

SALVE, REGINA

MELANIE RAWN

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Known for the *Dragon Prince* and *Dragon Star* trilogies, MELANIE RAWN has earned a reputation for far-ranging fantasy novels which reinvent the tropes of the genre with new life and ambition. She was a teacher and editor before turning to fiction writing full-time. Her most recent novel is the second in the Exiles trilogy, *The Mage-born Traitor*. The clash of religion and mythology has widespread effects in the cultures where it has happened. "Salve, Regina" takes a close look at what happens when one person is at the center of that conflict.

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Her bones were numb with kneeling on cold stone. On the cobbled floor beside the beds of her fevered children; on the broken pebbles beside the

graves of her parents and her sister and her sister's sons and her friends and her own dear husband; on the rough flags of the Church, before the altar and the candles—she knelt and tended and wept and prayed all this long winter until her bones were numb.

The priest stood upright beside the deathbeds, beside the graves, before the altar, intoning the sacred incomprehensible words of the Faith. He called to Christ for surcease of famine and disease, for deliverance from poisoned water and dying cattle and withered soil. He stood upright amid the Holy Relics and the Holy Water, the candles, and the chalice her own dear husband had fashioned with worshiping hands and Monseigneur le Baron's gift of silver.

Excepting the priest's, all heads in the village bowed heavy with repentance for sins committed and sins imagined and sins unknown. The miller's wife flogged herself bloody; she died four days later, so it was obvious she had not repented enough. The baker's weakling newborn daughter did not cry out when Holy Water drenched her brow; she died the next morning, so it was obvious that her silence meant the Devil had not flown out of her at Baptism. All that winter there were ashes and offerings, vows and Masses. The dying confessed, were shriven, tasted Wine and Wafer one last time. The living begged God the Father and Christ the Son to save them, have pity, reveal to them their sins so that they might mend their ways so the horror would cease.

The horror continued.

Worse than cold and hunger, worse even than her husband's death, her children did not know her. Their small bodies burned with Hell's own fires (and why, for surely such little ones had no sins upon their sweet young souls). Her own body was numb, and her heart and mind as well, the endless horror burning away all that she was.

Only last summer she had been plump and pretty, her husband the envy of the village for her pink cheeks and sunlight hair and bright laughter. Only last summer she had quickened with her sixth child that this winter had been born too soon and lived too briefly even to be baptized. Now she was gaunt and hollow, gray and empty. There would be no more children, and the five that were left her would soon be no more if she could not give them fresh water and nourishing food and certain cure for the fever.

She knew no medicine. There was no food. The water in the village well was fouled, and she dared not use it even to soothe the heat from her children's skin, for who knew but that it did not soak fever demons into their bodies? But water there must be—somewhere, somewhere, clean and pure. Water obsessed her. She remembered its coolness that slaked thirst and washed small hands and faces clean for Sunday Mass. She remembered how her children waved pink fists when Holy Water drenched their brows and consecrated them to Christ (but for that last baby, born too soon, whose soul would forever wander—and why, for surely there could be no sin on a newborn child).

She had no medicine and no food—but surely somewhere, somewhere, there must be water.

She bade her husband's sister, whose husband the cobbler was dead, to come sit with the children while she was gone, for the promise of sweet water to drink when she returned. She took up her cloak and two wooden buckets with fraying rope handles, and walked. Past the village well, past the Church, past the graveyard, past the dying apple orchard and the unplowed fields. She felt her cold numb bones come back to aching life, but when her heart and her mind threatened to awaken like her body, she said the word *water* over and over and over again, a talisman like a Holy Relic against fear and thought and pain.

Water, water, water.

And then, deep in the forest, she could smell it. Not trapped in stone, like the water in the village well, or plate-smooth like the water in the font, but wild and free and swift-running over rock and moss.

Water.

She was deep in the forest, and did she allow herself to think, she would know she was hopelessly lost. Did she allow herself to feel, she would be terrified. But she smelled water, and walked deeper into the forest, where no daughter of the True Faith should ever go alone, for within lurked forbidden caves and mysterious groves and strange standing stones no man could pull down, stones that at each turning of the year were said to rise up and dance by white wicked moonlight.

And then she heard water, its soft laughter so like her children's laughter of only last summer that she cried out and ran. No root or vine or

fallen log tripped her on her way, no bush or bramble or branch waylaid her. She came to a broad stream of clear, laughing water. Soft moss cushioned its banks like the fat pillows on Madame la Baronne's chair. Bright flowers nodded above its ripples like Madame's daughters in their lovely gowns. Old oaks and graceful willows whispered just like Madame's ladies gossiping around the great hearth that always blazed with fire. She had seen these splendid things, for she had been in Madame's service before her marriage. But all the comforts and colors of the distant Chateau were as nothing to the sumptuous miracle of water.

The moss gave gently beneath her aching bones as she fell on her knees to drink. *Water, fresh water, such as she had not tasted in months*— She scooped handful after handful into her mouth, over her face, tore off her dirty scarf and cap and unpinned her hair to rinse the winter's sickness and grief away.

When her emptiness was filled and her hair spread wet and clean down her back, she lifted her eyes to the white-gold sunlight and murmured a prayer of thanksgiving—not to God the Father or Christ the Son, but to the Blessed Mother whose compassion was surely responsible for this miracle of water.

And a woman's voice answered her.

"You are most welcome, daughter."

The woman's voice was low and gentle and warm, like a breeze returned from last summer. She turned, still on her knees, to behold a woman standing beside an ancient oak. Neither young nor old, dark nor fair, smiling nor solemn—and yet all these things at the same time. Her beauty was of face and form, but also of spirit that gleamed in her eyes that were all the colors of the forest: earth-brown, willow-green, sun-gold. She wore simple robes of white, gathered at waist and shoulder. Around her throat coiled a necklace of gold, and at her wrists wrapped matching bracelets.

All the numbness and all the pain were gone. Covering her face with her hands, she bowed low to the Blessed Mother.

"What is your name, my dear?"

For all the water, her mouth was suddenly parched dry. She swallowed hard, bit her lips, and with her face still hidden in her hands she

stammered, "Berthilde, Lady."

"Ah! Bright One—doubtless for your lovely golden hair. This is one of my Names, also." There was a smile in the warm soft voice. "I have so many!"

The words tumbled from Berthilde's lips in spontaneous joy, for here was the Lady for whom they were meant: "Queen of Heaven, Mother of God, Mystic Rose, Seat of Wisdom, Blessed Virgin, Lady of Light, Health of the Sick—" She caught her breath and dared peek from between her fingers. She *was* smiling now, with great sweetness and even a little humor.

"Lady of the Mountains, the Beasts, the Forest, the Lake," she said, nodding. "Quite a list! Add to these the Names Gaia, Isis, Hera, Ashtoreth, Brigid, Inanna, Britomartis, Car, and a thousand others that would mean even less to you, Bright One."

Her hands fell shaking to her knees and suddenly she was afraid. "Lady," she whispered, "never have I heard such sounds, not even when the priest speaks the Holy Mass."

"They are Names only. Those who know me know who I am." Pausing, she shook her head. "The priest does not."

"But—surely he serves you!"

"Not he. Few in this land serve me now."

Berthilde hung her head with shame. "We have sinned, Lady, I know this. Else why would there be this blight upon our land, and this sickness that kills even the strongest among us? We are unworthy of the sacrifice made by your Holy Son—we have not followed God's Laws—"

"On the contrary," the Lady replied, brows arching, "you have followed them all too well."

"I am only a woman, I do not understand such things—but I beg you, Sweet Lady, help my children! Free them from the fever that is killing them and all our village!"

"This is why you have come here, daughter. Such will be *your* doing.

Bring water to your children, and to your village, and to the cattle starving in your byres and the fouled well and the weary earth of your fields. Take this water, pure and clean, and give back thanks for it."

"I do thank you, Most Blessed Lady—"

"But *not* like that!" she exclaimed. "Groveling with your face in the dirt displeases me. Stand upright! Lift up your hands to the warmth of the sun!" Berthilde did as bidden; the Lady smiled. "Much better. Now you show your gratitude with joy, not fear. Take the water, Bright One, and return as often as you have need. The water and I will always be here."

Berthilde dipped her two buckets deep into the stream. As she turned to say her thanks again, she was alone but for the sighing of the summer-memory breeze in the willows and the dance of sunshine on the water.

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She walked swiftly, light of step and heart for sureness that soon her children would be well, the grass would grow, the orchard would bloom, the crops would flourish, the cattle would fatten and give sweet milk. These first two buckets would be for her children, then the sickest of the village and, of course, the priest. After that, the rest of the people and then the animals and the land itself would drink, and be healed.

Still, as she passed the withering apple trees, she could not but stop, and set down her buckets, and cup in her hands water for one tree that was special to her. Beneath its branches, heavy with spring leaves and white blossoms and the promise of sweet fruit, her husband had kissed her for the first time. She sprinkled the dry earth at its roots with water, and stood back. She waited, holding her breath.

The apple tree quivered, seeming to shake off the blight and the cold. Tender green shoots appeared. She cried out in wonder and snatched up the buckets, hurrying home anxious to watch the miracle occur to her children.

Yet caution slowed her steps as she neared the village. Last moondark, the tanner, trudging the long miles home from the Chateâu, was set upon by cloaked men who stole the flour that had paid him for repairing Monseigneur's favorite saddle. If people saw this fresh water, would she,

too, crawl to her doorstep bruised and bloodied—and lacking something even more precious than flour for a single loaf?

She could not risk it. She was sorry to be suspicious of anyone, but she must think of her children first, and the bloom of health that would replace the hectic fever in their cheeks. So she took the long way around the village so that none would see her. None did, and she crossed her own threshold at last.

The children were alone. Their father's sister had not stayed as she promised. Berthilde was angry for a moment, then shrugged, for it did not matter. Swiftly she took a cup—their wedding cup, made by her husband of good pewter polished to silver's gleam—from the shelf above the cold dead hearth and dipped it into the water.

Margot first, she was the youngest. Madeleine. Arnaud. Anne. Jean. Standing beside their small beds, she lifted her weary hands and gave wordless thanks to the Queen of Heaven as their breathing eased and their burning skin cooled.

Anne stirred, opened her eyes, and whispered, "Maman?"

Berthilde wept and laughed and hugged her children to her breast. After a time, when they had fallen into healing sleep, she picked up the buckets and started for the blacksmith's home; he was ill, and his family were close to death, they should have the water first.

The smithy was beyond the Church. As she neared the gray stone sanctuary, she knew she must give the water first of all to the priest. He was God's Voice in the village, a sincere and holy man, not like his long-dead predecessor who had always reeked of ale. Père Jerome went to every house every day, to comfort and hear confession and give the Last Rites. He would be wiser than she about whose need was greatest.

Accordingly, she carried the buckets up the three steps (symbolizing the Holy Trinity) and under the lintel with its carved wooden Virgin huddled beneath the eaves. As she passed below the Lady's sight, she looked up. Although this stiff, sorrowing face was nothing like the warm loveliness of the woman she had seen in the forest, she fancied she saw a smile curve the corners of those lips.

The priest was at the altar, but in a pose Berthilde had never seen

before: prostrate on the floor, arms flung out, fists clenched and face hidden against cold stones. Shocked, she stood mute at the back of the nave, listening as he cried out and beat his fists on the flags for anguish.

"No," she heard herself say, and set down the buckets, and hurried to him. She bent, touched his shoulder. "Oh, no, you must not, Père Jerome! You must put away your despair, we are saved!"

He scrambled to his feet, a tall, thin, ascetic man in brown cassock and rope cincture with a fine ivory cross on a leather thong around his neck. He dashed tears from his face and stared down at Berthilde.

"Saved? When only today three more have sickened, and two others have died? What else is there but despair when there are too many bodies for the ground to receive?"

"There will be no more deaths." She tugged him by the arm to the back of the nave, and showed him the water. "I found it—no, I was led to it by the Blessed Lady, and I *saw* her, Père Jerome, I saw her and she spoke to me and—"

"You—" He choked on the rest, and stood back from her. "Berthilde, where did you find this water?"

"I will tell you everything, but first you must drink. You are not well, I can see the fever beginning in your face. Drink, Père Jerome. Please."

He cupped a handful of water, sniffed it warily, but did not drink. "Tell me where you have found fresh water in this blighted land, and then I will decide whether or not to drink."

So she told him of the forest, of the stream, of the Blessed Lady, of the water, of the apple tree. All the while the precious water dribbled between his fingers onto the stones. His dark eyes grew darker, and grim. At last, when she was finished, he crossed himself and murmured many of the Holy Words she did not understand.

Fixing her with a stern, worried gaze, he said, "Berthilde, there are things I wish to make clear in my mind. Questions I wish you to answer. Will you do this?"

"Of course, Père Jerome!"

"This woman you say you saw. Was she wearing a blue mantle?"

"No. She was dressed all in glowing white—finer even than Madame la Baronne's finest clothes."

"Was there a light about her? A nimbus?"

"I do not understand this word, Père Jerome."

"A halo, as you saw around Christ in the Chateau's chapel window."

"No. But the sun shone warmly around her, as if in her presence it was always spring."

"Did she carry a book? Or a lily, perhaps?"

"No, but she wore a necklace and bracelets of gold, all twined around itself."

"Did she speak with reverence of the Lord God and His Son Jesus Christ, and say that she had Their blessing to show you this water?"

"N-no," she said more slowly now. "But she did speak of God's Holy Law."

"And what did she say?"

"That—that we had followed it only too well. And that few in this land serve her now, or know her for who she truly is."

"You say she spoke many strange names to you.

What were these names she used of herself?"

"I do not recall them, Père Jerome. I am only a simple, ignorant woman. I have no learning—" She hesitated, trying to remember the sounds, then said shyly, "She *did* say that my name means Bright One, and that this was one of her own Names as well."

"Was one of them"—and here his voice fell to a hush—"Ashtoreth?"

"Yes! Ashtoreth—and a word like my daughter's name, Anne—"

The priest crossed himself several times and spoke very rapidly in the Holy Tongue. Then he took Berthilde by the shoulders and gazed with awesome intensity into her eyes.

"You have been cozened, seduced by frightful powers of evil. I give thanks to Almighty God that He has sent you here to His Holy Church before your simplicity could lead you into direst peril of your immortal soul."

Berthilde's heart thudded with terror. "Père Jerome," she breathed, "what have I done?"

"It is true that you are ignorant, thus easy prey. This is my fault for not instructing you more strictly." He bowed his head, the small circle of his tonsure pale and naked at the crown of his head. "What priest, becoming shepherd of so gentle a flock, would believe his sheep capable of any but small everyday sins—let alone of being led so far astray? I spoke no harsh warnings, I saw no need. And I was wrong." Looking at her once more, he went on, "I repent of my sin and will remedy your ignorance. It was not the Blessed Virgin you saw, but a spawn of Satan."

"No!" she blurted. "She was not, she could not have been—"

"I tell you that it was. Had you truly seen the Mother of God, she would have worn a blue mantle, for blue is her color. Her head would be surrounded by a blaze of light, for she is the Queen of Heaven. She would have held a book, as she did when the Archangel Gabriel came to her, or the lily he gave her as symbol of her blessedness among all women. She would have told you that of her compassion she had pleaded with God and Christ to let her help you by giving you water. Instead—"

She trembled, not daring to breathe.

"She wore glowing white, as bright as the star Lucifer was before he fell into the Pit. Did she not say that Bright One was one of her own names? And the necklace and bracelets of gold—were they not like snakes twisting about her throat and arms? The names she called herself—oh, Berthilde, the name Ashtoreth is a word damned and damned again in the Holy Bible! As for the seeming miracle of the apple tree—do you not recall that it was this very fruit in the hand of a woman that led to banishment from Eden? You did not see the Blessed Virgin, you did not hear the words of the Mother of God! You saw and heard the Devil!"

Reeling with fear and confusion, she cried out. "But—but she was so beautiful, so kind—she smiled at me—"

"And do you believe that Satan cannot assume any shape he pleases, to trick and betray foolish women? How much wicked pleasure you gave, kneeling at the Evil One's feet instead of to God!"

"She bade me *not* to kneel, but to lift up my hands in joyful thanks—"

"Which only proves that she was *not* Holy Mary! Before her, all people and especially all women should go down on their knees, for she alone among you is without sin!"

"No, Père Jerome—please, no—"

"You have consorted with the very author of all our misery! When we turn our hearts from God, who is waiting to seize us? To torment us? To make of our lives on earth a foretaste of the Hell that awaits us for all eternity?"

Struggling, the air clogging in her throat, she protested, "But—but my children—they are well now, they sleep peacefully and without fever—the water cured them—"

"The water is accursed," he intoned, and with his bare foot kicked both buckets over onto the stone floor. Crossing himself, he said, "It cannot harm consecrated ground."

Berthilde moaned. "It will save us—the people, the animals, the crops—it saved the apple tree—"

"The tree must be cut down, for any fruit of it is accursed. You and your children, having drunk of the water, are accursed until confessions are made and penances given. Perhaps even an exorcism is needed." He fixed her with dark eyes that burned. "Kneel, and give thanks that Almighty God has brought you to His Church in order to save your soul."

Berthilde shook like a willow in the wind. Her knees quivered—but she did not fall upon them. She could not.

"On your knees, and beseech the Lord to forgive your sin!"

She could not.

Through the thin worn leather of her shoes she felt the water, pooling in tiny lakes on the rough-hewn stones, soaking into the skin of her feet. She remembered how clean it had tasted on her lips, how bright it had felt on her face and in her hair.

It was not evil. It had not come from the Devil. It had revived the apple tree, *her* apple tree. It had cured her children.

She did not feel accursed. And she could not kneel.

She ran, out the door beneath the stiff unsmiling wooden statue and down the three steps, across the churchyard and through the village. She ran past the apple tree and the blighted fields, and deep into the forest.

~oOo~

The Lady was waiting for her.

"Your children are well now."

Wordless, Berthilde nodded.

"Then why are you distraught? Like me, you are a mother, and the first joy of a mother's heart is to know her children safe and well."

"Lady—" Breath caught in her throat. "Lady, the priest—"

The lovely face changed subtly. "Ah. Yes. The priest. Tell me, Berthilde."

"He says—he says you are evil, that the water is accursed, that you caused our land to sicken—"

Suddenly all warmth and sunlight vanished. The golden necklace seemed to writhe about the Lady's throat, the bracelets twisting about her wrists. Berthilde stumbled back from her terrible wrath.

"I?" she exclaimed. "Have I plowed the land until it bleeds, and never given back to it a single drop of the blood that poured from its flesh? Have I slaughtered trees for the burning, for clearing more land to feel cold and soulless teeth of iron? Have I fouled the sacred wells? Have I done any of these things? Have I?"

Wind shuddered in the old oaks, whirled across the water. Yet as quickly as it came, it departed, and with it the Lady's anger. The gold stilled around her neck and arms, and with wise, sad eyes she gazed at Berthilde.

"And yet this priest does me homage, though he knows it not. Had my other Names not been forgotten and denied, perhaps even priests would understand who I truly am."

Berthilde asked humbly, "Please—I am too ignorant to understand, but I would at least truly know you so that I may truly serve you."

"I am the Mother of the Sacred King who is slain. I am She of Eternal Sorrow, for my beloved Son must die so that the earth and all else may live. All life begins and ends in me. All peoples are my children. I am She who gives life, and She to whom all life returns to be reborn. I am the Maiden, the Mother, and the Old Woman of Wise Blood, the Trinity, the faces of the Moon."

She felt her arms lift, her hands open, not to ward off these words but to gather them to herself as the truth she knew they must be.

"My Breath spoke the Sound that began the world. The difference between me and the priests' god is that I will never speak the Sound that ends it."

In an awed whisper, Berthilde heard herself say, "For—for a mother's joy is to see her children safe and well____"

The Lady nodded. "You see, you do understand. Go now, daughter, and be a mother to your children. You have been a Maiden, as I am, and served me with your dancing and your laughter. Now you are a Mother, as I am, and you may best serve me by tending your children. Women who are old, as I am, serve me in yet another way. Go now, daughter, and serve me by keeping your children safe and well."

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She never saw her children again.

When she returned to the village, past sere fields and her apple tree, the priest seized her with his own hands, for no one else would touch her. The

blacksmith, though hollow-eyed and reeling with fever, had yet made iron shackles for her wrists and her ankles. What little kindling was left after the long cold winter was piled up in the square, and someone brought the fresh green wood of the slaughtered apple tree, and at eventide she was burned as a witch and heretic.

The smoke rose, stinking of scorched human flesh and greenwood, to blacken the sky. And the horror continued, and the blight, and the grief. More in the village sickened, and more died. But not the priest.

For when Berthilde fled, in a moment of weakness—*water, fresh water, such as he had not tasted in months*—he fell to his knees and touched his hand to the pooling water. The droplets on his fingertips were almost near enough his lips to taste when he realized the temptation to which he had nearly succumbed. He prayed for a long while, and at last, his Faith assuring him that all the Devil's handiwork had vanished, once more he touched the water and let it touch his lips. It was as sweet and clean and wondrous as Berthilde had promised. Of all the village, the priest alone did not sicken, and in due course this evidence of purity and holiness made him bishop, archbishop, and cardinal.

One Sunday many years later, as he lifted his hands in exaltation before a cathedral altar, a vision appeared before him. The woman was neither young nor old, dark nor fair, smiling nor solemn—and yet all these things at the same time. Her beauty was of face and form, but also of spirit that gleamed in her eyes. She wore a mantle of blue. One hand held a book; the other, a lily. About her head was a nimbus like golden sunlight, as if in her presence it was always spring. About her throat coiled a necklace of gold, and at her wrists wrapped matching bracelets.

His heart thudded in his chest at sight of her. She gave him a wise, sad smile, murmuring, "And do you know me now, priest?"

With his hands raised and trembling, his voice rang through Notre Dame de Paris:

***"Salve, regina, mater misericordiae,
Vita, dulcedo et spes nostra, salve!"***

"I suppose that must do," she said.

***"Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy, our Life,
our Sweetness and our Hope, hail!"***