

THE WEAPON

by Michelle West

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[Four Corners Communication](#)

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The Hidden City

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*Forthcoming January 2012

**Forthcoming in 2013

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Introduction

I wrote this story for John Helfers, for his anthology, *In The Shadow of Evil*.

Interestingly enough, the cover painting for the anthology was the original concept sketch for the anthology *Summoned to Destiny*—a concept sketch based on my story in that anthology, *The Colors of Augustine*. The artwork was deemed too dark for *Summoned to Destiny*, which was supposed to be a YA anthology, and the artist actually asked me if he could use the painting for John Helfer's anthology. Which was very considerate of him, but entirely unnecessary.

Most of the novels that take place in Essalieyan also take place in Averalaan. Since the premise of the anthology was to write about a milieu in which evil had the prominent position, I thought I would write about Veralaan, the woman after whom the city was named. The first day or advent rites that occur on the first of Veral are a celebration of the choices she made in the very confined circumstances she was in. Those choices lead to the style of rule and governance that the Empire now enjoys.

The Weapon referred to in the title is Veralaan, herself. She is the Baron's only daughter, and because his rule is much contested, he leaves her in the Mother's cathedral on the Isle. His is a reign of terror and fear, and while the Mother's many priestesses and servants adhere to worship of the Mother, they've all felt his shadow, and they all bear the scars.

What would you do if you were given the daughter of the man who had murdered your family? How would you feel about her? Given the oaths sworn to The Mother, what would happen to that child within the cathedral?

The Weapon takes place during the period of the Blood Barons, as they were affectionately called. In *The Hidden City*, and actually in at least one of the *Sun Sword* novels, mention is made of the first day rites, and of the festival of The Ten. *The Weapon* is the story behind the first day rites.

The Weapon

I.

IN THE QUIET of isolation and a long-nursed pain, a woman knelt, praying to her god to give her a child. Because she was golden-eyed, she could be certain that her pleas were heard, for she was Daughter to the Mother—and because she was certain she was heard, she was also certain that Mother rejected her supplication. As a child, growing up in the certainty of knowing that the Mother *could* hear her, she had often pitied those who would live their lives in uncertainty. Time had eroded pity, or worse, begun to turn it inward.

The gift of god-born children was rare indeed in the small and fractious Baronies, for the Barons rooted them out without mercy, often destroying whole family lines in an attempt to destroy those who could willingly, inexplicably, consort with gods whose offspring might challenge their rule.

Only in the temple of the Mother, where healing was offered—and controlled—were such slaughters avoided. But even in these temples, the god-born were rare.

A miracle, denied those who lived in the shadow of the Baron's rule. After all, what parent willingly offered a babe to death?

Mother, she thought, rising. *Grant us your child. I am no longer young, and I must raise my successor. Grant us a child.*

But the Mother was silent.

* * *

The Mother's Daughter seldom summoned her Priests and Priestesses to this room, this hall. But when she did, she did so for a reason: blood did not cling easily to marble.

"Amalyn," the Mother's Daughter said, to the youngest of her attendants, "I want you to go to the Novitiates."

"But—"

"Now. The Novitiates will know, when the Baronial carriage empties into the Courtyard, which member of the family our visitor is. I *do not* want them to panic."

“But—”

“Amalyn. You are barely out of their ranks; they know you, and will trust your reassurances.”

“And if I have none to give?”

“Find them.”

Amalyn’s eyes closed. It was a type of surrender. She backed her way out of the nave, toward the door that led to the rooms that housed the novices who served the Mother. They were crowded now. Every person that the temple could save, they had—and proof of it could be found in the cramped quarters the Priests and the Novitiates shared.

“You wouldn’t be the only Daughter of the Mother that the Blood Baron has killed—”

“You *will not use that title*,” she said, her voice as cold and severe as any autocratic noble’s. “If it is my time, it is my time.”

“We can’t afford to lose you—” Her words died as Amalyn struggled not to say what they all knew: There was no other god-born child in the temple.

“Yes,” the Mother’s Daughter replied quietly. “We can. But we cannot afford to lose the cathedral; we cannot afford to have the name of the Mother silenced across the lands.” She hesitated and then added, in a more gentle voice, “We serve those who have no other hope. And because we have obeyed the rule of our Baron, Lord Halloran Breton, we are the only church that has not been destroyed or driven underground. Our responsibilities are to those who have no value to the Baron. And because we can heal, child, we have value.”

“Our oaths,” Amalyn whispered.

“Oh, yes. If the Baron kills any of those who serve the Mother at my command, I will close the healerie to his entire clan. But if that happens,” she added, with just a hint of fear, “you must be ready to flee; if we serve no purpose, we will become as the others.”

“But you could flee *now*—”

“Hush, child. The Baron sent word that he wished an audience; it is not his way to be so tactful when he desires a death. I am content to wait upon his command.” Amalyn left. Only when the door swung shut behind her did the oldest of the Priests bow.

“Iain,” the Mother’s Daughter said, granting permission to speak.

“Why has your agreement with the Baron never extended to your own life?” He said this with quiet respect—and managed to imply several decades’ worth of reproach in the almost

uninflected statement. He was good at that.

She shrugged. “It’s enough to protect those who serve.” And then she exhaled. “Not even the Baron can be offered affront without exacting a public price, and what better victim as balm to his pride than the Mother’s Daughter herself?”

“Let the temple stand,” she added softly.

No one was certain whether or not it was a prayer.

* * *

Baron Halloran Breton was, in these times, a man to be respected. Of the Barons, he alone had managed to subdue his neighbors, binding them in ways that she did not care to imagine to his cause. And his cause?

He had not yet named himself King. But even casual analysis of the geography of his campaigns made clear that he desired a kingdom; he was first among equals, if he held any man to be his equal.

He was not a handsome man. This much was a known fact. But he might have been, had the cast of his expression been less forbidding. He was tall, and he wore his height as if it were a mantle. Age had not lessened him; it had broadened his shoulders and crafted lines across his face that made clear he was a man of little humor.

He traveled with four guards.

It was one third of even the most minimal number that she had seen him use before, and this gave the Mother’s Daughter pause. But not so much pause that she did not bow. The Priests and Priestesses who served her chose the more expedient gesture of obeisance; it was certainly the one with which he was most familiar. They adorned the floor, the robes across their supine backs a spill of thick cloth. A cloth not so fine as his, and not so stained by travel.

“Is this hall secure?” he asked as she rose.

“We have not the soldiery you have at your disposal,” she replied quietly. “Nor the wizards. But inasmuch as it can be, Lord Breton, it is.”

His eyes were already roving the vaulted ceilings; torchlight flickered a moment across the dark of his eyes, reflected there. *Caught there*, she thought, *as if he had swallowed it in his youth*. She knew the Mother’s pity then, but was wise enough to hide it; his father, the previous—and very dead—Lord Breton, had been a famously cruel man.

And Lord Breton had decided, in the end, to abide by the life his father had chosen for him.

He had learned fear first, and when he had passed beyond it, he had never forgotten the price fear exacted. Fear was the tribute he desired; fear gave him a measure of power.

But no peace, no security.

He turned to the guards at his back; they were perfect in every way. Silent, grim, obedient, they responded to this slight gesture, and turned from the hall. He met her gaze, and his own flickered across the exposed backs of the most trusted of her servants.

She understood the command in his glance.

“Leave us,” she said quietly.

They rose, not as perfect in their discipline as the soldiers of the Baron. But they offered no argument. When they were gone, he turned to her. “Mother’s Daughter,” he said coldly. “I have granted you willingly what few Barons have chosen to grant even greater temples than yours. I have seen the worship of your goddess spread across my cities and my towns, and I have done little indeed to stop it, although I, as the rest of the Barons, have little use for the gods.”

She said nothing.

His smile was thin. “You are in the prime of your power. I have seen it before. I have also seen the decline of such power. Age, in the end, will leave you bereft; will you pass willingly from the halls that you rule?” Before she could answer, he lifted a hand. “They are words,” he said, “no more.” He stepped toward her, and she saw the mud leave the soles of his boots. “I do not understand you. I believe that you feel you understand me. And perhaps you do. I have let you spend your life upon my people in return for services that the mages cannot render me, and I am satisfied with our bargain. I have given you those who have chosen to break my edict; I have killed them, in your stead, so that your hands might remain bloodless. I have seen your servants,” he added, “and they do not all bear the blood of your Mother; there are those who would raise hand against killers; those who would rise up to the status of executioner.

“But you keep them contained, and they are protected while they serve in your name.”

“In the name of the Mother,” she said at last.

“Oh, indeed.” He paused; his hands slid behind his back and he stood there, staring at her, the harsh lines of his face tightening. “I am not certain that you will be a suitable guardian,” he said at last.

It was not what she expected to hear. It was, in fact, probably the last thing she expected to hear.

* * *

When he had first taken power over the corpse of his father—a phrase that was not exactly literal, as there wasn't *enough* left of his father to technically be called a corpse—he had come to the temple, bleeding, burned. Twenty years ago, and she remembered it still. She had been a simple novice, albeit golden-eyed.

The Mother's Daughter of that time had offered him the respect of obeisance in front of the congregation that had gathered—that still gathered, huddling now in their pews—before the Mother's altar.

Skin dark with ash and sweat that he had not bothered to remove, he had gazed at them all, hawk to their rabbit; she had watched, from the doors that led to the nave, thinking that he might destroy the service to demand the healing that was his by right of power. Thinking, if he were not granted it, that he might destroy more. He certainly looked, to her practiced eye, as if he were in need of healing.

But he had confounded that expectation. Into the spreading, uncertain silence, he had walked as if he owned the temple. "I am the Baron Breton," he said, and the exultation in his smile did not quite penetrate the quiet dignity of those words.

The Mother's Daughter bowed. She rose, but not quickly, and moved to stand by the altar, placing her palms against its surface.

"You have not flourished in the reign of my father, but you held your own. I respect that, Mother's Daughter. I desire your company; I will tour my city before the waning of the day." He paused for a moment, and then his gaze crested the bowed heads of the men, women, and children who were wise enough not to meet it. But Emily Dotal, golden-eyed novice, was not so wise, and she met those dark eyes beneath those singed, bleeding brows, and almost forgot to move.

"Who is the novice who attends you, Mother's Daughter?"

The Mother's Daughter said nothing; he had expected that, but his lips thinned.

No, she thought. Seeing him, understanding now that he desired a death to mark the beginning of his reign, to mark his prominence. She had stepped forward, ignoring the gaze of the Mother's Daughter to who she owed both service and obedience. The latter she forsook for the former.

"I am Novice Emily Dotal," she said, bowing. Bowing low. She might have knelt, but she

thought if she did she would never rise.

“You are golden-eyed,” he replied.

“I am the Mother’s.”

“Good. You are the first of your kind—with the exception of the Mother’s Daughter—that I have seen in the temple, and I have had occasion to visit during my youth. You will accompany us as well.”

“Novice.”

“Mother’s Daughter.”

“You will stay by my side, and you *will not* speak.”

“Mother’s Daughter.”

* * *

She had learned much, in traversing those streets.

The new Baron Breton had come to the temple with a small army. He led the men, the Mother’s Daughter by his side, through the streets, proclaiming his rule. He led them to the heart of the high city, and there, he set them free, for in the high city were the men who had gained great fortune in the service of his father.

There, she knew, his sole living brother resided. And he, too, was not without his men. She had read of war. It was something that was fought over distant plains, and distant patches of land. This sudden terrible knowledge: this was the Baron’s gift. To her.

It was a scar she bore still. The soldiers clashed, and this, at least, she could bear in silence. When the first volley of quarrels flew from the distance of buildings, when they pierced armor and men fell with grunts or screams, she flinched, and the Mother’s Daughter gripped her shoulder like a vise. But she could witness this, mute and still.

It was after. It was after the one army had been defeated, and the Baron’s brother beheaded, that the slaughter had started in earnest.

* * *

“Emily Dotal,” the Baron said quietly, calling her attention back from the bitter recess of memory although her eyes had not left his face. He was older, and he did not come injured and in triumph to these halls.

“Yes,” she replied, “that is what I was called.”

“But it is not, now, what you are. Mother’s Daughter, do you understand the gift I gave you

when first we met?”

She did not, could not, answer. She could still hear the screaming.

“I have spoken with the Witherall Seer.”

She kept her face schooled. It was difficult.

“And she has told me that my blood-line will rule these lands; they will fashion not a Kingdom, but an Empire, and it will stretch farther than even the lands the Barons now hold.” His smile was slight.

“Why have you come?” she asked, weary now.

“Ah, that. I am not the man I was when I took the Baronial throne. I have buried three wives,” he added quietly.

As it was widely rumored that his first wife had attempted to assassinate him, she expected no open show of sorrow.

“I am in negotiations with Baron Ederett, to the far South. If these are concluded successfully, you may receive an invitation to a wedding.”

Again, silence was the only response. It seemed, however, to be the incorrect response.

“My oldest son is much like my brother in his youth. My younger sons are canny.” He shrugged. “It is...surprisingly bitter, to see them arrayed against each other in such a fashion. They are attempting to become adult in the Baronial Court, and if they survive it—they have sacrificed pawns and slaves in their games—they will emerge stronger for their testing.

“But the Court at this time is no place for a child.” And he gestured.

The cloak that he wore fell away, its weave a weave invisible to the eye. When it was gone, a small child stood at his side. She was, to Emily’s eye, perhaps three years of age, pale and slender, her hair still blonde, eyes still blue, in the way of children. She did not speak. She did not touch her father.

“This—this is—”

“This,” he said turning to look down upon the child’s head “is Veralaan. She is, as your spies may have told you—”

“I play no games in your Court—”

“Not all spies are paid, Mother’s Daughter. Some come to you because they *feel* they are doing the *right* thing. They have hope of you, of your Order. They do not understand that you are content to sit, as dogs, if you are given the appropriate bone.” It was an insult.

She smiled anyway, and the smile was genuine. It annoyed the Baron.

“She is,” he continued, “my only daughter. The child of Alanna, my third wife.”

The child said nothing at all.

“Your wife—it is rumored that she died in childbirth.”

“Ah—that is the word I was looking for. Rumor. Yes, that was rumored.” A shadow crossed his face. It was a terrible thing, that shadow; it spoke of death, in every possible way. And had it been on another man’s face, she might have been moved to pity. As it was she struggled with self-loathing, because there was a part of her that enjoyed his pain.

“It was not, as rumors are often not, entirely true. But it is true now.” He put a hand on the top of the child’s head. His fist was mailed.

But gentle, she thought, and again she was surprised. “Go,” he told the girl. “This woman, she is your new mother. Her name is Emily, but everyone here will call her ‘Mother’s Daughter.’ You must learn to call her that as well.”

The child did not speak. But she was, as were any of his subjects, obedient. She crossed the marble floor, her stride small enough that the hall seemed truly grand. Truly empty.

“You are weak,” the Baron said to the Mother’s Daughter. “It is because of your weakness that I am uncertain of my choice. But it is also entirely because of your weakness that I feel that my child will be safe here. You do not understand politics, Mother’s Daughter, and you have been wise enough not to play.

“Therefore no one will tempt you, and I believe that even were the child my only heir, were the child a son and of use, you would still protect him with your life and the resources that I have chosen to leave at your disposal.

“Do not fail,” he added softly. He turned from the hall.

The child started forward. “Daddy!”

He hesitated. She thought he might turn back, but the hesitation was his only show of weakness—and at the risk of exposing even that, he had sent all of his men away.

She caught the child in her arms, and the child kicked and screamed, as children will who understand that they are being abandoned.

* * *

Iain was appalled. Amalyn was bitterly, bitterly angry. Norah was silent, and the silence was chilly. “Melanna?” Emily asked quietly. She held the child in her arms, for the child’s terrible

frenzy had, at last, given way to an unshakable sleep.

Melanna, wide, round, her cheek scarred from a different life, looked at the child's sleeping back. Her face was entirely composed; no hint of humor, of desire, of hatred, marred her expression. It made her, of the Priests, the most dangerous. Hard to deal well with things that one could not see.

"His men killed my son," she said at last. "When he was but two years older than this girl." What did not adorn her face informed her words.

"We have been ordered to protect her," the Mother's Daughter said carefully.

"We serve the Mother," was the perfectly reasonable reply.

The child stirred. Emily began to shift her weight from side to side, her arms around the child. The warm child. She, Mother's Daughter, would bear none. Had never thought—until this moment—that she might find solace in the act.

"We have no experience in raising children," Iain told them all. But his eyes were now upon Melanna. "The Mother has not seen fit to grace us—"

"No," Melanna said. "I will *not* do this." She turned from them and strode out of the small common room, her hands in tight fists.

Iain watched her go. "Mother's Daughter, is this wise?"

"Wise? No." Her arms tightened briefly. "It is not wise. But less wise is refusing the Baron's request. Inasmuch as he can be, he is fond of this child. I believe...he was fond of her mother."

Amalyn snorted, and Emily frowned. "She is but three years old. If she is her father's daughter, she is also her mother's. We cannot judge her. And she is no son; she is merely a daughter, and without value."

"He has shown himself to be without mercy when the children of others are involved."

She knew. She remembered. "And will we show ourselves to be, at last, a church made in his image? The Mother will turn her face from us, and without her blessing, without her power, what then can we offer the people?"

"Justice."

"We are not the followers of Justice," the Mother's Daughter said firmly. "Nor of Judgment."

"Melanna will not accept her."

"Melanna is the only woman here who has borne and raised children. She has served the

Mother for ten years. Perhaps this is her test.”

* * *

But she had not been truthful with her priests, and this was its own crime. She took the girl to her room and laid her in the small bed, staring at her perfect child’s features, at a face which would change, again and again, with the passage of time. Would she be beautiful? It was impossible to tell.

She had prayed for a child. But *not* this one.

What will we do with you, Veralaan? What will you become to us? She understood Melanna’s desire. She felt no like desire; death was not her dominion.

But she had in her hands a child born to power, a child born with the blood of Barons in her veins. It was true that the Mother’s Daughter had never become involved in the politics of court—why would she? Between one contender and the other, there was only the difference of competence; there was no difference of desire or ambition, no intent to change, merely to own. What matter, then, whose hand raised sword, lowered whip, signed law?

But here: here was temptation.

It was not only Melanna who was to be tested, but also Emily Dontal, the child who had become woman in the streets of the city, on the day that Lord Halloran had become Lord Breton, Baron of the Eastern Sea.

A child was unformed, uneducated. A clean slate.

And upon such a slate as this, *so much* could be written. She had not told her most trusted servants the words of the Witherall Seer.

Mother, she thought. *Guide me*. And she lowered her face into shaking hands, because it wasn’t a prayer for advice; it was a prayer for absolution.

* * *

The child would not eat for three days. She would drink milk and water, and Iain informed the Mother’s Daughter, with increasing anxiety, that he was certain she shed them both with the volume of her tears. Those tears had ceased to accompany loud wails, desperate flights toward the door; they became, instead, the silent companions of despair. She did not like the robed men and women who ruled the temple; she did not acknowledge the men and women who labored in the Novitiate. She was not allowed to sit when the congregation gathered, but Iain was certain she would take no comfort from the hundreds of strangers who made a brief home of the pews

either.

In the end, it was Melanna who took the girl in hand; she was not gentle. Not with the child, and not with the slightly anxious men and women who gathered around her, almost afraid to touch her unless she had finally exhausted herself and lay sleeping.

“You’d think the lot of you had never laid eyes on a child before!” It was custom to lower voices when exposed in the cloisters. Melanna often flouted custom when in the grip of disgust, and as she had come late to the Novitiate, she was often forgiven this flaw. “I can understand her, at least—she’s just been abandoned by her only living parent. The rest of you?”

“It’s not our custom—”

“And when the Mother grants us *her* child, what then? Will you leave all the cleanup to me?”

“Melanna—” Iain began again. He retreated just as quickly, his hands before his chest and palm out in the universal gesture of placation.

“You’re a man,” she snorted.

He had the grace to roll his eyes when she wasn’t looking, and she the grace to pretend she wasn’t actually looking. “Damn you all. I’ll take her.”

* * *

Daughter of the Mother, and not daughter of the god of Wisdom, Emily Dontal observed. It had taken two weeks, a mere two weeks, before Melanna intervened. Emily had intended to allow it, for she wanted Veralaan to feel isolated, and she could think of no better guardian than Melanna in that respect.

And for a while, it worked. But it was a short while.

* * *

She came upon Melanna in the smallest of the chambers used by the Novitiate for quiet contemplation and prayer. As Melanna was no longer a Novice, she was surprised to come upon her there, but not nearly as surprised as she was when Melanna looked up, and the dim lights of the brazier shone across her wide cheeks.

Even in the darkened shadows of the room it was clear that her eyes were reddened. She lifted shaking hands and made to rise, and the Mother’s Daughter gentled her by lifting her hands in denial.

“Why are you here, Melanna?”

Melanna said nothing.

The Mother's Daughter waited, and after a moment, she drew closer. Melanna was upon her knees; she had surrendered the advantage of height. Of more.

She said, "I wanted the Mother's guidance."

Emily nodded.

"The child—Veralaan—"

"I know it is difficult—"

"No, Mother's Daughter, you *don't*." Her voice broke. "My son was older," she added. "Older than Veralaan. I thought—" She lifted her hands to her face again, callused hands.

"If it is too difficult a task, Melanna—"

But the woman shook her head and rose. "I can manage her. She's just a child." Her tears had dried.

The Mother's Daughter watched her go.

* * *

But she came to understand, as the days passed, what the difficulty was. It was not in caring for the child of the man she most hated; it was the child herself. Although Veralaan was still quiet, sullen and easily frightened, she understood that Melanna had been appointed her caretaker, and she clung to Melanna whenever they were together. Melanna would extricate herself as she could, bending to free the folds of her robes from the three-year old's fingers.

But she would stop, spine curved, as the child spoke; no one else could hear what Veralaan said. Melanna would speak harshly in reply; harshly and loudly. The child would cringe. But she would not let go; once dislodged, she reached, again and again, for the comfort of this angry attachment.

* * *

When Melanna almost missed dinner for the first time—and it would have been a disaster, because the Priestess supervised the chaos that was the kitchen—Emily Dotal *knew*.

Melanna came late to the kitchen, Veralaan in the crook of her right arm. It was the first time that she would carry the child with her in her many headlong rushes from one place to another, but it was not the last. She tossed young Ebrick off his stool without ceremony, paused to criticize him for removing half the potato along with the peel, and then set Veralaan down in his place.

The child started to cry, but the tears were quiet.

“Veralaan,” Melanna said, shoving her hands through her hair, “*I don’t have a choice*. If I leave this lot to cook, we’ll be eating dirt and burned milk for the next three days!”

Veralaan nodded, folding her hands together; they were small and white. But she still cried.

“Hazel, what do you think you’re doing with that? The milk will just cake the bottom of the pot! Pay attention! Veralaan, we can go back upstairs when I’ve finished. I won’t forget the rest of the story. But I—EBRICK!”

Emily had never seen her quite like this, and watched in silence from the safety of the door.

Veralaan said something, and Melanna bent to catch the words. Her face froze a moment, and then she smiled, but it was a tight, tight smile.

“Yes,” she told the child, lowering her voice. “His mother finds him, and brings him home.”

Small hands were entwined in the fabric of the older woman’s robes before she’d even finished her sentence. “Veralaan, I’ve told you a thousand times not to do that. Not where people can see you. These are the Robes of the Mother; they’re to be treated with respect.” She was busy prying those robes from small fingers as she spoke; it was a losing battle.

In the end, she sighed and hefted the child again in her right arm, lodging the bulk of her weight against her hip. She turned and resumed the marshaling of her beleaguered forces, carrying Veralaan as if she were some sort of precious mascot.

* * *

“I don’t understand it, Iain,” the Mother’s Daughter said, over the same dinner.

“What don’t you understand?”

Had they not been quite so isolated, she would have guarded her tongue; she was the Mother’s Daughter, and inasmuch as she could be wise, she was expected to personify wisdom. Given that there was *already* a god that did just that, she thought it a tad unfair.

“Melanna.”

He was quiet for a moment, which was often a dubious sign. At last he put his knife down and pushed his plate an inch forward. “Emily,” he said quietly. Her name; a name he almost never used.

She met his gaze and held it. But he did not look away. Had she desired it, he would have. Or maybe not, she thought, as his expression continued to shift.

“Was that not your purpose in giving the child to Melanna to foster?”

“What purpose?”

“She will never have another child,” he said quietly. “The injuries she sustained made it certain.”

“I know. I was there.”

Grave, now, he said, “You have given her the only child—save perhaps one, if we are blessed—that she will ever be allowed to raise in peace.”

“I gave her,” Emily replied coolly, “the daughter of the man responsible for the slaughter of her family.”

“Yes, and so, too, did she see the child.”

“And she cared so little for her son that she could—”

“That is unworthy of you, Mother’s Daughter. Worse, it is a thought unworthy of the Mother.” Not since she had been in the Novitiate had he dared use that tone of voice on her. It brooked no argument, allowed for none; he was rigidly certain.

“I do not know what you intended. I do not wish to know. Leave me with the illusion of your mercy. Melanna will grow, from this. She will remember things that will hurt her, but once she is past the pain, she will remember things that will define her.”

“She will love this child.”

“In time, Emily, accept that we will *all* love her.”

“She is the daughter of—”

“She is a child. Whose child has yet to be determined; it is not in blood and birth that such decisions are made, but in the life itself.”

“Tain—” She held out a hand. It shook. “I have looked long and hard at this city, harder still at the Baron who rules it; I have evaluated, as I can, the foreign Barons who bark at the gates. They are of a kind, Baron Breton and the others; if he loses his war, there will be death and slaughter, before and after. I cannot see a way out of this darkness if not through her. If blood and birth matter little to the Mother, they matter to those whose power destroy our people, generation after generation.

“I saw her as a gift. As an opportunity—perhaps our only one. I thought to be a weapon-smith.”

He placed his hand across hers. “Have you spoken with the Mother?”

She shook her head. “I know my mother. I *know* what she’ll say.”

His frown was edged with humor. “There are other ways to fight,” he said at last.

“In stories,” she replied bitterly. “In song. But in song, the god-born walked freely among the villains, carrying the blood of their parents, and using the power it granted them. Where are their like now? We do not even have a god-born child of our own—” She choked back the words, the bitter fear. “I have seen those who would be heroes. They were not gentle men, and they were not kind, but had they succeeded, they might have been better rulers. If she is soft, if she is weak, what favor have we granted her? What good have we done ourselves? She will be killed by her own naivete. Had she stayed with her father, she would be capable. If we love her, will that not in the end make her a victim?”

“Let the definition of weakness be made by men like Baron Breton, and you have already lost; make of her a woman who can stand against him upon his own ground, and you will simply make another like him. Perhaps she will be beholden to you; perhaps she will kill you, as Baron Breton killed his father. I cannot say.”

“If we—”

“But if we have no hope, Emily...”

“Hope did not save Melanna’s child.”

“No,” he said quietly. He did not speak again during that meal.

* * *

Prayer afforded hope to those who gathered at the Mother’s altar; it afforded little to the Mother’s Daughter. But in the end, she *was* the Mother’s Daughter. She watched as Veralaan grew, claiming, as Iain had predicted, the love and affection of the Priests, the Priestesses, and the Novices. Melanna was her protector and her guardian, and each time the child was introduced to a newcomer, it was by the side of the ferocious Priestess, whose grim and loving demeanor made clear what would happen to those who judged her for her father’s crimes.

In a different world, this might have produced a different child. But in this one, not even Melanna—as she had learned so bitterly once—was capable of protecting a child completely.

* * *

When she was six years old, Iain began to teach her how to read, how to write, and how to comport herself as a young lady of wealth and power. The former, he had done in the Novitiate for years, but the latter? Not for a lifetime. Melanna hated it, of course. But Emily insisted on it.

“Why?” Melanna demanded.

“Because she *is* the Baron’s daughter.”

“Why Iain?”

“Because he is the *only* son of a noble family to grace these halls.”

“It’s no damn kindness to remind him of it. It just reminds him—”

“Of what he’s lost?”

Melanna fell silent. It was a mutinous silence.

“Melanna, if he is unable to teach her, he will tell me. Trust him.” She paused, and then added, “trust yourself. Trust Veralaan. To understand the odd customs and the graces of the patriciate is not to become what they are; if that were true, Iain would never have come to the Mother.

“He cares for Veralaan. Let him do this one thing for her; you have done almost everything else she requires.”

“I don’t see why she *requires* this!”

No, Emily thought, but did not argue further. *You don’t want to see it.*

* * *

Emily Dontal used the excuse of the temple’s care to keep her distance from Veralaan, but it was a distance that time eroded so slowly she couldn’t say when it broke at last, and she, too, was swept up in the joy—and fear—that came of caring too much for a child.

But she knew the exact moment she became aware of it, and she did not forget.

Iain had, uncharacteristically, bemoaned the lack of a “proper” staircase. The cathedral boasted stairs, but they were subtle, and meant to be traversed with silent dignity; he wanted something that would lead from the heights to the altar in full view of an audience.

And he was embarrassed by the desire.

“She’s graceful,” he said lamely, “for a child her age. But she has to practice the stairs,” he added, his voice wilting even more, if that were possible. “It’s the one time when all eyes will be upon her.”

“She’s seven, Iain. And at that, a quiet seven. I’m not sure she’d be happy if all eyes, as you say, were upon her. We found the funding for the harp that you requested. We found funding for the dress. But, Iain, the funding to add such a staircase is well beyond our means.”

He winced and lifted a hand. “I’m sorry, Emily. She reminds me of my youth, that’s all. I see so much potential in her—” He shook his head. She stared at him.

“There was a time,” he said softly, “a time in my life when I could see beauty and it wasn’t tainted. She *is* that time. I have learned to appreciate beauty in more subtle forms. I see it daily in the struggles of the Mother’s children. But this is different.

“And she’s the Baron’s daughter. She has to know how to make an entrance.”

“Iain—”

One of the Novices burst into the room, throwing the doors wide. “Mother’s Daughter!” she cried, all ceremony cast aside by panic. “Come quickly!”

“What has happened, Carin?”

“The Baron’s men are in the healerie!”

“What? Why?”

“Three of the injured. They want to take them.”

The Mother’s Daughter stiffened. “Iain.”

But he was perfectly composed now, and he followed where she led. The halls were long and narrow in her vision; the lights were dim. She had seen this many, many times. “Carin,” she said sharply, “who is in the healerie?”

“Edwin. Harald.” She hesitated and then added, “Rowan.”

Rowan was healerborn. Emily Dontal lifted her robes and ran toward the bend in the hall that would take her at last to the bitter scene she had supervised so often. But as she rounded the corner, Iain her shadow, she saw that the doors to the healerie had been left open, and in the frame of that door, she saw a broad, bent back that she could not help but recognize. Melanna.

She slowed; a collision and its subsequent lack of dignity would hold her in poor stead. Melanna did not seem to hear her; she had to touch the older woman to get her attention and when she did, she forgot why she wanted it; Melanna was so tense were it not for warmth she might have been a statue.

“Priestess,” the Mother’s Daughter said cloaking her voice with the weight and authority granted the god-born.

Melanna shifted slightly, providing barely enough space that one adult might slide past her. But her hands came up in fists, and as Emily stepped into the healerie, she saw that Melanna’s face was white, bleached white.

And she saw why in an instant.

Veralaan was standing in the healerie. She wore the deep, dark velvet that had been so

costly, and her hair had been gathered above the nape of her neck; were she not so short, she might have been years older.

Rowan was crouched beside one of her patients. The child. Why was so much that was bitter twisted around the lives of children? But the child was unconscious, and Emily thought it unlikely that he would wake before this was over. And it would be over. The Baron's men were not to be denied. It was the harshest of lessons that the novices learned, and it was repeated over and over again, the birth and death of hope.

Gathered just beyond the door at the other end of the healerie were the Baron's men. They wore the surcoat of Breton, and carried the swords forbidden to any other citizen of the city. They had lifted their visors, but they did not remove them; they numbered eight. Eight men, to take two who would not wake and one who could barely walk.

But she saw the subtle signs of hesitation in their stance, and she moved forward. Because she did, she could clearly hear Veralaan's voice. The ceilings in the healerie did it no justice.

"Why are you here?" Veralaan demanded, her arms by her side, her shoulders straight, her chin lifted.

"We've come for those three," the soldier replied. "They are wanted by the Baron."

"They are in the temple of the Mother," she answered evenly, the words so smooth they bore none of the stilted effort that spoke of practice. "They came seeking sanctuary and healing, and we granted it."

We.

"It is not yours to grant," the man said. He shifted his blade.

"It is the Mother's right," Veralaan replied. She lifted a slender arm, a child's arm. "And you are not welcome here if you come to disturb the Mother's peace. You can lay down your arms, or you can leave."

His eyes widened. So, too, did the Mother's Daughter's, but none of the men seemed to notice. Their attention was captive to the girl.

Iain, she thought, *you need no staircase here*. But she walked forward until she stood to one side of Veralaan.

"Mother's Daughter," the man said, a hint of relief in the words, "we have come to take three criminals to the courts of the Baron."

"But you have not taken them?"

“They can’t,” Veralaan replied coldly. She did not look up to meet Emily’s gaze; her eyes were fixed upon the man who seemed to be in charge. “They are not noble.”

“They serve the Baron—”

“And I,” she continued, brooking no interruption, “am. I am Lady Veralaan ABreton, and I have ordered them to leave.”

“Mother’s Daughter—”

Iain had come up behind her, as he so often did. “Lady Veralaan is entirely correct,” he said, speaking to her, but pitching his voice so that the intruders might hear him. “The laws of the Barony are quite clear. Lady Veralaan ABreton is a noble, and she has given these soldiers her command.”

“Only the Baron may command us.”

“Then take the men,” he replied evenly, “and offer public disobedience and insult to your master’s only daughter.”

The moment stretched out. The Mother’s Daughter waited. She had meant to put a hand on Veralaan’s shoulder, as both warning and protection; she would not have dared now. She saw the indecision upon the man’s face, and saw it, inexplicably, shift in a direction that she had *never* seen in all her years of service.

He bowed, stiffly and angrily, to a seven-year-old girl. “We will take word to our Lord,” he said, just as stiffly, when he rose. “And you will see us again.”

“Send my love and respect to Baron Breton,” Veralaan replied calmly, “and tell him that I look forward to his visit.”

She stood in the same perfect posture until the men backed out of the healerie. The silence that surrounded her seemed like it might never be broken again. Not even the one man who was awake could speak.

When the last of the soldiers had left the healerie, Veralaan turned to Rowan. “Please close the door,” she said quietly.

Rowan rose instantly, and tendered the Lady Veralaan a perfect obeisance. She also obeyed.

“Lady Veralaan,” Iain said, offering a perfect, shallow bow.

She looked at him, then, lifting her chin to better meet his gaze. “Did I do it right?” she asked softly.

“You were perfect,” was his grave reply. “But I think that—”

“They are not allowed to enter uninvited into *my* home. They are *never* allowed to enter my home uninvited.” And then she walked over to the unconscious boy who slept on the mat upon the floor. “He’s younger than me,” she added quietly.

At any moment, Emily expected the child to crumple, to show the strain of the confrontation.

“What could he have done to my father, at his age? There must be a misunderstanding.”

No one spoke. They should have. And if they did not, the Mother’s Daughter had that responsibility. But the girl’s desire for her father, her love for his memory, was something that, bright and shining, not even Emily desired to tarnish. It came as a surprise to her. Bitter surprise.

Melanna ran into the room. But even Melanna hesitated awkwardly on the outer periphery of Veralaan’s sheer presence. “Veralaan?”

“Lady Veralaan,” Iain said, his tone as severe as Emily had ever heard it.

Melanna glared at the side of his face, but it was a helpless anger. She had watched her charge from the frame of the door, powerless before her power.

“No, Iain,” Veralaan said quietly. “She is Melanna. She can call me whatever she wants.” And she turned to Melanna, “I’m sorry.”

Melanna looked confused.

But Veralaan, clear and confident as children could sometimes be, had no intention of allowing her the grace of confusion. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t with you when your son died. I could have saved him. You would be happy, then.”

Everyone froze again.

“You loved him,” she continued quietly, “more than you love me.”

Melanna bit her lower lip. She sank to her knees in the healerie, and she held out her arms—looking, in her roundness and her sudden pain, like one of the few perfect paintings of the Mother. “Not more than you Veralaan,” she whispered.

Veralaan walked slowly into Melanna’s arms, and disappeared as they closed round her back. “Never more than you.”

The Baron did not come.

II.

“LADY VERALAAAN.”

The young woman so addressed arched both eyebrows and rolled her eyes in mock frustration. The Priestess who attended her almost snickered. But she didn't speak, and after a moment, the Lady Veralaan ABreton turned almost regally. “Yes, Iain?”

“We have kept the Courtier waiting for as long as we can safely do so. He is, if I recall—”

“Lord Wendham,” she replied curtly.

“Lord Wendham, then, and if you know that much, you know he is seldom given to patience.”

“He has come to visit *me*,” she replied coolly. But she rose, wiping bloodstains from her hands upon the apron that hid her clothing. “And I have duties in the healerie that I consider to be more important.” But for all that, she spoke quietly. “Mother's Daughter?” she said at last, and Emily Dontal, silent until that moment, nodded. The years had aged her. But not unkindly.

“He will wait, Lady Veralaan. Your reputation precedes you, and if you do not tarry for *much* longer, he will pretend not to be insulted.” She paused and added, “Rowan is capable of watching the healerie.”

“Rowan,” the healer said curtly, “is also capable of speaking for herself, Mother's Daughter.” She turned to Veralaan, and offered the young woman a brisk nod. “I can watch the healerie. But I'd appreciate it if you didn't tarry.” Her grim eye fell upon the pallets, the floor, the crowded confines of the room that was her life's work.

Veralaan offered her a perfect bow. An unnecessary one. Rowan accepted it; long years had come and gone in which the arguments about form and necessity had at last been eroded by Veralaan's tenacity. But as Veralaan left the healerie—by the interior doors—Rowan turned to the Mother's Daughter, her gaze shadowed.

“Do you know why Lord Wendham has come?”

Emily Dontal frowned. “No.”

“I believe I do, Mother's Daughter. There will be a funeral that Veralaan will be required to attend.”

“Whose?”

“I'm not certain,” she replied quietly. “But there has been death in the streets in the past two

weeks, and if I had to guess, I would say the funeral of one, if not two, of her brothers.”

The Mother’s Daughter closed her eyes. But words didn’t require vision.

“She’s learned more here than we could have taught her had we planned it all,” Rowan continued, speaking words that should never have been spoken. “She’s seen, every day, what is done in his name, by his men. Or by those who serve him. She knows. No one speaks a word against her father. None of us speak of the wars—not in the temple. But the injured who come to us speak when they dream. The dying? She tends their injuries; she knows how they were caused, and even why. She hears.

“I was against her working in the healerie,” Rowan added softly. “From the beginning, even after she saved those three lives, I was against it. I do not know when that changed, Mother’s Daughter. But it has. Her presence here—it does something that my power can’t.”

“What?”

“It gives people hope.”

“Rowan—”

“Hope for the nobility. Hope for Breton. It is a bitter hope—to me—but not to all, and it has spilled from the temple into the city streets, traveling—like hope does—by whispers couched in awe. People know that if they can reach her side, they are safe.” She paused, and then added, “if she is taken from us, that will no longer be the case.”

* * *

At fifteen years of age, Lady Veralaan ABreton presided at her father’s side over the burial of two of her brothers. She wore the black and the white, and it was edged in the color and power of gold; she wore gloves, and a dress so fine it would have fed the temple’s beggars for two years. She was tall and straight, slender with youth, and her eyes remained utterly dry.

The Mother’s Daughter was allowed to attend her, and accepted the insult conveyed with this permission. No other Priests or Priestesses were likewise allowed to be present. It was just as well. This close to the highest echelons of power, it was almost difficult to breathe. There was no grief offered the dead; their mothers had gone before them to the Halls of Mandaros, and their father? Grim and dispassionate. She offered no blessing; was asked to offer none.

But she saw how the Lords of the Breton court circled Veralaan, and she did not like it. The girl herself, however, seemed above them; if she noticed that they eyed her like jackals, she paid them no heed.

In fact, she paid only one man respect: the Baron Breton. And he was graceful and perfect in his reply. But distant as well.

“It is a pity,” he told her softly, but not so softly that Emily Dotal did not hear the words, “that they attempted to prove their power when they had not yet mastered it.”

“Lanaris is still heir,” Veralaan replied. It was the first time—the only time—that Emily was to hear her speak her brother’s name.

“For a while,” was his bitter answer.

And two weeks later, when healers had come at the Baron’s command, and failed to emerge from the bowels of his dungeons, Lanaris ABreton passed away. Rowan was white with anger, and with a bitter admiration. “I would have healed him,” she told Veralaan, as she cut bandages into the long strips that were most useful in the healerie. “I would have healed him and been damned.”

“They didn’t.”

“No. And they will never heal anyone else as a consequence of their choice.”

“What does it mean?” Veralaan asked, in the pause that was wedged by anger between the gentle healer’s words.

“It means that Baron Halloran Breton is now without heir. He has a wife,” she added, “who has had no issue. This was less of a concern, before.”

Veralaan said, with a shrug, “He will find another wife.”

* * *

He needed one. He had come through war to rule the Baronies to the North, the South and the West; he owned the seas. His armies were like legend and nightmare, and where they traveled, they were not forgotten. While he lived, he held them all.

But not even Halloran Breton would live forever.

As Veralaan had so coldly said, he found another wife. But when she was pregnant, she died of poison. Many, many men perished in her wake.

He came to the temple one evening, with four men. He came on horse; the carriage was slow and noisy, and it afforded lookouts the ability to grant warning. But he did not enter the temple; he waited at the door as if he were simply another supplicant. If he did not wait with grace, he did not wait with ire, and Lady Veralaan ABreton agreed in due time that she might speak with her father, Lord Breton.

He left his men at the doors, and they fanned out, brightly burnished fence beyond which, for the duration of the interview, no one living would pass. Emily Dontal led him from the door to his daughter. She did not ask him why he afforded Veralaan this courtesy; he did not offer. But he looked aged, in a way that she had never seen him aged. Not with the death of his sons, certainly, nor the death of many wives.

She led him into the small chamber, and when she made to leave, he lifted a hand. It was an imperious gesture, but he did not follow it with words; instead, he met his daughter's level gaze. She nodded.

"Please," he said, with just a trace of irony, "stay, Mother's Daughter. What I say may be of concern to you in the future." He did not add, *do not interrupt*. Nor had he need. She bowed to him, and moved to stand beside the wall farthest away.

Veralaan did not run to him; she did not smile or lift arms. She regarded him from a distance. If he noticed, he said nothing—and Emily thought it unlikely that he *did* notice. It would pain Veralaan, but she had grown strong enough over the years to hide pain from all but Melanna and Iain.

"I will be brief," Lord Breton told his only living child, "because your safety is served best by brevity. Your existence here has long been known, but it has never been of grave consequence. I fear that this is about to change, Veralaan. There will be, among the Lords who serve me, men who will offer you much if you will consent to marry them. There are those who would not bother to ask your consent, were you not now in the hands of the Mother. They will not risk her wrath at the moment—if they choose to fight among themselves, they may well need the blessings of the Mother.

"I know them all. I know their weaknesses and their strengths. I have chosen two who I believe are likely to be able to hold what I have built. They could simply take it, but I think they are canny enough not to spend men where it is unnecessary. You are the bloodline," he added quietly. "And therefore, your presence by the side of the right man will signal legitimacy."

She looked at him. "I am to marry?"

"Not yet," he said quietly. "But soon. You will know. Choose wisely." He hesitated for just a moment, as if he might say something more. But he was Halloran Breton; in the end, he retreated in silence, taking nothing of her with him.

And when the door was closed, Veralaan turned to Emily Dontal. The presence—and the

absence—of her father cast long shadow; some hint of the wild fear she had shown as a young child now darkened and widened her eyes. She raised her hands, and they shook, but she did not bring them to her face; she held them out before her, turning them so that she might inspect their palms.

* * *

The room was cold and quiet; the thin door was shut. There were chairs around the table, because they had chosen the dining hall for their meeting; it was one of the few rooms that could easily seat them all.

They sat in a tense silence, one punctuated by sudden motion, by words that almost demanded voice. Emily Dontal waited until she was certain that no one would speak.

“This is what we expected, isn’t it?” she asked them all. Melanna’s glare was tinged with red, although she did not cry. “This is why we trained her. This is why we taught her. She is *the Baron’s daughter*. Did any of you truly think that she would spend her life here?”

It was an unfair question, for it had only one answer.

“Iain?”

“I have studied the Lords of the Baronial Court,” he said quietly. “My sources—and they are few—have given me what information they can.”

“And you trust them?”

“Not at all. They understand why I have requested the information, and they seek their own advantage from the giving.” There was no bitterness in the words. “Of the men that consider themselves powerful, I think I know the two of whom he spoke.”

“And they?”

“What would you have me say, Emily? That they are *good men*?” Ah, bitterness there. “That they will be *kind* husbands?” And all of Melanna’s rage, but cultured, quiet.

“Yes, if it were true.”

He rolled his eyes. “In a different story, Mother’s Daughter. In a different world.” He drew the circle across his chest, a jittery fidgeting motion. “But if she must choose—”

The door that led to the kitchen swung open.

In it, hands by her side, stood Veralaan. “I won’t,” she said softly.

She had heard everything.

“Veralaan—” Melanna rose almost blindly.

“I won’t. Do you think I’m stupid? Do you think I don’t know? One of them will be responsible for my father’s death.”

Ah. “Veralaan—”

“And even if they’re not, what difference will it make? I know their names. I hear them every day, in the healerie. I know what they do, in my father’s name. I know what they will do. Am I expected to leave the Mother’s heart so that one of them may rule?”

“If you do not,” Iain said, without fire, “they will war among themselves. And in that war, there will be more death than even you can imagine. You have some power, Veralaan. If you choose—”

“I won’t. I will never marry.” She lifted her hands; they were fists. “Why didn’t you train me to wield sword, Iain? You know how. Why didn’t you teach me about armies, about strategy? Why did you—all of you—let me labor here, let me think I was making a difference?”

“You *are* making a difference, Veralaan.”

“And when I leave?”

They did not lie to her. And, because they couldn’t, they said nothing.

* * *

Six months later, Baron Breton passed away, leaving behind one living child. She was a girl, and although in theory she was heir, it was tenuous theory; no one would follow a woman. But as Baron Breton had surmised, the Court did not immediately fall upon itself, although there were deaths. They decided, instead, that they could wait for Veralaan to make a choice. They signed treaties in blood to that effect: they acknowledged *her* as Breton’s only heir.

Word began to arrive in the hands of trusted emissaries from all stratum. Letters were followed by gifts, and gifts by requests for audience.

Iain saw that Veralaan’s wardrobe suited her station, but he also demurred when presented with these requests; the Lady Veralaan, he said, was in mourning for her father, for her much loved father, and she could not entertain others until the period of mourning had passed.

It was not—entirely—a lie, although Veralaan did not cry or weep. She refused, however, to meet with these men. And for a year, they accepted this refusal with outward grace. But it was a thin veneer.

* * *

The first girl who came to the healerie with a message from one of the Lords had two broken

arms. The girl could not be more than eight years of age, and she was weeping and frightened—but she was alive. Veralaan was not in the healerie, and Rowan and Melanna managed to keep this from her for a day and a half.

A day and a half was all it took for the next injured victim to arrive. After that, there were a dozen, and each man, woman or child carried a message for Lady Veralaan of the Mother's Temple, writ in broken bone, in gaping wound: a simple greeting.

Veralaan tended them all herself; she insisted on it. She wept with them, and openly begged their forgiveness. It was the only time she would do so.

Iain said, quietly, “what one lord does, they must all try. But Veralaan, if you accede to these...requests...they will never stop.”

“And if I don't?” she asked. She was bone-white.

“I can't say,” he replied at last. “If they kill, the message will never reach you.”

“What would you have me do?” She turned to Rowan, hair now gray, skin as white as Veralaan's, and for the same reason.

“I—I can't advise you, Veralaan.” She turned away.

“Rowan!”

“I think Iain's right. Start, and it will *never* end. All they will have to do is fill the healerie with the dead and the dying, and whoever can do the most damage will, in the end, be the one who holds the most power over you.” But her hands were bunched fists as she said it, and the cloth around her legs shook as she shoved those fists into her lap.

Melanna tried to drag Veralaan away, as if, for a moment, she were once again a three-year-old child. Veralaan shook her off without speaking. But her face did not regain its natural color.

“Don't do it,” Ian told her, “If you do, they will know that you're weak.”

“And is this how strength is defined?” she asked, staring at the closed doors of the healerie, her voice very soft.

“In the Baronies, yes.”

* * *

One day passed.

Melanna wept quietly, her voice shorn of bark, and therefore of strength. Emily put an arm around Melanna's shoulder. “Why are you standing in the hall?”

“Veralaan won't see me,” was the choked reply. “She sent Iain away as well, I'm afraid of

what she'll do—”

Emily held Melanna tight. “We are all afraid,” she whispered. “I prayed. The night she came, Melanna. I prayed to my mother for a child. For the child she has long denied me. I always wondered—I wonder still—if it is because of my weakness, my anger, my inability to simply forgive.

“I don’t know. Perhaps the gods do listen to those who aren’t born with their blood; Veralaan came after the prayer.”

“There is no god of Mercy,” Melanna said bitterly.

“No. Only the Mother.”

“Where are the *other damn gods*?” Melanna snapped harshly. “Where are the heroes? Where are the men who could stand against those—those—” She lifted a hand to her face.

“You know the answer,” was the bitter reply; they were of a mind this evening. “But I—”

“She won’t see you.”

“She will,” the Mother’s Daughter said, without stiffness or determination. “Because she sent for me.”

“Don’t—” Melanna gripped Emily’s arms. Her wide fingers would leave bruises there, but it was unintentional. “Don’t let her do it.”

“She cannot stand to see them suffer because of her. To see them suffer? Yes. Because she has practically lived in the healerie when she has not been learning how to be a Baroness, she has grown calluses, as we *all* have. But this is new. Until now, they lived *because* of her. She is young, and her heart is not scarred enough. I do not think she will survive this.”

“We should have done things differently. We should have—”

The door opened, and Melanna choked in her rush to contain the rest of the words. But she stared at Veralaan’s pale face. She lifted her hands to touch it, and Veralaan, instead of withdrawing, lifted her own, catching Melanna’s beneath her youthful palms.

“You are my mother,” she said quietly.

Melanna, already given over to tears, cried more of them.

“And Emily, you, too. Amalyn, Rowan. Even Iain.”

“Not father?”

“No. I would never disgrace Iain by calling him that.” The words were bitter, but the bitterness was a ripple. “Mother’s Daughter?”

“Lady Veralaan.”

“I require your presence in the inner chamber.”

“The inner—” Emily’s eyes widened. “The Mother’s chamber?”

Veralaan nodded quietly.

“Veralaan, the Mother is *not* of this world. She cannot offer you guidance, and she cannot protect you. She—”

“She cannot even hear me, if you will not intercede,” Veralaan said. “I know. I know all of this, Mother’s Daughter. And I know that Rowan is also right. But I can’t—I can’t go into the healerie again. I can’t—” She stiffened. “It won’t end with strangers, even the strangers to whom you’ve dedicated your life. If injuring—and disfiguring—outsiders won’t work, they’ll try insiders. We’ll lose Novices. I might lose—” For a moment, the younger Veralaan was there, in the wide eyes, the frightened eyes, of a child who had been abandoned by her father. “I’ve made my choice.”

“What choice, child?”

“I am not a child, Mother’s Daughter. I am Baron Breton, by the acknowledgment of the Lords of the Baronial court. And in the end, it was not a request. You will accompany me to the inner chamber.”

“There is no magic in the inner chamber, Veralaan.”

“No, Mother’s Daughter.”

“Then why?”

“The Mother will hear you. And when you call her—if you call her—she will come.” She turned to Melanna and hugged her tightly. “Tell Iain—”

“I won’t. I won’t tell him anything. You want to tell him something, you *have to be here to do it.*”

* * *

The inner chamber. The room in which the prayers of the Mother’s Daughter were made. It was a small room, with a modest ceiling, stone walls, and a small altar. Upon the altar was an empty bowl, an empty basket, a small candle; things that were entirely modest and ephemeral.

“It is not a very fine room.” The Mother’s Daughter came to stand by the altar; she did not kneel.

“What need have gods of finery?”

“Ask men who envy the gods the power they think gods possess,” was the bitter reply.
“What do you wish me to ask of my mother?”

“I don’t,” Veralaan said evenly. “I wish to ask it myself.”

The Mother’s Daughter was silent for a long moment. “Veralaan—I can summon my mother. And in reply, she will summon us. We will walk in the world that is neither man’s nor god’s. It is...not an easy place to endure.”

Veralaan, however, was young; she would not be moved. “Call her.”

And Emily Dotal did.

The mists ate away at the floor; they severed the walls from their moorings, until only the mists themselves remained. They were not gray, not black, not white, but all of these things, and interspersed with them, colors, muted and moving as if at the behest of strong breeze. But none of these things moved Veralaan; she endured them as if they were simply a matter of fact.

Emily was impressed.

But when the Mother came, Veralaan lifted chin and looked up, and up again, for the form the Mother chose was not comforting, and not small; she was tall as the skies of mist, her arms long, her shoulders wide. She came carrying no baskets; she came attended by no beasts of burden, no emblems of unearthly authority. She wore the workaday robes of a field laborer, and her face was lined by sun and wind.

“Daughter,” she said to Emily. “Why have you summoned me?”

“At the behest of one of your Novices,” was the quiet reply. “And no, Mother, I do not know why.”

“Ah, daughter,” the Mother said quietly. She spoke not to Emily, but Veralaan. “I have long watched you, through the eyes of my only child. What do you wish of me?”

“This world, this place,” Veralaan replied. “It is said that time moves strangely here.”

“It is true. Time is of passing consequence to my children, but it does not touch me.”

“And if I spent time here, would I age?”

“You are mortal.”

“If I were willing to age, would time pass beyond this place?”

“In mortal lands?” The Mother frowned. Emily could feel it as if it were weather, a storm.
“Why do you ask this, child?”

If Emily’s use of the word had caused offense, the god’s use did not. “Because I have no

time. Beyond this place, your followers are dying because men with power seek my attention.”

“They seek more than that.”

“Then you already know why I ask.”

“I wanted to be certain that you did. What would you have of me? I am no warrior, and I am bound to my lands, as you, in the end, must be bound to yours.”

“I want a son,” Veralaan said.

Emily almost stopped breathing.

“I want a golden-eyed son, a god-born child. I was not trained to war,” she added bitterly, “because I am a daughter. I cannot fight. I cannot lead armies, even if there were any willing to follow. Everything I am, I have become in your service.

“But I am not without strength. I am willing to bear such a child, and to raise him as I can—but only in the lands between; if I bear him here, he will die.”

“If you bear him in the lands between, you might, child.”

“I am willing to take that risk.”

“I cannot give you the child you seek.”

“I know. But you are sister to many gods, and I—” She struggled now, with the words. “And I wish you to intercede on my behalf with one of your brothers.”

“Which one, child? The fate of the god-born is death in your lands, and there is not a god who easily surrenders his children to death.”

“I know,” she whispered. “Not even a man as monstrous as my father could do that.”

The Mother was silent a long moment. “If you are willing to live in the half-world, there may be among us those who are willing to offer what you ask. But child—those born to the blood are driven by it. Which god would you choose?”

Cartanis, Emily thought. Surely *Cartanis*, god of just war. But Veralaan was silent. After a moment, she said, “Which god would you choose for me?”

And the mother laughed. It was a low, rich sound, a sound carried by a host of voices, a multitude of emotions. “It is not a question that I could answer,” she said, when she had stopped. “But think long on what is missing in your world, and perhaps you will find the answer you seek.” She held out her arms, her huge arms, and gathered Veralaan in them, as if she were a babe.

“Emily,” she said, when she had pulled Veralaan from the ground that the mist obscured.

“You have done well. You have struggled, and you have chosen to love this child as if she were your own.”

“No, Mother,” Emily said, bowing her head. “I had no choice. But the others? Melanna, Iain, Rowan—they are worthy of the praise you offer me. They love her. And they will be grieved indeed to lose her.”

The Mother’s smile creased; it blended with sorrow.

“Loss defines us,” she told her only blood daughter. “But more than that, what we choose to lose defines us. I will go. But wait here, Emily.”

* * *

Emily Dontal knelt by the altar. The mists had parted and dispersed, and in the absence of her mother, she felt the world as the grim, dark place it was. No dint of labor could lift that darkness. It was said that the gods had once walked the world, and she bitterly regretted the fact that she had not lived in those times.

But one could not choose.

Mother, she thought, as she pressed her forehead to stone. Her vision was skewed by a thin sheen of water; there were tears there that she could not shed. She had been bidden wait, and she was dutiful. She waited, feeling, now, the cold of stone in her bones, the ache of age.

She did not see the mists as they returned until they had all but covered her. But she stood as they did, so that she might see her mother again.

It was not her mother who stood before her.

It was a young man. And beside him, another. Two. They gazed down upon her, for they were tall, and their eyes were bright, golden. That light seemed to burn the mist away, and she was captive to it, although—had she been vain—she would have known that those eyes were kin to her own.

“Mother’s Daughter,” the man to the left said quietly. He offered her a hand, and she stared at it for a moment. Then she took it.

“I am Cormalyn,” he said quietly. “And this, my half-brother, Reymalyn. We have heard much about you, and we are honored to meet you at last.”

She shook her head, almost in wonder. “You are the son of Cormaris, Lord of Wisdom.”

“I am.”

“And your half-brother, the son of Reymaris, god of Justice.”

“I am,” the second man said, speaking for the first time. “And I am capable of speaking for myself, although my brother is the better with words.” He too, offered her a hand.

She felt her throat constrict.

“We are the sons of Veralaan,” they said in unison, “and as she is, by acclaim, Baron of Breton and therefore the Eastern seas, we are her heirs, and between us, the legitimate claimants to the Baronial lands.”

But she could not speak. *Veralaan*, she thought, staring at the two.

Cormalyn’s smile was gentle. “It is hard, for my mother,” he told her. “But hard, as well, for you. Or it will be. She is coming, Mother’s Daughter. But she is not what she was, and you must warn the others.”

“I—”

But they stepped to the side, and between them, as the last of the mists left, she saw Veralaan. No: she saw through time, down a stretch of more than a decade and a half, to see the woman that her Veralaan might become: Stronger, wiser, but almost silent in her isolation. Her hair was still blonde, and it was longer, and the features of her face were unmistakably her own; she did not look old, but she was no longer a fifteen-year-old girl.

She was a woman.

She had borne these two, and she had raised them.

“Mother’s Daughter,” she said quietly, as if speech were foreign to her. She held, in her arms, a blanket, but she wore the same dress that she had worn on the day—this day, some half an hour past—she had left.

“Veralaan!” Emily said, pushing past the two men who had at first seemed miracle and were now merely adornment. She held out her arms wide, but Veralaan stepped back. She smiled, to show that it was not an act of rejection.

“My sons,” she whispered.

“You were always an ambitious child,” Emily said with a wry grin. “Two?”

“Wisdom. And Justice. Because we need both.” She added, with a rueful grin, “I was never really good at making choices unless they were obvious.”

“What will you do?”

“I will summon the Baronial Court, Mother’s Daughter. They will come, and they will meet my sons and their fathers.”

“You would—you would summon your fathers? In the court?”

The two men said nothing, but they looked at their mother.

“I speak too freely,” she said with a pained smile. “I am accustomed to the company of those for whom silence is no barrier. I...have to learn again, Emily. Will you...will you let me stay here, when I abdicate my throne in favor of my sons?”

“Veralaan—they are two men.”

“Yes. But they were raised by their fathers, and they know things that not even you, Mother’s Daughter, can know. They will build an Empire. The Witherall Seer foretold it; my father went to the Seer before he brought me to your temple, and I listened to what she said, although I didn’t understand it at the time. But it has to be the *right* Empire, or else, what’s the point?” She took a step forward, and then stopped. “I almost forgot.” And she held out the blanket to Emily.

“What is this?”

“It is a gift from the Mother, although she wept to part with her.”

And Emily Dontal closed her eyes. “I do not think my arms are strong enough,” she whispered, afraid to open them.

“I do. There is work to do, Emily. I cannot promise that it will be without bloodshed and death. But you’ve always done what needed to be done, and if my sons are driven by Justice and Wisdom, they will *always* need the mercy of the Mother, the compassion of her Daughters. Take your child. I want—I want to see Iain and Melanna. Because they haven’t changed.”

And Emily’s arms closed round the infant whose eyes, golden, were a reflection of her own. Mother’s Daughter.

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

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