

SAMPLE FOR SOUTHERN AUTHOR EXPO APPLICATION

Catherine Labadie

*Excerpt taken from Render to Silver (Chapter 20)*

Under the moon the cathedral was a different building. The spires climbed higher, aided by the long shadows they cast. Whorls and edges of architecture that had reached its prime hundreds of years in the past stood out in relief against the pale stone. Windows—either regular glass functional shapes or the huge, artistic feats Aebbenary boasted of—reflected swathes of moonlight across her path.

Though she had viewed Silver’s church thousands of times and grown up in its sublime shadow, Marzanna felt smaller beneath its gaze than she had in years. Hope that she would escape it alive felt like hubris, which even the elder gods had been known to punish.

The great doors were an ominous maw of black gaping open to receive her. Her and her alone, invisible or not. Marzanna waited a long span of minutes to see if any of the cathedral’s usual activity was ongoing...or if mourners who had lost loved ones and friends had begun their pilgrimage to the church to claim last rites for their dead. But there was nothing—nothing but the black doorway that seemed to absorb every ounce of moonlight that passed in through the cathedral windows.

*I will not beseech Thy mercy.* She wished she could forget those words along with the cadence of Easoren’s voice as he’d spoken them. Replacing them with images of Fiammetta drudged up from her better memories took effort she shouldn’t have expended, but she needed something to comfort her as she ventured alone into the black. *The ends of Fia’s hair brushing my neck and shoulders when she kisses me. How slowly her eyes shut when I touch her...*

The lanterns in their sconces should have been lit at this hour,

but all was left to darkness as she proceeded. Marzanna's Light was her only company; she had better uses for it than solace alone.

"Find them," she spoke to her own power. Not just her glow, but the impish sediment of pagan magic she'd possessed before all of this had begun. It took her longer than it should have to remember that pagan magic needed an anchor; Marzanna dug frantically in her pockets for something organic, something of the earth. Purely by habit she'd tucked a stone from the road away for safekeeping—it would be enough.

She spoke the command again with more confidence. "Find Fiammetta and Lior."

Part of the stone hollowed, leaving an indentation big enough for the pad of her thumb. She cupped it carefully in her palm and cocked her head to the side as a sound began to flow around and past her like a flourish of pipe organ music. The highs and lows of it—particularly the notes her brain acknowledged even though her ears couldn't catch them—inspired such awful apprehension that she had to rally her resolve to follow it from the beginning again.

It continued to scritch and scratch with unpleasant persistence in the bed of her skull like the point of a knife scraping crusts of dirt out from under her nails. Following it, Marzanna passed swiftly through the public-facing areas of the cathedral as the spell led her down, down, and down further still. Often her steps faltered as she calculated the most likely options for where the stone would lead her, or where Easoren would have thought it best to conceal her loved ones.

The answer eluded her until she stood directly in front of a humble, ordinary door she recognized. Faint lantern light shone under the door. Though it was steady, the sight of it didn't comfort her.

*It would be here.*

A chapel, but not just any chapel. This was where Marzanna had been beaten within inches of her life...where the exalted High Priest had stooped to save her and lift her from obscurity. The Chapel of Contrition.

And, small though it was, it was full of people. Enough that she paused in the doorway, aghast at the trap set for her, that she had almost walked into in her haste to rescue her love.

Founts. All gowned in immaculate uniform. All masked down past their nose, where another veil hid their lips and jaws; they were even gloved. With their hair pinned under their veils the only markers that they weren't dolls were their assorted height differences and skin tones she could only make out if she stared too long.

Their eyes winked towards Marzanna as the door creaked open, revealing fewer clues rather than more. The stone in Marzanna's hands vibrated intensely before it crumbled to dust, consumed by the paradox of a magic spell and her miraculous Light. Yet the humming didn't cease—the stone hadn't been the source at all.

*They can see me!* Her Light hadn't flickered or failed, but Marzanna felt the scorching attention of their united gazes and cowered from it. It had been a possibility that she would stumble into a trap: now it was a certainty.

“Fount of Miracles, we attend thee.”

Some voices were high and flute-like, some low and rasping. They all spoke with the same lack of inflection. None of them moved: they didn't have to. The threat of their presence was enough to hold her fast.

There were too many of them. If Easoren had enlisted every Fount and Cleric—including the Confessors and Absolvers she feared with visceral terror—to find and keep her, Marzanna had to escape from this vanguard at all costs and regroup elsewhere.

At *all* costs. There was no love lost between her and any Fount

in Silver's church, but all of them had been plucked from their lives and dropped into similar nightmares.

"Don't come any closer!" Marzanna gathered handfuls of her cloak in her hands and squeezed the fabric for comfort as she backed away. If only she could grab her halo of Light like a sword and defend herself. The alternative was dropping her unstable control over it and letting those who wouldn't step aside burn before her blinded eyes.

"Fount of Miracles, the time is nigh. We will attend thee and bear thee to thy ascendance." The group began to shuffle forward.

"I don't want to hurt you, but I will! *Stop!*" A reedy note of panic choked her as she gathered her flagging strength. The Founts at the head of the pack paused; their slipper-clad feet dragged to a dusty stop. Several of the ones in the back hummed again, making Marzanna cringe.

"Don't!"

*Fiammetta.*

Her beloved voice had come from the left, but it sounded again from the back right before Marzanna had lunged forward more than a step. The step was enough to trap her as the door slammed shut behind her. Repugnance over what she might be forced to do to the Founts—once again by Easoren—to get to Fia tightened her chest so she couldn't take a deep breath.

"Don't let their blood stain your hands!"

"Fia?"

The Founts rejoined their voices, drowning out what sounded like a sob from Fiammetta. Marzanna lost her patience and the burden of her scruples lifted as she raised her hands with her palms facing out to stab out her power.

"*Heretic.*" The Founts began to hiss. "Heretic, would you kill your lover alongside your sisters?"

Marzanna's lips curled as she cursed him, absent though he

was. *I'll kill you for this.*

The sonorous humming ebbed and flowed around her again, muting her invective. “Fount of Miracles, thy time has come. Submit.”

*Fia is here.* Marzanna beat her head against the three words like they were a wall, forcing herself to keep thinking them so her terror wouldn't outstrip her good sense. *The spell led me right. It will be harder to escape now, that's all.*

“What do you want me to do?”

They parted ranks. Where the appalling likeness of Silver had presided above a large altar, a makeshift purification area had been set up for her benefit. Compared to the watching presence of the masked Founts the scene was surprisingly normal: a silver tub filled with water, a chair with a clean set of Marzanna's custom Fount of Miracles clothing laid over the back, a small table with soap and a brush and her silver coin jewelry.

“We will attend thee.”

*She's here.* Marzanna scanned the assembly with futile yearning. Fiammetta was well-hidden.

“Very well.”

The Founts swarmed her. Their humming distorted to a less foreboding yet still distressing chant of Silver's most sacred hymns as their gloved hands pawed at her and stripped her of her shoes and clothing with care that bordered on veneration. Marzanna heard Fia's sweet voice weaving the melody amongst the harmonies. The location of her voice kept changing, though, as if something was making it bounce from the chords of one Fount to another every few seconds.

Two Founts—neither of them Fiammetta—took her gently by her forearms and led her to the bath. They helped her balance as she stepped into it, then held her as she flinched as soon as one foot touched the bottom of the tub.

The bath wasn't filled with water, but with Miracle wine. When Marzanna sank into it, the cloying smell tickled her nose and tingled against her bare skin, but the texture wasn't sticky or thick. Her various bruises and scrapes from the tumultuous events of the Advent stung as the wine cleansed them, then stopped aching.

It was still vile.

The Founts joined together to bathe her. Each took their turn scrubbing grime from her skin while the others murmured prayer upon prayer in many different Ioggenican and Aebbenarian dialects. None of them removed their elbow-length gloves, so their hands gave no indication as to which of them was Fiammetta.

Before she could rise, a burly Fount held down her shoulders to make her settle back into the bath. Then, filing away in pairs, they backed away to stand against the walls like mute sculptures of saints. Marzanna's back was turned to the doorway she had entered—the one way in and out of the chapel—but she sensed by the chill that filled the room that they were waiting for someone, and that someone had arrived.

She didn't turn.

"It is said that the return of a lamb to the fold is a gift from God. For the lamb to return on its own, without the guiding hand of a shepherd...I might consider that a Miracle."

His voice. Marzanna felt it cut deep enough to scrape the marrow of her bones.

"I had a shepherd, Priest, but I am no lamb."

Easoren's footsteps paused directly behind her. She could feel him standing over her, looking down with eyes that had the power to flay open her tender skin.

"What are you then, besides a heretic?" Listening with ears that burned, Marzanna heard the rustle of his clothing as he knelt behind her. "Are you a wolf like your swordsman? A lion like your scholar?"

She didn't answer right away. Fear stilled her sharp tongue, but it wasn't death she dreaded from his hands. One shudder, then another ripped through her at the shockingly warm brush of his fingertips against her neck as he pulled the damp ends of her hair back and gently twisted the generous mass to lay out of the tub behind her.

“Perhaps I'm a shepherd too.”

His hands paused on her shoulders, hovering above them with a touch so light it hurt. Then he laughed, a genuine burst of mirth that echoed through the chamber and would have made her recoil if she hadn't already been on her guard for the unexpected.

“I have defanged the wolf.” His hands landed and crept upward to not gently cup her face. “I have punished the lion's vanity.” He forced her head back so she had to look at him upside down. “But for you, my blasphemer...”

*Holy God.*

Cursing with the mentality of a penitent was an impossible habit to break, but Marzanna didn't even try. The changes to Easoren were subtle at first, but as they stared at each other in the eerie, swarming quiet of the shrine she noted each one with increasing horror.

Skin washed of most of its color. Grey eyes honed into piercing weapons that bored through her skull to root out her soul. Cheeks that had sunken in from lack of nutrition and regular sleep—a process that should have taken weeks instead of a few days—and teeth a little too long, a little too white in a mouth darkened inside by deeper red.

But the worst part was that seeing him in the flesh once again—with the full awareness of her nudity, her vulnerability alone in this chamber in a tepid bath—struck her with such intense desire her inexhaustible Light blazed a beckoning she would rather die than admit aloud.

They stared at each other without speaking. His thumb stroked the angle of her cheekbone like a line of fire, approaching her lips before he stopped.

“Though you have blasphemed and cursed God, Marzanna, how you have been *favored!*” He murmured the words like he had been marveling at this knowledge for some time. Easoren’s face filled her vision and made her forget, truly and completely, about anything or anyone else.

“Favored...and beloved.”

The final word was a dousing of ice water. Marzanna gasped as she remembered to breathe. *“Beloved,” he says. As if he or Silver knows what that means.*

Easoren let her go and leaned back; she knew because the pull of his presence eased. Marzanna leaned forward and brought her knees up to her chest in the tub, hugging them for comfort as much as to conceal herself. Though the wine was opaque, there wasn’t enough of it to hide more than the lower parts of her breasts.

“You have something I want. What do *you* want from me? Surely now the Advent is over—”

“It’s not over.”

“How can it go on?” She ruefully admitted it shouldn’t have surprised her. “Aebbenary is in shambles. Your wine overflows with no one to guzzle it.”

“The majority of the teeming horde is unharmed. More than ever, Silver’s largess will be coveted by one and all.” He trailed his hand down her hair once more before Marzanna heard him rise and saw him move to sit on the floor in front of the tub so he could watch her. From this angle he looked no better, but some of the inhuman aura from looking at him upside down did abate.

“People died yesterday, Priest.”

“Yes.” A narrow eyebrow arched, waiting for her question.

“How do you expect this city to rejoice at the exchange of a

crown and the vanity of the nobility while their dead litter the streets?”

“They will come. When Silver’s holy church marches from these depths in glory and full force they will come. They’ll line Aebbenary’s streets and sing praises to God as they welcome Him back to His throne...” Easoren paused, tilting his head to the side. “Forgive me, I forgot to ask. How much did you manage to glean about tonight?”

Marzanna scoffed. “Do you expect me to answer that?”

“I have you either way.” He shrugged. “It makes no difference if you tell me or not. We have other things to discuss.”

Easoren’s hand dipped into the tub so his fingertips dangled into the cleansing wine. He watched the ripples without visible concern or hurry; his tranquility made Marzanna want to grind her teeth down to nubs.

“Lior and Fiammetta. They’re safe?”

“For now. They’ll remain so...as long as you comply with my every command.” He made a show of craning his neck this way and that to scan the Founts bordering the chapel. “Your Fiammetta is here with us, as you know.”

She knew. It had occurred to Marzanna from the moment she sensed Easoren’s presence that Fia would witness the mania that came over her whenever he played her chords.

Marzanna skidded backwards in the tub, pressing her back against the edge to escape the creeping sensation she got from watching Easoren’s hand dip in and out of the wine.

“Are you satisfied? Is it the good and appointed hour for you to reveal the task you have molded me for?” she asked. It took work to keep her voice nonchalant—if she showed her desperation he was less likely to tell her—but she was proud of herself for managing it.

“Satisfied...” There was a resonance under the word like he

had been gnawing on it like a bone already riddled with indentations from his teeth. “How I labored to teach you the true nature of God. For nothing, it seems. There is *nothing* that will satisfy Him or us. If you could gain the future you have fought for, Marzanna...what would you do?”

A real smile parted her lips as she leaned forward. “I’d kill you, Your Reverence.”

He met her halfway, also leaning in. “I don’t doubt you believe that. But I think we both know that’s not what you want to do to me, Marzanna.”

Marzanna balked, sinking back against the lip of the tub as shame reminded her to blush. How she *bated* that he knew about her atrocious obsession with him.

And Fiammetta was here, listening. Bearing witness to the arc of Marzanna’s fragile spine bend to breaking as she danced unwillingly on the hook Easoren had cast into her soul.

Easoren’s arm had dipped into the wine up to the tapered sleeve of his ceremonial jacket, but when he withdrew his hand it was dry. Seeing her observe this, he shook droplets that didn’t exist from his skin; the loss of his proximity was minimal but acute.

“Let us imagine you succeed in your superficial desires. You save your lovers one by one from my snares, murder me, and flee on the fastest ship off this island. You vow to them and to yourself that you will never taste the power God gave you again. That you will live a life of contentment and ease with your teacher, your protector, and your virtuous little dove.”

If Marzanna dared shut her eyes in his presence she could see it all. The blood on the floor of the main sanctuary pouring from the hole where she had cut Easoren’s heart from his body. The sight of herself and the companions of her heart fleeing this dark night forever, cloaked and hooded as they boarded a shining ship that would carry them to their new destinies.

“For a time you might be happy. But the so-called freedom you craved would not sate you for long. The peace and domesticity you prayed to the forgotten gods of old for would not quench your thirst. The feast of temptation that had seemed so bountiful would reveal itself as a meager shadow of what you had been given. What you rejected. And, in the manner of regret, the life of your dreams would be corrupted.”

Marzanna stared at him as he wove a spell of words over her frozen body. His eyes were unusually luminous in the glow of her untarnished light and the subdued lanterns in the chapel.

“The corruption would begin with you, but it wouldn’t stop there. Do you wonder who might be most susceptible to your unique poison? My guess is your saintly, sweet Fiammetta.”

“Don’t talk about her. You don’t have the ri—”

“There is no being on this earth unmarked by hunger and ambition. When both of those are denied, even stifled, there is a madness which slinks up from the entrails of our consciousness that can distort even the worthiest souls. Though you would rather die than admit it, the wings of your precious dove are less fragile than they appear...and stained red by her sins.”

*‘Zanna, ‘Zanna, give it to me.* As Marzanna felt the web of Easoren’s words closing in around her, she remembered the grisly dream she had had the morning after her glorious night of loving Fiammetta. The one where her beloved, who had never hurt a soul, had crushed the life from a dove and basked in its blood.

*It was a dream,* she reassured herself, *nothing more.*

“Slander is beneath you, Your Reverence. Though I am not loyal to Silver, I *am* loyal by nature. If all you have come here to do is bait me with lies you have failed.” *I have other dreams. You will not cure me of my longing for freedom.*

Easoren nodded as if conceding. “Loyalty. In time, you will surrender that to Us as well. Along with everything else.”

*Us.* The plural term chilled her.

“I tire of your theater.”

He stood with grace that contradicted the warped proportions of his changed figure, then extended a hand down to assist her.

“Very well. Up.”

The command chafed, but part of Marzanna longed to obey it. She forgot that she was naked as she slowly rose from the bathing wine without taking his hand. It stung her pores like nettles as it dripped off her body and hair, leaving it dry and clean as it slithered down her skin.

He looked. She watched his eyes travel down her body in the manner of a normal man, not a holy High Priest. The return of self-awareness was gradual, but Marzanna began to remember that outside of this lofty talk of ambition and destiny she was a woman of tender flesh, soft breasts, slender limbs. That Easoren, whatever else he was, was not as immune to her physical charms as he made himself appear.

An image of a thought that could only be his hovered behind her eyes in the space of a single blink: her body writhing beneath his, her ankles on his shoulders as he fucked her. In this vision the *only* thing she wore was her bracelets, anklets, and the circlet of coins around her head.

*Fia.* Marzanna belatedly covered herself with an arm across her breasts and her other hand shielding the shadows between her thighs. *She's here, she'll see.*

Though he was unusually talkative, Easoren let the moment go. He gestured for her to approach the chair with her new clothes on it and, unexpectedly, began to wait on her himself instead of allowing any of the silent Founts to assist. Though he was careful not to let his skin brush hers she felt the warmth of it anyway, and kept shivering with the strength it took not to “accidentally” give in to touching him.

She bit her lip to keep from gasping as he viciously tightened her stays. These small reminders of how both of them were on the cusp of irreparable violence shouldn't have exhilarated her...but they did. Marzanna sucked in a breath and held steady.

“Satisfaction is ephemeral on this earth, Marzanna, but it is something you will grant Us tonight through sacrifice.” She must have passed a test; he gave her another clue without preamble.

“What more can you take? What else should I, a pauper before Silver, bleed out for your cause?”

*How do you know it isn't your blood he wants on his altar? Or Fia's, Lior's, Däard's?*

“When Silver comes, He will ask of you what He wills. Before then, the sacrifice of your dreamed future might suffice.”

*Yea, God of Gods, and Thine earthly glory will increase unending.*

Marzanna heard the voice, but if her life had depended on it she couldn't say if they prayer had come from her, Easoren, or Silver Himself acknowledging the fatal dawn of His new era.

When she was ready, Easoren stepped away and looked her over.

*I have not beseeched Thy mercy, but Thou hast granted me gain before loss.*

He led the way out of the chapel. Before Marzanna could consider mutiny four Founts surrounded her back, front, and on either side. They didn't touch her, gloves or not, but they began following Easoren so she had no choice but to walk with them or be pushed by the horrible feeling of their bodies. None of these were Fiammetta either, she was certain.

*You win for now,* she thought at the back of Easoren's head as they proceeded out of the chapel and back up the way she'd come down to the primary entrance of the cathedral. *But in the open you will not be able to escape when I come for you.*

The church remained dark despite their passage. Marzanna gave off her own Light, but it merely lit her own path and that of the

Founts guarding her. No one else should have been able to see since they had left the lanterns in the Chapel of Contrition. Easoren especially, walking ahead alone, should have been blind...but he glanced back once to make sure she was following him, and she saw the glow of silver in his eyes. He could see perfectly well.

Figures shifted and groaned in the gloom as individuals, duos, and groups of varying sizes fell in line behind their procession. The inhabitants of the church hadn't been absent like Marzanna had thought as she'd followed the song of the Founts down to the chapel in search of Lior and Fiammetta. They had been here the whole time, tucked away in crevices in the walls and gaps in the stone. Waiting for the High Priest's command to surge forth like bile from an empty stomach out of the maw of the cathedral.

They were a parade of silent watchers as Easoren shepherded them into Aebbenary proper. The sound of their shuffling progress and the murmurs of prayers beginning to be sung marked their way as they came to the bridge and crossed it. Though Marzanna couldn't see very far—the Fount in front of her was taller—she glimpsed the Peacemakers lining the path into the city holding massive torches aloft so every man, woman, and child could see the outpouring of Silver's faithful.

They had come, for some reason. Marzanna paused long enough to remember the people felled by sword or stampede and wonder if even half of their corpses had been borne away to be prepared for their eternal rest. Her head throbbed with the faint pulsing of her Light as it began to grow and grow. The reflection of it off the silver adornments—similar to the coin jewelry ornamenting her own appearance—made spots shiver under her eyelids whenever she blinked. When she closed her eyes for a breath of rest before the Founts began to nudge her forward again, towards the multitude making way for the church parade, the jewelry became chains instead of decorations.

They walked for a decade. A century. The interval between the dying of one millennia and the birth of the next. Aebbenarians threw flowers at their feet to the sound of prayers murmured, hissed, cried out, and shouted. Marzanna wondered where they were finding so many blooms until they approached and passed one of the Miracle wine fountains. White flowers tinged red at the base of their lily-like petals overflowed with the wine onto the street, where people picked up the silver-veined blossoms and rained them down on the heads of the church procession.

The scent of them—sweetness and the green tang of decay beginning to set in—was so heady it made her feel drunk. All of her senses were heightened by her fear and dread, but she was aware enough to realize this felt...almost like a wedding. A somber, terrifying marriage of the intangible with the tangible.

Marzanna lost track of where they turned or what road they followed to Aebbenary's heart. There was only Easoren's lean, distorted figure walking ahead of them all, the praying Founts surrounding her, the steady thrum of the Peacemaker giants escorting them to the final purpose of the Advent of Generosity.

When they stopped, it took her a moment to realize it. Marzanna looked up and around, blinking in the glare of her own Light as it sharpened to a stabbing point before it settled.

The scene existed as her vision had prophesied. The hexagon stage crafted from polished cedar. In the middle waited the decadent throne—though Easoren had confessed more than she'd expected him to, she couldn't guess which of them would be sitting and who would kneel. Dozens of Peacemakers surrounded the stage and stood at attention on both sides of the stairs leading up to the stage bare of all but the throne and the spires of the impossibly tall ladder stretching up towards the heavens.

The Founts surrounding Marzanna melted away; without them she felt exposed. In the wake of prayers falling silent Easoren slowly

turned to face her. This time when he extended his hand to help her up the stage stairs, she knew she couldn't say no. Her Light could grant her that power—but she'd scorch a thousand souls for the privilege. Any three of them could belong to Lior, Däard, or Fiammetta.

Curiosity got the better of Marzanna. “What is the purpose of the ladder?”

“Symbols are powerful tools,” Easoren murmured a cryptic answer from close behind her.

END OF SAMPLE