

MICHELLE WEST

— SHORT STORY —

Choice

19




CHOICE

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INTRODUCTION

I wrote this quite a while ago (there's a bit of lag time between the writing and the publishing).

At the time, it was very difficult because I felt that I couldn't accept the invitation to submit if I couldn't write a story that had the same tone or feel as a Mercedes Lackey Valdemar story—which is what it is. It's a story with my characters set in the Valdemar universe.

The Valdemar universe is very large, and it covers a number of books in different time periods - but there were fewer books when I wrote this one.

I noticed, when proofing, that I had used "Torvan" as a guard name - and no, I didn't do that deliberately; at the time, *Hunter's Death* was new, and, well.

Some of us are terrible at names. Also, David Fruitman is a real person who does not live in Valdemar. I was not asked to do this, and didn't offer it as a charity auction or reward—it just amused me to do it. Luckily he wasn't offended.

CHOICE

When Kelsey saw the white horse enter the pasture runs, she stopped breathing for a moment and squinted into the distance. Then she saw the herald whites of the man who walked just beside it, and with a pang of disappointment she continued across the green towards the inn. Shaking her head, she grimaced just before she took a deep breath and walked through the wide, serviceable doors.

“Kelsey, you’re late. Again.”

“How can you tell?” She pulled her dark hair back from her square face, twisted it into a makeshift coil, and wrapped it up with a small swathe of black silk — a parting gift from a friend who’d left the town to join a merchant caravan. It was the finest thing she owned, and the fact that she used it in day-to-day wear said a lot about her. Not, of course, that she had very many other places to wear it.

“Don’t get smart with me,” Torvan Peterson snapped, more for show than in anger. He had very little hair left, and professed a great resentment for anyone who managed to retain theirs. He was clearly a man who liked food and ale,

and he owned the very practically named Torvan's Tavern. Children made games with that name, but not often in his presence. "Not," he added, "that I would disparage an improvement in your intellect." He stared at her expectantly, and she grimaced. "Well, out with it girl. If you're going to be late, you can at least amuse me with a colorful excuse."

She rolled her eyes, donned her apron, and picked up a bar rag. "We've got a herald as a guest."

"Chatting her up?"

"He, and no."

"Hardly much of an excuse then. All right. The tables need cleaning. The lunch-time crowd was rather messy."

She could see that quite clearly.

On normal days, it wasn't so hard to come and work; work was a routine that added necessary punctuation to her life. She saw her friends here — the few that still remained within reach of the inn — and met strangers who travelled the trade routes with gossip, tales of outland adventures, and true news.

But when a herald rode through, it made her whole life seem trivial and almost meaningless. She worked quickly, cleaning up crumbs and spills as she thought about her childhood dreams, and the woman who had — while she lived — encouraged them.

You can be whatever you choose, Kelsey, her grandmother had been fond of saying. You've only to put your mind and your shoulders to it, and you'll do us all proud.

Kelsey snorted and blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. I can be whatever I choose, but I'll never be chosen. In her youth she'd believed that to be chosen by one of the companions was a reward for merit. She'd done everything she could think of to be the perfect, good little girl, the perfect lady, the little hero. She had foresworn the usual

childhood greed and the usual childhood rumbles for her studies with her grandmother; she had learned, in a fashion, to wield a weapon, and to think her way clear of troublesome situations without panicking much. Well, except for the small stampede of the cattle back at Pherson's, but anyone could be expected to be a little bit off their color in the midst of their first stampede.

She had done her best never to cheat or lie — excepting those lies that courtesy required; she shared every bounty she was given; in short, she had struggled to lead an exemplary life.

And for her pains, she had drifted into work at Torvan's Tavern, listening to her friends, encouraging and supporting their dreams, no matter how wild, and watching them, one by one, drift out of her life, either by marriage, by childbirth, or by jobs that had taken them out of the village.

She had her dream, but it was a distant one now, and it only stung her when she came face to face with the fact that someone else — some other person, through no work, no effort, no obvious virtue of their own — was living the life that she had dreamed of and yearned for ever since she could remember.

Still, if the heralds — they never travelled alone — came in for a meal and left their companions in the pasture runs, she could sneak out for a few minutes and watch them, and pretend. Because no matter how stupid it was, she couldn't let go of her dream.



IT WAS clear from the moment he walked into the tavern that something was wrong. Heralds were able — although how, she wasn't certain — to keep their whites white and in

very good repair, and this herald's whites were neither. He was pale, and the moment he stepped out of the glare of the doorway, she saw why; his arm was bound, but bleeding, and his face was scraped and bruised.

"Excuse me," he said, in a very quiet, but very urgent voice, "I need help. My companion is injured."

Heralds never travelled alone. Kelsey tucked her rag into her apron pocket and made the distance between the table and the door before Torvan had lifted the bar's gate.

"What — what happened?"

He shook his head, and it was obvious, this close up, that he was near collapse. She put an arm under his arms — she was not a weak woman — and half-walked, half-dragged him to a chair. "Don't worry about me," he said softly, his face greying. "She's hurt, and she needs help."

"Why don't I worry about both of you?" Kelsey replied, mimicking the stern tone of her grandmother in crisis. "Torvan — send Raymon for the doctor, and send Karin for the vet!" The herald started to rise, and she blocked him with her arm. "And where do you think you're going?"

He opened his eyes at the tone of her voice, and studied her face as if truly seeing her for the first time. Then he smiled wanly. "Nowhere, ma'am," he replied. It was then that she realized that he was probably twice her age, with grey streaks through his long braid and two faded scars across his neck and cheek. His features were fine-boned, unlike her own; he looked like the son of a noble, except it was obvious that he was used to doing his own work.

"Good. What are you smiling at?"

"You. You remind me of my grandmother." The smile faded as he winced; his expression grew distant again. She knew that he was seeing not only the loss of the herald he travelled his circuit with — for she was certain that that

herald must be dead — but also the fear of the loss of his companion.

She brought him an ale and made him drink; he finished most of it before the doctors — human and animal — arrived.



“IF YOU MAKE her travel on the leg you can probably get a few more miles down the road, but you’ll lame her,” the vet said, staring intently at the cleaned gash across the knee. “I don’t know much about companions — but I do know that if she were a horse, she would never have made it this far.” That he didn’t offer more, and in the lecturing tone that he was wont to use, showed his respect for the herald.

The herald — who called himself Carris, although that was clearly not his full name — nodded grimly and wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief absently. His uniform was safely in the tub in Kelsey’s room, and he wore no obvious weapons, although a sword and a bow were in easy reach. “How long will it be until she can travel safely?”

“Hard to say,” the older man replied.

Carris nodded again, absorbing the words. The doctor had been and gone, and Kelsey had been forced to rather harsh words with both doctor and herald before an uneasy truce had been reached between them.

You don’t interfere with his majesty’s business, she’d snarled at Dr. Lessar. And you — what did you think we called the doctor for? He’ll bind and treat that arm — and those ribs — even if you feel its necessary to go out and break them again. Is that clear?

The doctor laughed. And you're telling me how to talk to a herald?

Oddly enough, the herald laughed as well. And he did submit to the doctor's mercy, electing to more quietly ignore most of the doctor's subsequent advice.



TORVAN ACCEPTED Kelsey's desertion with as much grace as he could muster during the season when the trade route was at its busiest and the tavern could be expected to have the most traffic. She did what she could to lend a hand between the doctor's visits with Carris and his companion, but it was clear that she felt them both to be her concern, and clearer still that the herald was almost in bad enough shape to need it, so he gruffly chased her out of the dining room and told her to finish off her business.

Her business took her to the stables, where, in the dying light, the orange flicker of lamps could be seen through the slats of the door. That's odd, she thought, as she lifted her own lamp a little higher. It wasn't completely dark by any means — but the stables tended to need a little light regardless of the time of day — and she shone that light into the warm shadows.

Carris was kneeling at the feet of a pinto mare, gently probing her knees. She nickered and nudged him, and he nearly fell over as he spun quickly to face Kelsey.

"What are you doing here?" They both said, in unison.

Then Carris smiled. "You know, lass," he said, although she'd passed the age of 'lassdom' five years back, "you should consider a career in his majesty's army. You've the makings of a fine regimental sergeant."

"Thanks," she replied, feeling that he meant to tease her,

but not seeing anything in his words that could be viewed as pejorative. “You haven’t answered my question.”

He chuckled, and it added wrinkles to his eyes and mouth that suggested he often laughed. “No lass, I haven’t. What do you think of her?”

“Of —” She looked at the horse, and then realized that it wasn’t. A horse. “That’s your companion.”

“If she forgives me for the indignity and the desertion, then yes, she is.”

“Why — why have you done that?” She lowered her lamp, as if to offer the companion a little more privacy. Her tone made it clear that she thought it almost sacrilegious.

“Don’t you start as well,” Carris said, mock severely. “I’ve done it,” he added, his voice suddenly much more serious, “because I’ve a message that must be delivered — and I can’t take her with me, but to leave her here, as an obvious companion, is to risk her life.”

Kelsey let the seconds tick back while she figured out exactly what he meant. Then she lifted the lamp again. “Are you crazy?” She said at last. “You can’t ride with your arm like that and your ribs broken — you’ll pierce your lungs for certain!”

The companion bobbed her lovely head up and down almost vigorously.

“Don’t start,” Carris said again. “We’ve already covered that ground, and I’ve made my decision. She knows it’s the right one.” He stood slowly, but winced with pain just the same as if he’d jumped up. “Kelsey, you’ve done as much as any girl can to help me — but I’ve one more favor to ask of you.”

“W-what?”

“I want you to take care of her.”

“Of ... her?”

“My companion, yes,” he replied. “Her name is Arana.” He waited for her to answer, and after five minutes had passed, he said, “Kelsey?”

She couldn’t even speak. Instead, she walked past him, holding the lamp as if it were a shield. She approached the dyed companion, met her eyes, and held them for a long time. Finally, she remembered that she wasn’t alone, and had the grace to blush.

“I meant to tell you that dinner’s been laid out for you. It’s probably cold, but you should still get to it while you can.”

“Kelsey?”

“I’ll have to think about it,” she replied, not taking her eyes off of Carris’s companion.



THAT NIGHT, with the moon at half-mast, it was dark enough that she stubbed her toes twice on the path to the stable. The lamp that she held was turned down as low as possible — she didn’t want to attract attention from the field-mice and the rats.

She wanted to look at Arana again, without Carris intruding upon the privacy of her old dreams and her old desires. Could she watch the companion. Could she take care of her. Ha!

She opened the doors, smelled the hay and the horse scent as it hit her nostrils, and made her way in. Usually companions weren’t stabled like this — but Carris had insisted that Arana be as horse-like as possible.

“Does she like sugar?”

Carris had laughed. “As much as a real horse.”

She hadn’t snuck into stables since she was child, but

she'd lost none of her old instincts. She made her way, unerring, to Arana's stall.

She wasn't particularly surprised to find Arana waiting for her. "Hello," she said softly. The companion, as expected, didn't answer. A pang of disappointment, like a slightly off-key chord, rippled through her and vanished. "I'm Kelsey."

Arana lifted her head and nodded.

"I suppose you've met a lot of people like me. I — I always wanted to be a herald. I've always prayed that one day, a companion would choose me. It's never happened," she added ruefully. "And I don't suppose you'd be willing to tell me why."

Arana put her head over the stall's door and let Kelsey scratch her. It was easier than scratching a normal horse; the companion seemed to be more sensitive. "Doesn't matter. Carris wants me to stay here, with you, while he does some fool thing on his own, injured, without anyone to look after his back. What do you think of that?"

Arana said absolutely nothing, but she became completely still. Kelsey shook her head and lowered the lamp. "That's what I thought as well. Here. I brought you some sugar."



"WHERE DO YOU think you're going?" Carris, dressed like a well-to-do villager, frowned as Kelsey let her backpack slide off her shoulders to land on the ground with a thump.

"Talked it out with Torvan," she replied, around her last mouthful of bread and cheese, "and he says it's a go." She swallowed, wiped her hands on her pants, rolled her hair into its familiar bun, and shoved her coin bag into the inner reaches of her shirt.

“What’s a go?” Carris asked, suspicion giving him an aura of unease that made Kelsey want to laugh out loud.

“I’m going with you, Carris.” She checked her long dagger, and then picked up her wooden bat. Made sure she had a hat, and a scarf to keep it attached to her head.

“That’s preposterous,” he replied. “You are doing no such thing.”

She shrugged. “Whatever you say.”

“Kelsey —”

“Look — what did you think you were going to do? Dress like that, but pick up a fast and fancy horse that’ll take you to capital?”

He looked taken aback.

“You’ll stand out like a scare-crow. You’re afraid that someone following you would recognize Arana, and if that’s the case, you’ll be recognized if you travel as you’d planned. Trust me.”

“I wasn’t aware that you’d studied the arts of subterfuge. You certainly haven’t mastered the art of subtlety.”

“Ho ho ho.” She bent down and picked up her pack; slung it over one shoulder, and then bent down for his. “Don’t argue with me,” she said, not even bothering to look up. “I’ll take the packs. You take your arm and your ribs. Oh damn.”

“What?”

“I almost forgot.”

“What?”

“The hair. It has to go.”



CARRIS WAS in a decidedly less cheerful mood when they finally departed the inn. “Look, Kelsey,” he said tersely. “You may not believe this, but that hair was my single vanity.”

“A man your age shouldn’t be beholden to a single vanity,” she replied sweetly. “Now come on. You’ve come at a good time — I’ve a friend who guards one of the caravan routes, and they’re always looking for new hands.”

“As a caravan guard in this territory?” Carris raised an eyebrow. “You do realize that with the upsurge in banditry lately, he’s just asking for trouble?”

Something about the way he said the word ‘banditry’ caught her attention; she pursued it like a cat does a mouse. “What do you know about the bandit problems?”

He didn’t reply.

“This have something to do with the message you need to deliver?”

He nodded, but no matter how she pressed him, he would say nothing else.

Well, it’s Crown’s business, not mine, Kelsey thought. And probably better that I don’t know. She knew enough, after all, to know that as a herald he was trustworthy, and that anyone who tried to kill him was as much the king’s enemy — and therefore her own — as a stranger could be. Still, she felt a twinge of envy; she knew that were she a herald, they’d talk openly of their mission — like equals. Comrades.

As if he could read her thoughts — and it was rumored that some heralds could — he said, “it isn’t that I don’t trust you, Kelsey.”

“Don’t bother with explanations. I can come up with a dozen good ones on your behalf and you don’t even have to open your mouth.” She paused, and then stopped. “You can wield that thing, can’t you?”

“Both of them, yes,” he replied, smiling.

“Good.”

“What did you intend as a weapon?”

“This.” She pulled her bat out of her pack and swung it in a wide circle. “I call it a club.”

“You’re going to sign on as a caravan guard wielding a club?”

“You’ve never seen me wield a club before,” she assured him. Then she laughed. “You should see your face. Yes, I intend to sign on, but I’ll probably do it as cook or a handler. If a person’s willing and able to work, there are always jobs on the trade routes. Especially now.” She started to say something else, and then stopped. “Are you in pain?”

“Yes,” he said, but the word was so soft it was a whisper.

She studied his pale face for a moment and then grimaced. The death of his friend wasn’t real for him yet, but in bits and pieces it was becoming that way. Kelsey was almost glad that she wouldn’t be with him when he finally completed his mission — because she was certain that when he did, he’d collapse with grief and guilt. She’d seen enough hurt men and women come through Torvan’s place to know the look of it.

That’s the life of a herald, dear, her grandmother would tell her.

I know, she told her grandmother’s memory. But I want it just the same.



DAVID FRUITMAN HAD the look of a barbarian to him. His face was never closely shaven, but never full-bearded, his brown hair was wavy — almost scruffy — and long, and his carriage gave the impression not only of size, but of the

ability to use the strength that came with it to good advantage.

Kelsey waved and shouted to catch his attention.

When he saw her, he rolled his eyes. "What, you again?"

Carris hung back a bit, unsure of the larger man's reception, but Kelsey bounded in, slapped him hard on the upper arm, and then dropped the two packs she carried to give him a bear hug. She called him something that was best left in the tavern among friends who had had far too much to drink, and then swung him around.

"Carris, get your backside up here. David, this is Carris. Carris, this is David. He's what passes for a guard captain around here."

David looked at Carris, raised an eyebrow, and then looked down at Kelsey. "There's a problem, Kelse," he said.

"What?"

"His arm's broken."

"So? It's not his sword arm."

Carris and David exchanged raised brows. "Shall I explain, or shall you?" Carris said.

"You do it. I'm not getting enough danger pay as is."

"Very funny, both of you. David — can I talk to you in private for a minute or two?"

"Is this like last time's private — where you shouted loudly enough that this half of the caravan lost most of their hearing for the next two weeks?"

"Very funny." She scowled, grabbed his arm, grabbed her packs, and nodded frantic directions to Carris. It all came together somehow, and they made their way to the wagon that David called home while he was recruiting.

"Well?"

"Carris is a herald," she said, dispensing with pretense and bluster — although the latter was hard to get rid of.

“His partner’s dead, his companion’s injured, and he’s got a message that he’s got to get to the capital as fast as possible. He can’t ride — don’t argue with me, Carris, you heard what the doctor said — and he’s being hunted.”

“Hunted by who?”

“He can’t say.”

“I can’t hire him, then.”

“David — he’s a herald.”

“That doesn’t mean the same thing to me as it means to you,” David replied. “Look — the people who hunt the type of guards I hire are cut-throats that I know how to deal with. The people who hunt a herald...”

“David!” She reached out, grabbed the front of his surcoat, bunched it into two fists and pulled. Even Carris recoiled slightly at the intensity of her tone. “You-are-going-to-hire-us-both.”

He raised a brow, not in the least put out. “Or?”

“Or I will tell Sharra about the time that —”

He lifted both of his hands in mock surrender, and then his expression grew graver. “Is it that important, Kelse?”

“More. Trust me. We need you.”

“All right. Let go of my surcoat and pray that the entire encampment didn’t just hear that. I’ll take Carris on — but we’ve got to strap a shield to that shoulder.”

“Can’t you just say he was injured in the line of duty?”

“Sure. But who’s going to ask me? Most of the guards here are the same as I started with, and they’ll know he’s a stranger if they’re asked. We’ve hired five men here, and he’ll just be another one of those — but he’s got to look the part, even if he’s not going to act it. Clear?”

She said something extremely rude. “Yes. Clear.”

“Good.”

“Captain?” Carris said softly.

“What?”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t. Thank her. I owe her, and it’s about time she started calling in her debt.”



“I HOPE YOU APPRECIATE THIS,” Kelsey said to Carris as they set up their tents. Her hands were stiff and chapped, and she was busy nursing a blister caused by peeling carrots and potatoes for a small army. When he didn’t answer, she looked across the fire.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Arana,” he replied at last, weighing his words. “You travel for this long with a — a very dear friend, and you really notice when she’s gone.”

“You aren’t used to being separated?”

“No. I’m used to being able to hear her no matter where I am.” He was quiet, and she let the silence stretch between them, wondering when he would break it. Fifteen minutes later, she realized he wasn’t going to.

“Is it everything they say it is?”

“Pardon?”

“Being a herald. Having a companion. Is it everything it’s cracked up to be?”

He smiled. “It’s harder than I ever imagined,” he replied, leaning back on his elbows, and then wincing and shifting his weight rapidly. “And it’s the most rewarding thing I could ever dream of doing.” He laughed, and the laugh was self-deprecating. “It wasn’t what I’d intended to do with my life — and both of my parents are still rather upset about it, since it significantly shifts the family hierarchy.”

“Do you know why you were chosen?”

“Me?” He laughed again. “No. If I had to choose, I’d be the last person I’d ask to defend the kingdom with his life.” He sobered suddenly. Rose. “Kelsey, I don’t know how to thank you for everything you’ve done, and I know that leaving you to the campfire alone isn’t the way to start...”

She waved him off. “Everyone needs a little space for grief,” she told him firmly. “Even a herald. Especially a herald.”

But after he was gone, she stared at the fire pensively. By his own admission he’d done nothing to be considered a worthy candidate — why had he become a herald? Why had he been chosen? Don’t start, Kelsey, she told herself sternly, or you’ll be up at it all night.



“YOU LOOK AWFUL,” David said, as he ducked a flying handful of potato rinds.

“I didn’t sleep very well,” she replied. “Are you here to annoy me, or should I just assume you already have?”

He laughed. “I wanted to see how you were faring. The caravan’s got a few extra mouths this time round; if I was going to choose KP, I wouldn’t have done it for this stretch of the route.”

“Thanks for the warning,” she said, and heaved another handful of skins. Then she wiped her hands on her trousers, set her knife aside, and stood. “Why is the caravan so bloody big this time?”

“It’s well guarded,” David replied, lowering his voice. “Well guarded. We’ve done our buying for the season, and we’re doing our damned best to protect our investment.”

“How bad has it been? We’d heard rumors —”

“It’s been bad.” His face lost all traces of its normal good

humor. “If you hadn’t insisted, I wouldn’t have taken your friend on — there’s a very good chance he gets to see action whether he’s up to it or not.”

“Oh.” She blew a strand of dark hair out of her eyes. “Is there some sort of drill?”

“Meaning?”

“What should the non-combatants do if the caravan is attacked?” She waited for a minute. “Look, stop staring at me as if I’ve grown an extra head and answer my question.”

“Well,” he replied, scratching his jaw, “if I were in that position, I’d probably hide under the wagons.”

Great. “If I’d wanted an answer that unreal, I’d have asked a bard.” She picked up her knife and went back to potatoes, carrots and onions. Onions. That was the other thing she was going to have to find a way around.



CARRIS TOOK to taking it easy about as well as a duck takes to fire. He was grim-faced and impatient, and he watched the road and the surrounding wooded hills like a starving hawk. David had decided that the best watch for Carris was the night watch; under the cover of shadow and orange fire-light, he could pass for a reasonably whole guard. He carried his sword and his bow — although Kelsey pointed out time and again that the bow was so useless it was just added encumbrance — and wore a shield that had been strapped to his front as well as possible given the circumstances.

What he did not do well was blend in with the rest of the guards. It was his language, Kelsey reflected, as she listened to him speak. He didn’t have the right cadence for someone who had fallen into the life of a caravan guard. Never mind

cadence, she thought, as she dove into the middle of a conversation and pulled him out — whole — he didn't have the vocabulary, the tone, the posture. He did, having been on the road without being able to shave himself, have the right look.

"Stop being so nervous," she said, catching his good arm in hers and wandering slightly away from the front of the caravan.

"Kelsey, do you know what this caravan is carrying?"

"Nope. And I don't want to."

"Well, I do. We're going to see action, and I can't afford to see it and not escape it alive. We've lost four heralds to this investigation, not including Lyris, and we'll lose more if I don't get word back."

"We'll get word back," she said, assuring him. But she felt a twinge of unease when she finally left him. Dammit, he's even got me spooked. She went to her pack, found her bat, hooked it under her left arm, and walked quickly back to her place among the cook's staff.



"WHAT IS THAT?" A familiar voice said.

"Don't ask her that." Marrit, the older woman who supervised the cooking, looked a tad harried as she glared in David's general direction.

"It's a bat."

"I know what it is."

"Then why did you ask?"

"Don't be a smart-ass, Kelse. Why are you carrying it around?"

"It's as much a weapon as anything else I own."

"And you need a weapon on kitchen duty?" David

laughed. “Marrit, I didn’t realize that you’d become such a danger over the the past few days.”

“Look — don’t you have something to do?”

“I’m off duty. I’ve got nothing to do but sit and visit.” He smiled broadly and took a seat. He even managed to keep it for five minutes. Marrit didn’t say one disparaging word about her cook’s lax work habits when Kelsey dropped her knife into the potato sack, turned, and pushed him backward over the log.



TWO DAYS PASSED.

Carris was edgy for every minute of them, except when he spoke of Lyris. Then his emotion wavered between guilt, grief and a fury that had roots so deep even Kelsey was afraid to disturb them by asking intrusive questions that stirred up memories too sharp and therefore too dangerous. This didn’t stop her from listening, of course. She managed to infer that Lyris was the herald who had travelled with Carris, and further that Lyris was young, attractive and impulsive. She knew that he had come from the wrong side of town, just as Carris had come from too far into the right side, as it were.

Never anger a noble, her grandmother used to say. Especially not a quiet one. Although it was a tad on the obvious side, it was still good advice.

“Kelsey, why must you take that club everywhere you go?”

Given that she’d just managed to hit his rib with the nubbly end, it was a reasonable enough question — or it would have been had she not heard it so often. “Don’t start. I

thought if there was one person in camp I'd be safe from, it'd be you. Why do you think I'm carrying it?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Everyone here seems to have their pet theory."

"What do you mean, everyone?"

"Guards," he said, offering her the gleam of a rare smile, "have very little to talk about these days."

She blushed. "I'd better not catch them talking about me, or I'll damned well show them what I'm carrying it for."

Carris actually laughed at that. Then he stopped. "I know I'm unshaven and unkempt, but have I done something else to make you stare?"

"Yes," she replied, without thinking. "You laughed." She regretted her habit of speech without thought the moment the words left her lips; the clouds returned to his face, and with them, the distance.

"And there's not much to laugh about, is there?" He said softly, his right hand on his sword hilt.



KELSEY WAS AT THE RIVERSIDE, washing more tin bowls than Torvan owned, when she heard the screaming start. A silence fell over the men and woman who formed Marrit's kitchen patrol. Fingers turned white as hands young and old clenched the rims of tin and the rags that were being used to dry them. No one spoke, which was all the better; Kelsey could hear the sound of hooves tearing up the ground.

Horses, she thought, as she numbly gained her feet. The bandits have horses!

"Kelsey!" Marrit hissed. "Where are you going?"

Kelsey lifted her fingers to her lips and shook her head. She motioned toward the circular body of wagons. Marrit

paled, and mouthed the order to stay by the riverside, where many of the cooking staff were already seeking suitable places to hide.

It was the smartest course of action. Of course, Kelsey thought, knees shaking, that's why I'm not doing it. She swung her bat up to her shoulder and began to run.



IN THE CONFUSION AND CHAOS, panic was king, and the merchant civilians his loyal subjects.

The wagons, circled for camping between villages too small to maintain large enough inns and grounds, provided all the cover there was against the attackers. People — some Kelsey recognized, and some, expressions so distorted by fear that their faces were no longer the faces she knew — ran back and forth across her path, ducking for cover into the flapped canvas tents, the wagons or the meagre undergrowth. The guards on watch had their hands full, and the guards off-duty were scrambling madly to get into their armor and join the formation that was slowly — too slowly — taking shape.

She counted forty guards — their were forty-eight in total — as she scanned the circular clearing searching desperately for some glimpse of Carris. No sign of him; maybe he'd finally shown some brains and was hiding somewhere under the wagons.

Ha. And maybe the horses she heard were a herd of companions, all come to ask her to join them. She took advantage of a scurry of panicked movement to take a look under a wagon. She saw the horses then.

Funny thing, about these bandits. They weren't wearing livery, and they weren't wearing uniforms — but they looked

an awful lot like a bardic description of cavalry. The horses were no riding horses, and no wagon-horses either. She didn't like the look of them at all, and she loved horses.

They sure make bandits a damned sight richer than they used to, she thought, clenching her teeth on the words that were choking her in a rush to get said. And a damned sight more organized. She had a very bad feeling about this particular raid. And when the blood spray of a running civilian hit the grass two feet from her face, she knew that if there were any survivors to the raid at all, it was going to be a minor miracle.



A FLARE WENT UP in front of the lead wagon; fire-tipped arrows came raining from the trees, and shadows detached themselves from the undergrowth, gaining the color and height of men as they came into the fading daylight.

Kelsey knew she should be covering for cover somewhere, but the tree that she'd managed to climb was central enough — and leafy enough — that it gave her both a terrific vantage point and a false sense of security. She counted the mounted men; there were ten. She couldn't get as good a sense of the foot soldiers — bandits, she corrected herself — but she thought there weren't more than thirty. So if one didn't count the cavalry as more than a single man each, the caravan guards outnumbered them.

It made for a tough fight, but the horses were too large to be easily maneuvered around the wagons, and if the merchants and their staff were careful, the caravan would pull out on top. She smiled in relief, and then the smile froze and cracked.

For on horseback — a sleek, slender riding horse with

plaited manes and the carriage of a well-trained thoroughbred — unarmored and deceptively weaponless, rode a man in plain, black tunic. At his throat, glowing like a miniature sun, was a crystal that seemed to absorb light out of the very sky.

This was the threat that Carris wouldn't speak openly of. This was what he had to reach other heralds to warn them about. This was the information that the king needed. Kelsey gripped both her bat and the tree convulsively as the mage on horseback drew closer to where she sat, suddenly vulnerable, behind the cover of leaves.

His was a power, she was afraid, that dwarfed the power of all save a few heralds — and she was certain that Carris was no herald-mage, to take on such a formidable foe.

Damn it, she thought, holding her breath lest a whisper rustle a leaf the wrong way. Carris was right. I shouldn't have brought him along with the caravan. Then, And he'll probably die just like the rest of us — they won't know he's their herald, and they won't care.

One of the mounted soldiers rode up to the mage.

"That wagon," he said, pointing. "Food supplies, but nothing of more value."

"Good." The mage gestured and fire leapt up from the wagon's depths, consuming it in a flash. The circle was broken, and the ten mounted horseman, pikes readied, charged into the encampment.

She heard the shouts and then the screams of the guards and the civilians they were to protect. People fled the horses and the hooves that dug up the ground as if it were tilled soil. They didn't get far. Kelsey saw, clearly, the beginning of a slaughter.

Sickened, she shrank back, closing her eyes. There's

nothing you can do, some part of her mind said. Hide here. Maybe they won't notice you.

"Captain! 'Ware — they've got a mage at the centre of their formation!" It was Carris' voice, booming across the panicked cries and painful screams of the newly dying. In spite of her fear, she gazed down to see him, sword readied, shield tossed aside and forgotten. The blade caught the fire of the campfire; it glowed a deep orange.

You see? Another part of her taunted. You wouldn't have made a decent herald after all. She hid in the trees, and Carris, broken arm and cracked ribs forgotten, stood in the centre of the coming fray, his sword glowing dimly as it reflected the light of the fires.

No. She took a deep breath. Watched.

The guards met the bandits, but the bandits attacked like frenzied berzerkers, and it was the caravan guards that took casualties. Kelsey could not make out individual faces or fighting styles — and she was thankful for it. What she could see was that somehow, the blows that the caravan guards landed seemed to cause no harm.

It was almost as if the enemies were being protected by an invisible shield. Magic. Magic.

Another horseman rode in, and stopped three yards from the mage. "Sir," he said. "We've got a group of them hiding by the riverside. Possible one or two have managed to cross it."

The mage cursed. "Get the archers out, then," he snarled. "We can't afford to have anyone escape."

"Can't you —"

"Not if you want to be safe from steel and arrow tips," he replied grimly. "Go." He gripped the crystal around his neck more tightly.

Get down, Kelsey. She shivered as she saw the mage

close his eyes. Now's your chance. Get down. But her legs wouldn't unlock. Her hands shook. She watched the ground below as if the drama that were unfolding were on a stage that she couldn't quite reach.

Carris came out of the wings. She saw him, close to the ground, and nearly cried out a warning as the mounted soldier departed. But she bit her lip on the noise. He used the shadows, Carris did, and he moved as if he had no injuries. An inch at a time, he made his way to the mage who sat on horseback, concentrating.

The horse shied back, and the mage's eyes snapped open. Carris leapt up from the ground, swinging his sword. It whistled in a perfect arc; the mage didn't have time to avoid it. The sword hit him across the chest and shimmered slightly. That was all.

The mage laughed out loud. "You fool!" He cried. "Did you think to harm me with that?" Carris swung again, and again the mage did nothing to avoid the strike. "Why, I think I know you — you're the little herald that escaped us. It's probably best for you — you wouldn't have enjoyed the fate that you consigned your friend to suffer alone."

Carris' next swing was wild, and it was his last; three foot soldiers came up, slowly, at his back. But the mage lifted a hand, waving them off. "No, this one is mine, gentleman. Unfinished business." He smiled. "Don't you have merchants to kill?"

The soldiers nodded and stepped back almost uncertainly. If Kelsey had to guess, the mage had probably killed one or two of them to keep them in line; they weren't comfortable with him, that much was clear.

"You can't think that you'll get away with this," Carris said. It was, in all, a pretty predictable thing to say — and not at all what Kelsey would have chosen as her last words.

Something snapped into place for Kelsey as she thought that. I can't let him die with that for an exit line, she told herself, and very slowly, watching her back as much as possible, Kelsey began to shinny down the tree.

"I know we will," the mage replied, all confidence. "Are you sure you don't want to continue your futile line of attack? It amuses me immensely."

Carris lowered his sword.

"You could try the bow — you can wield it, can't you? It would also amuse me, and perhaps if I'm amused, you'll die quickly. I was embarrassed by your escape," he added, his voice a shade darker. "And have much to make up for to the Baron."

Carris said nothing.

"Come, come. Why don't you join me? We can watch the death of all of your compatriots before we start in on yours. You see, you have a larger number of guards — but they aren't, like my men, immune to the effects of sword and arrow. It's a lovely magic I've developed, and it's served me exceptionally well. Come," he added, and his voice was a command.

Like a puppet, Carris was jerked forward.

"Watch."

It was almost impossible not to obey his commands. Kelsey looked up — and what she saw made her freeze for a moment in helpless rage. David was fighting a retreat of sorts — but he was backing up into another cluster of the enemy. He seemed to understand that the swords that the caravan guards wielded were only good for defense, for he parried, but made no attempt to strike and extend himself to people who didn't have to worry about parrying anymore.

A guard went down at David's side.

Kelsey bit her lip.

And then, because she was her grandmother's daughter — and more than that besides — she swallowed, took a deep breath, and crawled as quickly as possible to where the mage sat enjoying the carnage.

She wanted to say something clever or witty or glib — but words deserted her. Only the ability to act remained, and she wasn't certain for how much longer. She lifted the bat, and, closing her eyes, swung it with all the force she could muster.

She had never heard a sound so lovely as the snapping of the mage's neck. She would remember it more clearly than almost any other detail of the attack. Almost.

He toppled from his horse as the horse reared. She watched him crumple and fall; watched his body hit the ground. Then she lifted the bat and began to strike him again and again and again. Carris shouted something — she couldn't make out the words — as she tried to shatter the crystal that hung at the mage's neck.

Then she felt a hand on her arm, and swung the bat round.

"Kelsey, it's me!" Carris' face was about two inches away from hers. There was a bit of blood on it — but she thought it wasn't his. Couldn't be certain. "You did it," he said. He tried to pry the bat out of her hands, but her fingers locked tighter around it than a merchant's around his money chest. He let go of her hands and smiled. The grin was wolfish.

"We've got them, Kelsey. Thanks to you, they don't know that they can die yet — but they're about to find out the mage is gone." His teeth flashed. "And they've been walking onto our swords because there's no risk to them."

"Remind me," she said faintly, "not to made you mad."

He looked down at the corpse at her feet. Laughed, loudly and perhaps a little wildly. "You're telling me that?"



AN HOUR later it was all over. People lay dead in pockets of blood across the width of the encampment. The merchants buried and mourned their own, but they left the bandits for carrion. The mounted men had fared the best, once they realized that they were vulnerable, and three at least had fled the arrows and bolts that the guards used against them. The rest joined their unmounted counterparts.

David, injured, was still alive. Kelsey was glad of it. She watched his wounds being bound by the doctor — the merchant Tuavo always travelled with a good physician as part of his caravan — and swung her bat up onto its familiar shoulder-perch. “Hey,” she said.

“I know, I know. So we never make fun of strange barmaids who carry bats around the kitchen. Okay?”

She smiled. “That’s not what I’m here for. It’s about my position as a caravan guard.”

“As a what?”

“Look, I’m a bit of a hero for the next hour, and I’ll be damned if I don’t use it to get out of peeling potatoes and onions for the next two months. You’re going to vouch for me — is that clear?”

He laughed. “As a bell.”



“HELLO,” Kelsey said, as she caught Carris’ shadow looming over her shoulder. “Aren’t you late for your shift?”

“The captain excused me. I’ve been,” he added, lifting his arm, “injured in action.” He grinned and Kelsey laughed. She’d done a lot of that lately.

Carris returned her laugh with a laugh of his own. He

seemed both taller and younger than he had when she'd first laid eyes on him in Torvan's place. A little more at peace with himself.

Still, there was something she wanted to say. "I — I've been meaning to apologize to you."

"To me? For what?"

"The mage." She looked up, and her eyes, dark in the fading day, met his.

Carris shook his head almost sadly. "Was it that obvious?" He took a deep breath, and ran his fingers through his short, peppered hair. Very quietly, he gave her her due. "I've never wanted to kill a man so badly in my life."

"I would've felt the same way."

"You got to kill him." He looked into the fire, and she knew he was seeing Lyris. She reached up and caught his hand; felt his fingers stiffen and then relax as she pulled him down to the log.

"Tell me," she said, in the softest voice he had yet heard her use. "Tell me about Lyris."

He did. He talked for hours, letting his tears fall freely at first, and then returning to them again and again as an odd story or an old, affectionate complaint brought the loss home. He talked himself into silence as the fire lapped at the gravel.

Then he did something surprising. He turned to her in the darkness and said, "Now tell me about Kelsey."

She was so flustered, she forgot how to speak for a moment — and Kelsey was not often at a loss for words. Well, she thought, as she stared at the crackling logs beyond her feet, what do you have to say for yourself? About yourself?

His chuckle was gentle. "Should I start?"

"Go ahead."

“Kelsey is a young woman who, as a child, very much wanted to be a herald.”

It was dark, so he couldn't see her blush. “H-how did you know that?”

“It's a ... gift of mine. And as a herald, you get used to spotting people who hold the heralds in awe. Or rather,” he added wryly, as he touched his short hair again, “hold the position in awe.”

She shrugged.

“You asked me if I knew why we were chosen — but what you really wanted to know was why you weren't.”

She couldn't answer because every word he spoke was true.

“I don't know why.” He slid an arm around her shoulder and it surprised her so much she didn't even knock him over. “But having met you, I can guess.”

Here it comes. “What? What would you guess?”

“Kelsey — I told you that I was the son of a noble, and as it's not important, I won't tell you which one. But if Arana hadn't come to me, hadn't chosen me, I would have become embroiled in the politics of the nobility, and would have done very little of any good to the people of the kingdom as a whole. I like to think I would have ruled my own people well, but ... it's not easy.

“And Lyris? Much as I love him, he'd have probably wound up as a second-rate thief — or a corpse. Not much good there, either.”

She was very quiet.

“You don't have a companion, yet if not for you, the people of this caravan would have been slaughtered like sheep at the crown princess' wedding.” He caught one of her hands in his good one. “I've got to get some sleep, if I can. So do you. But think about it.”

“I will.”



KELSEY HAD SPENT many sleepless nights in the cold of a dying fire, and this one was to be no exception. What did it mean? What did it really mean? She looked at her hands, seeing both the callouses and the dried blood of the injured that she'd helped the doctor with. They were good hands; strong enough to do what was necessary.

I'm not a herald, she thought, as she stared at them. And I never will be. She turned it over in her mind, and for the first time in her life, she accepted it without sorrow. I never will be chosen.

She stood up as the embers faded. But if I can't be one of the chosen, I can be one who chooses. And I choose to do what I must, when I'm needed.

Heralds couldn't do everything for themselves; she knew how to run an inn — maybe, if she proved worthy of it, she'd be allowed to run a college. Everyone needed to eat — surely the heralds would need a cook? And that close to the thick of things — that close to heralds, companions, possibly the king himself — there was certain to be a lot for Kelsey to do.

She smiled; the sun was on the fringe of the horizon.

“Carris!”

If she expected him to be sleeping, she was wrong; he was awake, and a strange little smile hovered around the corner of his lips. “Yes?”

“I'm coming with you to the capital, and I won't take no for an answer. You're still injured, you probably still need someone to watch your back and you —”

“And I'd love your company.”

He didn't, come to think of it, look at all surprised. Made her suspicious, but it also made her, for the first time that she could remember, completely happy. She was done with waiting; it was time to start the life that her grandmother had always promised her she could choose to live.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle writes as both Michelle Sagara and Michelle West; she is also published as Michelle Sagara West (although the Sundered books were originally published under the name Michelle Sagara).

She lives in Toronto with her long-suffering husband and her two children, and to her regret has no dogs.

Reading is one of her life-long passions, and she is paid for her opinions about what she's read by the venerable *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. No matter how many book shelves she buys, there is Never Enough Shelf space. Ever.

Although she doesn't have a newsletter, if you subscribe to her blog, you will get everything that's posted there—book news, cover reveals, random answers to questions, etc.

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OTHER SHORT STORIES

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 ones 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 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*)
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 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*)
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44. The Knight of the Hydan Athe (2002, *Knight Fantastic*)
45. Legacy (2002, *Familiars*)
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48. The Augustine Painters (2002, *Apprentice Fantastic*)
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50. Fat Girl (2002, *Oceans of the Mind VI, ezine*)
51. Diary (2003, *The Sorcerer's Academy*)
52. Winter Death* (2003, *The Sun in Glory: Friends of Valdemar*)
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

