of brilliant light. The earth thundered beneath them, the winds howled, the air snapped with lightning.

And when it was over, when the maelstrom had cleared, Avandar Gallais stepped out of the floating dust and the shattered ruin of the Common ground. He was not unblooded; he granted the *kialli* some respect for that. But he was, as always, undefeated. As always.

He had come down from the mountains too early.

He had known it when he left them, driven North by the ghosts of the dead and three dark dreams. But the dead had become tricky over the passage of centuries; they waited until the battlefield loomed around him then snuck out of the shadows and debris, finding bodies, lingering in the whimpering screams of the dying.

He found the boy that way.

Found him bleeding to death, his chest a puckered, blackening wound that would not hold until a healer could be found. Young boy, not more than four years old, and beside him, arms broken on impact, his mother or grandmother. Hard to tell; the magic had scarred her face completely. The boy was not wild with pain, nor yet with fear, but he was wild with the desolation of abandonment, and no magic that Avandar Gallais possessed—or had ever possessed—would bring back the dead.

He should not have touched the child; that was his first mistake. But his body had given in to the glory of the fight and the satisfaction of the kill; it was satiated now, and other things had room to play.

He knelt by the boy. Reached out for him, his long sleeves sticky with blood that had not been shed in decades. *This* blood, his own, he was not used to seeing. But the boy's blood—the blood of others, had become his life. *Was* his life.

In the foreign, Weston tongue, the boy cried out for his mother. Avandar Gallais spoke a few words, a few comforting words of enchantment, and then, after a second's pause, snapped the child's neck cleanly.

He had done it countless times before, but he had always had time to recover; had given himself that much. The ghosts were so strong in these streets. Almost without thought, he held the child's corpse to his chest, tucking the lolling head beneath his chin.

There, in the dimming day, Avandar Gallais began to weep.

And it was weeping that Ellerson of the guild of the domicis found him.

* * *

They did not speak.

Ellerson, because he could think of nothing at all to say at the sight of a child in the broken city streets, and Avandar for his own reasons.

The magi were summoned. The magi arrived.

The witnesses—the few that had somehow stayed near the scene and survived it—were unclear about what had happened. They had seen men wearing the awkward crest of Darias, they had seen another man, taller and prouder of bearing, and they had seen the earth break, the sky rain fire, the trees snap like kindling on a hot, dry day. Not that the port city had many of those.

Ellerson's duty was to the guild, and not to the magi; to the guild, and not the magisterial guards. He did not speak, except once, and that was to say that in his considered opinion as a longtime member of the domicis guild, the House Colors that the five men wore were so sloppily put together they were obviously forgeries. That much was true.

Avandar said nothing. He rose as a witness, spoke as a witness, lied as a witness. The magi who had come to question him took his name and his occupation—apprentice guildsman—with some surprise, but the surprise was clearly not one of recognition.

“Come along, Avandar,” Ellerson said, when the magisterial guards were finished

questioning him. "It is time, I think, to go home."

Avandar looked up, beyond the fringe of Ellerson's remaining hair; looked South. He staggered to his feet, looking once over his shoulder at the unknown child the magisterial guards were bearing away on a simple cot.

"No," Ellerson said softly, "not South. To the guild, apprentice." He was gentle. He had not thought to be gentle with this man. "We go to the guild. Come. Follow me." Even in gentleness, he could not bring himself to touch his student.

Avandar pulled himself up to his full height, as if stung by the softness of Ellerson's tone. He followed.

* * *

Every life you take will become yours, Warlord. Its power, although not its knowledge, will be your strength.

And what price? What price will I pay for this gift? I am a man, and I will not give up my life to night or darkness in order to prolong it. I will not feed like an animal upon my own kind; I will not play kialli games or dance Arianni dances.

Do you think you do not prey upon your kind even now? No, do not answer. You are wiser than I thought you would be—an interesting sign. I cannot confer eternal night; I cannot change your essential nature. If you fear either from me, be easy. That is not my intent.

What is your intent?

To give you immortality, Warlord. War is an interest of mine, and you will keep it alive.

* * *

He woke to a darkened room. His arms ached. His chest hurt. The stench of the dead was in his nostrils, and to breathe he must rise, must seek the open air. The bed he left behind; his step to the window was almost, but not quite, flight. He threw the latches off, pushed the window up, sought the open air. The dream was thick and heavy and he had seen it often enough that he knew what would follow.

He would stand, at the foot of a god, waiting.

The mists of the halfworld where god and man might meet, if not as equals, then not quite as slave and master, would be thick with a life of their own, sensuous and disturbing. They had never seemed so immediate before; it was almost as if his answer would make him part of them, part of their dominion. His first intimation of immortality.

That part of the dream he could face. But what followed was harder.

He was almost grateful for the knock at the door.

“Come,” he said, knowing that Ellerson would bring light with him; knowing that he would stop at the threshold a moment before stepping across and closing the door behind him. Knowing that he would come alone.

“Avandar.”

“I...often have trouble sleeping.”

“I rarely do.”

“That does not surprise me.” He lifted a hand to touch the peak of the window frame. “It was perhaps...to attain such easy sleep that I came to you.” He turned; the light that Ellerson carried was a muted, simple lamp.

“My turn to stand behind the light, and you in it, is that it?” the domicis asked quietly.

“Even so.”

“Tell me.”

“There is not much to tell.”

“You killed that child.”

He turned away again. “I have seen enough of the dying, old man. That child was already dead. I spared him a few minutes of isolation, fear, pain. You would have done the same had he been a dog.”

“Yes. Had he been a dog.” The night was harsh. “You killed the five men.”

“They would have killed me.”

“True enough. But your battle killed some thirty people, at best count.”

“So few?” The windows were airless. “I have killed thousands, in my time.”

“In *your* time,” Ellerson replied. “Not on *mine*.” He set the lamp down. “Tell me why you’ve come, Avandar Gallais, and I will do what I can to help you. Refuse, and I will likewise refuse. This was a game, to me, and I repent of it; it is now clear that I have accepted a task whose failure will be too costly. I can step back, or I can go forward.

“I am prepared to wash my hands and step back.”

Avandar Gallais stepped into the darkness and stared a long time at the older—at the younger—man’s face. “You are not what I expected, Ellerson of the domicis. I will tell you what I may tell you. If it is enough, it is enough.”

Ellerson stood quietly, seeking to take no comfort by seating himself. He was, in his way, like the mountains that Avandar Gallais called home.

* * *

He spoke first of his dream. He had thought to be interrupted, but Ellerson did not offer him that comfort, except to say, almost dryly, “you accepted, of course.”

“I was a younger man,” Avandar replied, as if that were answer enough. In a way, it was. “Younger,” he said, “and less sure of my power.” His hands, shadowed, were still visible in the night of small room and single window. “I am sure, now, of nothing but power.”

“You aren’t a god.”

“No. But if I killed no other men in my life, I would live as long as one. As far as I’ve been able to determine, the length of life is year for year: One potential year of their life for one actual year of my own.

“I said I did not wish to feed upon my own, but I have, and if I do not hunger for their lives, I hunger for the thing that takes it most: war. Dominion.” His hands dropped. “I had an Empire, of a sort, when I chose to accept the god’s offer.

“And an Empress, a woman of beauty and power in her own right, a partner of consequence.” This, then, was the second part of the dream, the part that defined his existence, that made him understand the mercy of gods. “She was fair, Ellerson, as your Northern snows; the sun could not bite her. Her hair was dark, the blue-black of night, and her eyes were dark as well; nothing cold at all about them. She was as tall as I, harder and more determined, and she had turned her talent and her energy to the study of magery so that she might be my equal.” He laughed bitterly. “My equal. I indulged her shamelessly. She was the jewel in the crown; the crown itself.” He looked into the dim light, the old man’s stiff face. “I tell you this because I am a fool, and I am too new from loss. I will kill you if I hear it spoken of, because it will have to have come from you.”

“If I choose to accept you, Avandar, what you say will be as close to sacred as words can be.”

Truth, there. “And if not?”

“If not, I will take your words as a confidence between a lord and the man who has chosen, for this single night, to serve him as only one of the domicis can.”

That surprised him. He was silent a long while, unsure of whether or not the silence was due

to his wife or this strange man. “She was the first kill,” he said at last.

Ellerson said nothing.

“She knew what I had done. I do not know how, but I assume the god’s servants told her. Did I tell you that she was like the fires themselves? Hot, scorching, blistering—sudden in her anger and her fury, sudden in her love. She felt betrayed; she felt abandoned to mortality by me, by the only man she had chosen to love.

“She came to me in fury, and she—who had honed her talent at my side and knew better than any what my weaknesses were, attempted to destroy me. I tried to speak to her. To speak with her—she was beyond reason. A day, two days, and we might have spoken and had peace of one sort or another, but there was no peace offered.

“I did not intend to kill her.”

“But you did.”

“Worse, Ellerson. When she died, I felt it. The life that left her, the magery that had been her pride—and mine—came to me as if they were swords and I was the only sheath they had ever known. I had doubled my life span, and my power, in a single blow.

“But she was not just any woman. She was of an old, old line, and had in her the blood of the firstborn. It was not above her to place a curse upon the gift that had been given me. *You have chosen victory over love, she said, and this is what it will buy you; eternity. You will come to curse it, for you will hold nothing that you value until the day you choose another man’s cause over your own. As you have conquered, so must you serve.*”

He did not kneel; did not sit. But the stiffness left him. The nightmare of death, her slack blistered face, the shock and the anger melting into hurt and denial. Nights that he could not leave the dream quickly enough he still woke screaming at the feel of her life bleeding into his. He had tried so hard to stop it.

But his pride was part of his power; he could not scream in front of this old man. He spoke instead, quickly to cover the pain, to pass over it, “She was the first of six wives who attempted to take my life. It...makes a man cynical about love and the fair sex.”

“Did you kill them all?”

“No. Not after her. But I didn’t love them either; not that way. In the case of my wives—or my children—I let executioners deal with their deaths. I could not quite bring myself to claim them.”

“Your children?”

“Sons, mostly. They tired of a father’s Imperial grip, and as my life would extend infinitely beyond theirs, they saw no better way to free themselves. I will admit that I had some sympathy for them; they were young men much like I had once been.

“I built Empires, and after a while, I left them. To my sons, to their sons. Once in a while to my daughters. But it pales, as time passes. We live—we who are mortal—in a world of ‘ifs.’ Imagine, Ellerson, that you have finally lived the perfect life.

“I chose to absent myself from war for a time—albeit a short time—and to find a woman who might be wife not to the Warlord, but to a soldier, a common man who had cunning and strength to recommend him. It was not a guise that suited me well, but I wore it. And I found such a woman, and I lived with her. I joined the army of the man who ruled the city in which we lived; it was long ago.

“War came.” He fell silent for a long moment. “She was lost to the war; my son was lost to it. I remained. I conquered. I made my enemies pay, and with every life I took, the time of my return to her—to any of the people I loved—grew more distant.

“Was I a good man? What does the word mean? I have never understood it, and I understand it less and less with time. In my youth I did things that I could not speak to you of; I am not proud of them now, but I do not judge them, and those injured are so long dead it is hard to believe that any other judge exists. But I am not what I was.

“It is tiring, to watch every person you love wither and die. Whether they die attempting to take your life, or die because you have chosen to join battle—and I have chosen many battles, and I have held many of my children as they lay insensate with pain, unaware of me, of my presence—they die and I remain. I am *tired*, Ellerson. I have come this way to fulfill her curse and have peace.

“I tried. I tried it on my own. I lived what I thought was a life of service. Three lives. It was not, apparently, enough. And it came to me that I did not understand service; that I could not understand the conditions of her curse enough to be free of it. I had heard of this...unusual guild long before you were born, and I had thought to recover from my last life and come to you here for instruction.”

“You’ve come here to learn enough to die?”

Avandar smiled softly. “Not the way I would have worded it, had you offered me the choice,

but yes, I believe that is what I said.”

“You realize,” Ellerson said quietly, “that the magi would kill for the opportunity to speak with you. That the historians would stand in line, beg and plead for years on end, for a chance to listen to what you might say.”

“I would speak to them in tongues that have long since died,” Avandar replied, “if I spoke at all. There is some history that is better left buried; I would bury my own if I could. Will you aid me?”

Ellerson was quiet. “I cannot answer you tonight, except to say this: I may not be able to give you the peace you desire, but if it is in my power, I will point you in the right direction.”

* * *

Pride.

Pride was the root of all great falls, in both story and religious text. In that ground where old religions faltered and fell into the realms only children now knew, it was a sin so often warned against that the children themselves had lost the sense of its grandeur and its greatness; in their language it was a crime much like theft.

But Ellerson was no longer contained by childhood. He stood in the darkened classroom, framed by door, the lamp’s oil burning dangerously low. After a moment, he walked through the door to the room that was his preserve, his territory, his hallowed ground. He paused in front of a desk that still held the scorched and blackened marks of two palms.

Closing his eyes a moment, he listened to the tenor of Avandar Gallais’ voice. How could a man such as he learn the value of service when in truth he had never done anything but rule? Even in this, his desire was his own, a thing apart from a master or mistress.

And what had Akalia seen in the Three Dreams, that had driven her to accept what was plainly otherwise unacceptable?

I am too old for this, he thought, and set the lamp in the cradle of burned wood.

He knew what he would do, of course, because he could still hear the man’s voice breaking and breaking again, like water against the seawall, the new corpse of a child held against chin and chest.

* * *

“Service in the guild is not the service offered by a servant, or a guard, or even a Southern oathguard. The Chosen of Terafin, who lay down their lives, and make of their lives their duty,

are not—could not be—domicis. Do you understand this?”

“No.”

The one good thing about Avandar: He was honest to a fault. Ellerson could understand how a man of his nature had somehow stood still for long enough to learn the art of magery. His focus was astonishing.

“To be willing to die for a cause is *not* what the heart of service is about. Young men scattered across the globe throw their lives away—uselessly and usefully—on a daily basis. They neither know, nor understand, the heart of service; they offer themselves, and they are accepted.” Here, the sun cast a shadow. It had taken Ellerson the better part of two weeks before he was willing to appear in public with Avandar Gallais again.

But the days were long and lovely and he found this student so oppressive he almost had to get up and walk around to escape the sensation of being caged with a hungry beast. Avandar himself did not seem to mind the interruption, although he did not appear to understand it.

“First,” Ellerson said, as they walked by the seawall, a place where few people ventured, “there is the matter of inclination. *I* am not a man interested in serving power.”

“And yet you are with me.”

“I will teach you, but teaching has different constraints. I would never serve a man of your nature.”

“Why?”

“You are a man of power, Avandar, and service to power is its own responsibility. I am not willing to become what I would have to become to be useful to you.”

“And what have you served, then?”

“This is not about me, and the question is therefore impertinent—but I will answer it. I have served merchants in my time, in particular three who sought to achieve some status within the patriciate. They were not well-bred, but they were cunning and they were decent enough.”

“And you taught them manners, one presumes?”

“That and more, although they did not hire me to teach them.” He shrugged. “I cannot speak of them further; it is part of the code. But I have been hired on contract, I have fulfilled my contract and I have returned to the guild.”

“I do not understand.”

“No, I suppose you don’t. There are two ways to offer service. The first is for a term: a year

is usually the shortest, and five the longest. The second is for the life of the master—or mistress—who requests a *domicis*. These are always people of power.” He looked down at the sea, which was oddly still beneath their feet.

“Why do you make the distinction?”

“A *domicis* must protect his master and mistress, and that protection takes many forms. He must be aware of their needs, sensitive to them, and able to respond by either presence or absence, without the need for formal spoken word. He must understand what they desire when they themselves *do not understand it*, and this is one of the most difficult things a *domicis* learns to do.

“It is part of our art, to understand people.” He turned to look at Avandar Gallais. “You were called Warlord; you understand people in a fashion, but I would say given your long years of experience, that you actually understand less than the students who remain with the guild after the first three years of their lessons.”

It did not surprise him when Avandar Gallais bristled. He wondered, almost idly, if the man would melt the stone beneath his hands.

The stone did not melt. After an uneasy moment, Avandar Gallais spoke again. “Pretend for the moment that I am such a student. That I have been judged ready and worthy. To whom would you...display me?”

He will never be ready for this. “A person of power, Avandar. A man or a woman who has need of the talent you display—a man or woman who can take the flow of your power and bend it to their life without being so bent by it they lose *that* life.”

“In other words,” the mage said, showing a humor that always surprised Ellerson, “no one.”

* * *

The days grew longer; grew shorter; grew longer again. There were no more mages, no more attacks; the streets had become so safe that Ellerson—had he been a different man—might have forgotten what he had witnessed in the Common.

But two things happened to change that.

The first was a visit from an old student. An old student who had, as many did, sought service to a woman of power, and who had been found acceptable by the Terafin herself—the most powerful woman in the realm, after the Kings. He was curious; he was always curious when his students returned to him seeking advice or favor. Morretz was not a man who did

either.

“Morretz,” he said, as he took a seat. “Akalia says you have an unusual request?” He was suspicious of any unusual request Akalia placed before him, but he was not suspicious of Morretz.

“Very.”

“You know I’ve retired from all of this nonsense.”

“Of course.”

“Which is why you had Akalia call me in, no time for more than a quick change of clothing and a hasty gathering of personal items?”

“Not precisely.”

“Then tell me. Precisely.”

“The Terafin wishes to hire you, for a contracted period, not for life. You will have a wing of the House proper, and it will be your domain; you may choose your own servants, if those provided do not meet your approval, and you will, of course, be given a generous budget out of which to operate. You will be offered the sum of not less than two thousand crowns for a period which may be as short as two days and as long as two years.”

“Two *thousand* crowns? That is rather a lot. Am I to serve some nefarious criminal?”

“Ellerson, The Terafin might not be aware of your particular choices in masters, but I am—I assure you that we would not house a nefarious criminal under your care.”

“The patriciate is composed of them.”

“However,” Morretz continued, knowing him well, “we would certainly not shy away from asking you to serve a petty criminal.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“A girl. Possibly of age, but most likely fourteen or fifteen by her size and look.” Pause.

“She came off the street of the older holdings. With her den.”

* * *

“Akalia, *tell me*.”

Akalia looked *old*. She lifted her head and met his eyes with a fraction of her usual vigor. “That girl,” she said softly, “needs you.”

“More of your dreaming nonsense.”

“No, Ellerson; part of the original. I am tired of this, in a way even you would find difficult

to understand.” She rose. “But Avandar Gallais was sent to us for a reason.” She frowned. “Morretz saw him. He was not particularly pleased to renew the acquaintance.”

“He didn’t mention—”

“Don’t ask him. And don’t ask me.”

“I cannot possibly accept the care of this girl—although I admit my curiosity and my inclination are both piqued—while having the care of Avandar Gallais.”

“No.”

“And you would let me take service to the girl?”

“Yes.”

“Why, Akalia?”

“You must answer that for yourself. Will you do as I have asked?”

“He will not be pleased.”

“No, but he will accept it. I have already seen to that.”

* * *

Teaching was a type of service; Ellerson acknowledged this in one corner of his mind. One corner was all he had left for it. The Terafin manse—the manse upon the Holy Isle itself—was not to his liking, and setting it straight, with the required frosty tact, had taken concentration, energy, and speed.

But he was up to a task of that nature, and when his new master arrived, he was ready for her. Ready, and not ready, prepared and unprepared. She was as Morretz had said, a girl not quite fifteen by the look of her, but beneath the wild fringe of humidity-curling hair, and above the bruised circles that ringed them, her eyes were bright and sharp; free from the hard edge that the street often put there.

He bowed formally, and she stared at him as if he were a different form of life. He was. “I am Ellerson,” he said. He waited a moment, and then added, “I am the domicis.” Pride was such folly; it was clear that she had no idea of what the word meant. And he was heartily tired, at that moment, of attempting to explain it. When one of the unruly young men at her back called for food with manners that would have embarrassed soldiers on the field, he led the way. Time to teach them all that they needed to know later. For now, food, shelter, the hint of home.

What had this to do with Avandar?

Nothing. Ellerson was here as domicis, and it was almost a pleasure to let the responsibility

of Avandar recede. He had this one, this Jewel Markess, and she was a child in which he could see possibility.

* * *

A day later, a day, and he had the answer to a question he wished he had not asked.

A day, the girl with her den, her den in the silence of shock that magic often leaves in its wake, the word *demon* whispered but never spoken aloud. He sat with them in the darkness of an evening around, of all things, a kitchen table. And he knew, when they spoke, that what he had to offer them would not be enough.

But he watched this girl, this Jewel, speak. He watched her speak to the white-haired boy, Angel, the dark-haired boy, Carver—children who were not quite children. Watched her struggle with her own fear in order to calm theirs.

You are a leader, he thought, as a face framed by the lamplight he would come to understand she best loved sank toward the tabletop, *and you will be a person of power*.

* * *

The Henden that year was dark; the darkest month that Ellerson had ever known, and he had known many. He had not had word from Avandar Gallais in the three months leading up to it, and wondered, as he advised and guided the young Jewel Markess, if Avandar Gallais and the Guild of the Domicis were still together.

He was fond of the girl, but more than that, he could see that the power that she would take was fast coming, faster than he would have liked. *I have never served a man or woman of power*, he thought, *but you Jewel Markess, are the first one that I will regret walking away from*. Almost, he did not. He was fond of her, as he had never been fond of a master; her sharp temper and salty language aside, she was a mistress worthy of service, one not aiming for power, but destined for it nonetheless. And when she had it, would she even understand what it meant? Would she know how to protect it, how to nurture it, how to remain true to herself while wearing it?

Those things, he could teach her. But he had come to understand that he could not keep her alive in the deadly world of House Politics for long enough that she might learn.

This is why you sent me, Akalia, he thought. And returned in secret to the Domicis Guild. Akalia was waiting for him.

“Well?” she asked softly.

“Yes,” he replied.

“She is, I hear, a young girl.”

“Yes. Young for her station, old for her age.”

“Would you give her to Avandar?”

The old man laughed. “Not easily, no. But I would say that they will be evenly matched in their fashion. She is not a girl, Akalia, she is—”

The door swung open. Avandar Gallais strode into the room. It was expected, at least by Ellerson. “You have found me a master,” he said, with a terrible confidence.

“I told you,” Ellerson said, “Never to do that again.”

“And I might play at apologies, Ellerson, but I have waited many lifetimes. I do not wish to wait another. Come. You have found me a master, and she is a master of power; I will take what I am offered. Now.”

Ellerson and Akalia exchanged a single glance, and the glance spoke volumes. But the old man remembered how that imperious voice could break, and he saw the young woman who he thought might not survive the House itself without the aid of a powerful and completely trusted domicis; he rose.

Jewel was going to hate him. To hate them both.

“Very well, Avandar Gallais,” he said softly. “But I must warn you now to be careful; she is not what you expect, and she will judge you for the next decade by what you do when you first meet.”

* * *

When Avandar left the Domicis guild hall for what he hoped was the final time, he carried very little with him. But he carried history, and history was heavy.

The old man walked beside him almost stiffly.

“You are worried,” he said, because he understood Ellerson that well.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“This girl—she’s not what you expect.”

“I have seen many women, and many girls, in my time. You have already said that she is a master who requires *my* service. What else should I know?”

“You are not ready to serve, Avandar. I do this with misgivings, but I feel that—for reasons

I cannot explain, either to myself or to you—you will be of aid to each other in the years to follow.

“She is...young. She is not—” Ellerson fell silent. “Avandar, remember: first impressions.” He paused. “It is not our way to discuss our masters. I feel, however, that I should warn you—”

But the words were like gnats; he brushed them aside. The sea wind carried the tang, the taste of freedom. He walked quickly, and Ellerson walked slowly, and together, by dint of ruffled compromise, they reached the Terafin Manse at more or less the same time.

* * *

Avandar Gallais was shocked.

To see the girl—for she was a girl, no more—seated uncomfortably before Ellerson, her eyes half-filled with defiant tears, was perhaps the most disappointing event in his life. To hear Ellerson speak to her, as if she were somehow a weak child, was worse. But to know, to *know* that this was to be his fate—to serve *this*—was almost more than he could bear.

He would have left the room, but The Terafin’s domicis, Morretz, was present. They had met before; clashed before. The younger man had, of course, lost. He was an enemy, if one beneath notice, and Avandar did not show defeat or weakness in the face of an enemy. He stood his ground.

But he could not believe that this...urchin...was to be his *master*. He rebelled against it, until the power within him made more noise than the speech of the people around him.

No. Wait. Think. He took a breath. The power sometimes drove him, and *he* was its master, not the other way around. Ellerson had tried to tell him something about this girl; he had not listened. He listened now, trying to sort out the buzz of half-remembered words. Minutes passed before the right ones returned to him.

She has the sight. It had been centuries, longer, since he had encountered that power, but it had always intrigued him. Perhaps something could be salvaged from the ruin of his plan.

Turning to The Terafin, he said coldly, “This is the one?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

He let the power go; it jumped from the skin of his gently pointed fingertips in a fan of light and fire toward the girl.

Who was not there to greet it. He heard drawn sword; heard the crackle of Morretz’ magic,

saw the stiffening of The Terafin's fine features. And he smiled.

"That," The Terafin said icily, "was unnecessary."

"For you, yes," Avandar replied, turning to the only person in the room who would normally be worthy of his attention. "But it is not you who will devote your life to the services of this one."

She was close to refusing him that opportunity; he saw it clearly in the frost of her unchanged face. He was not used to explaining any of his actions. But he swallowed his pride. Turned to the girl who was even now lifting herself from the carpets beneath the large, expensive table that graced this library. "My apologies." He turned back to The Terafin, gauging her reaction.

Morretz spoke; he replied. It was an insignificant exchange; The Terafin's reaction was the only one that counted.

He was therefore extremely surprised when something struck his shoulder. Something sharp, hard, with enough of an edge to bruise, although not enough to draw blood. Eyes widening, he turned in the direction of the missile, his gaze sweeping groundward for just long enough to note that what had hit him was, in fact, a simple book.

She stood there, defiant, bristling, her cheeks flushed with anger and just a hint of triumph. He saw her age, and he saw beyond her age, and he thought: *No, I have been here before, and I will not do this.* For her eyes were dark and of fire, and he had thought her unworthy of notice until that moment. Now, he thought her beautiful.

It hurt him.

"It seems," The Terafin said, her voice as smooth and neutral as his would have been under similar circumstance, "that you are not the only one to test, Avandar."

"No," he said softly, seeing now some of what Ellerson must have seen in this young woman, this Jewel Markess ATerafin. "Just the only one to fail. Your pardon, little one." He was only slightly surprised when she bristled at the term of almost affection. "Terafin, I accept your contract. I will serve this one."

The Terafin raised a brow slightly, and then nodded. "Jewel, this is Avandar Gallais. He is of the Domicis and has come to fulfill the obligation that Ellerson felt he could not."

"W-what?"

"I am," Avandar said gravely, "your domicis."

“I won’t have him!”

The Terafin’s voice chilled several degrees. “You will. This interview is at an end.” She turned, sweeping out of the room, followed by Morretz and the Chosen who attended her always.

Jewel was left in her wake, flat-footed, deflated. He had seen that before. Knew that in her, it wouldn’t last long.

What am I doing? He almost turned and followed The Terafin out. Because he recognized in Jewel something that, in time, he might come to love. And he loathed the loving because it was the source of all grief, all loss, all damage.

She turned to him. Mutinous. Certain—as he was certain—that she had no choice but to follow her Lord’s dictate. “*You serve me*, is that clear?”

“Oh, absolutely,” he replied, speaking through slightly clenched teeth, as was his habit when someone attempted to give him an order. Something he would have to change; one of many things. He would try. That was all he could do.

Perhaps this would be the lifetime. Perhaps this would be his salvation. And perhaps it would be a waste of his time. He had time. He told himself that, staring down at her face. He had time. She, on the other hand, willful, defiant, foolish in the certainty age lent her, might not. He understood why power was needed; what he didn’t understand, given her outburst, was how Ellerson thought she would survive to attain any rank or stature. She stank of the sincerity that led most easily to death.

And that, perversely, was what he would like best in her.

“You will listen to me in emergencies; you will do as I say and you will allow me to protect you as I see fit.”

“Don’t even start,” she replied, her teeth on edge.

The magic came, rose at the tone of her arrogant little voice.

She snorted, as if she could see it, and see what lay beneath it. She probably could.

A guard came to lead her away, and she allowed it; they had their battles laid out before him in a gridwork that he could see more clearly than she.

He thought about his conversations with Ellerson; he could not see a clear path from them to this girl. But there was something here; he was almost afraid to touch it. Love? Perhaps. Or perhaps something more precious still.

* * *

That night, the mountains rose in the distance of dreams. He rose with them, taking to air as he seldom did in these latter centuries.

The woman who had sent him from the mountain paths met him halfway up, her robes a billowing darkness that might be mistaken for cloud if seen from below. “Avandar Gallais,” she said quietly.

“You have the advantage.”

“I will not always have it, and you have advantage enough. Forgive me if I wait before making my formal introduction. You have come farther than I thought you would.”

“Do you think,” he said, because it was a dream, and it was not a nightmare, and the ghosts were miraculously silent in the shadowed night, “that I will walk far enough?”

“Who can say? You are a warrior, and in service, you are *still* a warrior.” She bowed her head. “I have served my life under the geas of a god, and it is only to end the geas that I continue the service.”

“My god is a dead god.”

“Mine is not.”

“I see.” He turned away from her. “Do they stop screaming, the dead? Do they rest in peace, do they slumber? Do they...forgive?”

When he turned, she was gone; he was alone in the night air.

But her voice at the distance of dream’s edge, of waking, said, *You will have the opportunity to ask that question yourself.*

And for a moment, before the day broke, before life called him back to its endless demands, he felt a tremulous peace.

THE END

Short Stories by Michelle West and Michelle Sagara

The first six stories released are connected to the Essalieyan Universe of the novels I write for DAW as Michelle West. Since those are my most asked-for short stories, those are the stories I wanted to make available first. The rest of the stories will be released in chronological order from the date of their first appearance, which are listed in brackets beside the titles, along with the anthology in which they first appeared. All of the stories have new introductions (which will probably come through in the samples if you've already read the stories but want to read those.)

In the Essalieyan universe:

1. Echoes (2001, *Assassin Fantastic*)
 2. Huntbrother (2004, *Sirius, the Dog Star*)
 3. The Black Ospreys (2005, *Women of War*)
 4. The Weapon (2005, *Shadow of Evil*)
 5. **Warlord (1998, Battle Magic)**
 6. The Memory of Stone (2002, *30th Anniversary DAW Fantasy*)
- * * *
7. Birthnight (1992, *Christmas Bestiary*)
 8. Gifted (1992, *Aladdin, Master of the Lamp*)
 9. Shadow of a Change (1993, *Dinosaur Fantastic*)
 10. For Love of God (1993, *Alternate Warriors*)
 11. Hunger (1993, *Christmas Ghosts*)
 12. Four Attempts at a Letter (1994, *By Any Other Fame*)
 13. Winter (1994, *Deals with the Devil*)
 14. What She Won't Remember (1994, *Alternate Outlaws*)
 15. The Hidden Grove (1995, *Witch Fantastic*)
 16. Ghostwood (1995, *Enchanted Forests*)
 17. When a Child Cries (1996, *Phantoms of the Night*)
 18. The Sword in the Stone (1997, *Alternate Tyrants*)
 19. Choice* (1997, *Sword of Ice: Friends of Valdemar*)

20. Turn of the Card (1997, *Tarot Fantastic*)
21. The Law of Man (1997, *Elf Fantastic*)
22. Flight (1997, *Return of the Dinosaurs*)
23. The Vision of Men (1997, *The Fortune Teller*)
24. By the Work, One Knows (1997, *Zodiac Fantastic*)
25. Under the Skin (1997, *Elf Magic*)
26. The Dead that Sow (1997, *Wizard Fantastic*)
27. Kin (1998, *Olympus*)
28. Step on the Crack (1998, *Black Cats and Broken Mirrors*)
29. Diamonds (1998, *Alien Pets*)
30. Sunrise (1999, *A Dangerous Magic*)
31. Elegy (1999, *Moon Shots*)
32. Return of the King (1999, *Merlin*)
33. Work in Progress (1999, *Alien Abductions*)
34. Water Baby (1999, *Earth, Air, Fire and Water*)
35. Faces Made of Clay (2000, *Mardi Gras Madness*)
36. Sacrifice (2000, *Spell Fantastic*)
37. Shelter (2000, *Perchance to Dream*)
38. Pas de Deux (2000, *Guardian Angels*)
39. Déjà Vu (2001, *Single White Vampire Seeks Same*)
40. To Speak With Angels (2001, *Villains Victorious*)
41. Lady of the Lake (2001, *Out of Avalon*)
42. Truth (2001, *The Mutant Files*)
43. The Last Flight (2001, *Creature Fantastic*)
44. The Knight of the Hydan Athe (2002, *Knight Fantastic*)
45. Legacy (2002, *Familiars*)
46. The Nightingale (2002, *Once Upon a Galaxy*)
47. A Quiet Justice (2002, *Vengeance Fantastic*)
48. The Augustine Painters (2002, *Apprentice Fantastic*)
49. How to Kill an Immortal (2002, *The Bakka Anthology*)
50. Fat Girl (2002, *Oceans of the Mind VI, ezine*)

51. Winter Death* (2003, *The Sun in Glory: Friends of Valdemar*)
52. Diary (2003, *The Sorcerer's Academy*)
53. Dime Store Rings (2004, *The Magic Shop*)
54. To The Gods Their Due (2004, *Conqueror Fantastic*)
55. The Stolen Child (2004, *Faerie Tales*)
56. The Rose Garden (2004, *Little Red Riding Hood in the Big Bad City*)
57. The Colors of Augustine (2004, *Summoned to Destiny*)
58. Unicorn Hunt (2005, *Maiden, Mother Crone*)
59. The Snow Queen* (2005, *Magic Tails*; with Debbie Ohi)
60. Shahira (2006, *Children of Magic*)

*Set in Mercedes Lackey's Valdemar, as the anthology titles suggest

For more information—or just to say hello!—I can be found online at:

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