

**The Sins of the Mother**  
**A short story of the Thelenic Curriculum**  
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The Symposium chamber of the city of Lore, heart of government for one of the most powerful empires in the world, was near empty on the evening that Empress Hypatia Tydask died. As with many sudden deaths of the great and powerful, it came just at the moment that her position seemed assured. The Empress, wearing the traditional green robes of the Lily College, trimmed in purple to show her membership of the Imperial House and worked in the gold thread reserved for the Arch-Chancellor, sat at the head of the great khile Seminary Desk and regarded the High Seminar with a mixture of disdain and anticipation. Legend had it that the desk had been carved from a single massive khile tree that had once grown within the tower of Thelen himself, but Hypatia, like most modern Magisters, gave little credence to such fancies. Nonetheless, the desk measured some twenty feet across and from the rings in the wood, was a single cross-section of a tree that had stood for some three thousand years before it was cut- and that had been over a thousand years ago.

Hypatia Dane, as she had been born, was not the most powerful Magister to have held the position, and had instead taken up the role after the death of her husband, the Scholar Emperor, Adramion Tydask. Losing her position by the Rite of Challenge to a more skilled Magister was a very real threat, but the same astuteness that had seen her married to the Emperor had also ensured that challenging her would be at the least politically unfortunate, and possibly even fatally dangerous. Any who considered such measures to be in some way unfair had utterly failed to understand the entire point of the political system of the Lily College. It was not enough for an incumbent Arch-Chancellor to be able to defeat their enemies in the duelling arena or on the field of battle- they had to possess the skills to reduce the number of threats to their position to the barest minimum. Since this by definition included external threats to the Empire of the Thelenic Curriculum itself, the College was virtually guaranteed a leader who would be savagely effective in matters of both domestic and international politics. The alternative was death, or at least an embarrassing dispossession.

There was, however, one arena in which Hypatia, now a Tydask having been inducted to the Imperial House with her marriage, had failed almost completely. For some reason, despite all the extensive checks of the compatibility of her Pattern with that of Adramion, the three children who had resulted from their union had been utterly unsuited for positions of power in the College. Only one, Pieter Tydask, had even achieved Magister status, and he had reached his late twenties in possession of only a mediocre two Leaves of rank, not enough even to challenge for the Chancellorship of a backwater city like the port of Mernas. The other two had taken up honourable commissions in the military or Infirmary which had saved some face, but an Imperial dynasty was not maintained by such means. Eventually, with Hypatia's grudging consent, Adramion had taken on a hand-picked concubine, Lady Ritala Daran. Ritala was, even by the eccentric standards of Magisters who could bend reality to their will and therefore occasionally had a somewhat twisted view of it, a wild-card. She had no Leaves to her name, lacking the temperament for the required academic study to become a true Magister, and yet her power was unquestioned, as was her beauty. That some called her a Warlock, an untrained and dangerous magic-user, was of little consequence in the important business of creating Imperial heirs. For all this, Hypatia and Adramion had remained on good terms, and had even conceived one final child together shortly after the birth of Ritala's second. The Patrons had not smiled upon them, however, and the infant was born so hideously deformed that the mewling form had been hurriedly taken away and destroyed at Adramion's order before Hypatia had even held it.

Now, at the same table as Hypatia, the progeny of her hated rival and grudging saviour were seated.

The eldest, Ullarth, was tall and strong, with blonde hair and piercing blue eyes, both Folded into his Pattern at birth to resemble his public mother, as opposed to the red-headed, green-eyed Ritala. Now in his fifteenth year, he was officially still completing his studies for his first Leaf, but none who met him were in any doubt that here was a true successor to the role of Scholar Emperor. At his hip rested his father's ancestral sword, *Queen's Bitch*, an ancient bastard sword of terrible potency with which the young Imperial scion had already reached a level of proficiency to rival some Sword-masters, who were themselves warriors of Magister-level power who had voluntarily been Sealed to devote all of that potential to their physical and martial skills. Myrka, Ullarth's younger sister, was if anything even more devoted to combat than her brother, and had had to be dissuaded from taking up the Seal of the Sword herself. As it was, even at the age of thirteen she stood just short of six feet tall and wore College battle-plate at almost all times. Adramion, seeing the girl's disposition, had tried to teach her Impose, the rune-based strategy game used as the basis for Imperial military training, but her hot temper often overcame her natural brilliance and she regularly lost to Ullarth, and her younger brother, Thelir. Nonetheless, it was hoped that her quick mind and physical prowess would one day make her a formidable battlefield Magister. Little Thelir, in contrast, a slender youth of twelve, was already feared in the barracks and taverns of Lore as a deadly player of the game of Chasten. Unlike Impose, which was designed in part to give the Sealed masses an appreciation of the power of the Magisters, using magic to influence the cards in a game of Chasten was prohibited, but Thelir won so often that many muttered that he must be doing it. Even the wily Magister Ollan Dane, one of Thelir's many tutors, had failed to catch the child at it, however, and the youngster had won a horse and a small estate from various members of the Court before Hypatia found out and forbade him to play for bets.

These three, then, were the future of the Lily College. To Hypatia's relief, the two younger children seemed content to follow the lead of their elder brother, who in any case was the most powerful of the three, so the succession, when it came, would most likely be smooth. None of the three were even aware that Hypatia was not their true mother, for Ritala was kept well out of the public eye and the physiological symptoms of pregnancy were simple enough to fake, though amongst the Senior Faculty the true facts were something of an open secret. Any Magister who aspired to the rank of Chair would never fall for so simple a deception. The truth would of course be revealed to the next generation in due time, but it would change little. By then, Hypatia would be the respected Matriarch of House Tydask, Ritala would be long gone and Ullarth, as the new Emperor, would have no reason to cast public doubt on his own lineage.

The other eleven seats at the Seminary Desk were taken up by the Chairs, Magisters who held important roles in the research or academic Faculty. These were further divided into the Patron Chairs, named for the seven children of Thelen who were also referred to as the First Magisters, and the Imperial Chairs, later additions to the Council that reflected the needs of the growing Empire. There were the other Tydask-held Chairs, Marinas, Indiria, and Dekan, who with Hypatia herself and the unflinching support of her Vice-Chancellor, Gheris Falon, secured a near-stranglehold on the Council if it should be decided to call a vote. Such a thing was rare, however, since the role of the High Seminar was considered to be far more to advise the Empress than it was to decide policy itself. Among the other Chairs, old Edereth Dane, the Chair of Earth, was more interested in crop yields than he was in internal politics, and despite her role as Voice of the Voiceless, the holder of the Chair of Amaran, Marike Falon, was generally content to follow Gheris' lead. The Vice-Chancellor had quietly warned Hypatia, however, that if the small, dark woman should decide to speak, it would be wise to listen. Amaran was the lowest Chair in terms of status, and Marike was appropriately seated at the opposite end to Hypatia, but this meant she could stare directly into the Empress' eyes. The eighty-sixth stanza of the Fifth Book of Thelen states "*In any power structure, that which seems weakest may yet hold the most strength.*" and no Magister with any sense ignored such wisdom, especially when some scholars believed it referred to the Patron Amaran herself.

Fortunately, Marike and Marinas Tydask, Hypatia's sister-in-law, were involved in a long-running feud, for some thirty years ago Rendel Thane, the Patriarch of a lesser House and a well respected Archivist, had spurned the advances of Marinas to marry Marike. The union had been the source of some gossip, since neither Magister had joined the other's House in name, though in practice the two Houses had formed a close alliance. Their six (*six!*, thought Hypatia, bitterly) children, of whom the eldest, Derelar, was considered a rising star in the College, had kept the name of their father, but currently stood to exert significant influence in House Falon if Gheris continued to be childless. Overall, it had provided a useful distraction that Hypatia had exploited mercilessly. Truly was it said that no-one held a grudge like a Magister. Poor Dekan, holder of the Chair of Handastalath and therefore, due to that Chair's responsibility for the administration of the College, Rendel's ultimate superior, had been so preoccupied fending off Marinas' vindictive demands that there was no chance of him making trouble for Hypatia within the House. Only the elderly Indiria could possibly have challenged her position on the death of Adramion, but the old woman took her role as Chair of Leaves very seriously, and considered day-to-day politics to be insignificant against that Chair's oversight of the training and assessment of the next generation of Magisters.

In theory, the Chancellors of any of the other cities of the Empire were also eligible to attend the High Seminar, but this privilege was rarely exercised, since most had their own Seminars to oversee. This evening, only the seat of the Chancellor of Gyre was filled, and Chancellor Rakan cut a lonely figure in the front of the Symposium Gallery. His esteemed colleagues were not missing much by their absence, Hypatia reflected sourly. Firstly, Tomas Daran, the Chair of Light, had once again raised the issue of dangerous research being pursued in the eastern frontier city of Manadar without his approval, and Orton Belus, the Chair of Walanstahl, had once again promised to have his agents investigate it. Then the perennial issue of the price of silver from the mines of Gyre was the main item on the agenda, and it was this that had attracted Rakan's interest. The price always seemed to creep up during peacetime, and it had been some time since the last war against the southern Kingdom of Abelia, the main rival to Imperial power on the continent. That conflict had ended in an unsatisfying stalemate, with no significant territorial gains or losses for either side, but Adramion had made a point of deepening trade ties with the Kingdom and the Royal Knights who formed its ruling class and a formal alliance had been signed shortly before his death. Other than an incursion by the Expelled Tribes of the eastern forests, the Empire had known peace since then, and it was a peace the Scholar Emperor had sought to maintain. Hypatia saw little reason to disagree. Perhaps the flint-eyed Deleth Adaran, holder of the Chair of Yar and as such responsible for the College military, might think differently, but if so he wisely kept his own counsel. Certainly as long as Marinas held the Chair of Mendarant and thus advised on foreign policy, he would find little support for any martial adventures.

Her eyes were a little heavy as she listened to Rakan's long, droning speech, but she forced herself to concentrate. Ullarth shot her a warm glance, and a small surge of Aether accompanied it. All three children did this from time to time, and it always picked up Hypatia's spirits. She made herself nod attentively to Rakan, and queried a minor point of detail about the currency conversion rate between the Imperial Silver Quoit and the Abelian Rubal that had Rakan scrambling for his notes and brought a smirk to Thelir's face. Ullarth smiled too, and seemed about to say something when he suddenly frowned and looked away, towards the southern doorway. Before Hypatia could ask him what was wrong, there was a loud crash and the silver-bound oak doors exploded into the room. Through the smoke and settling dust strode a figure dressed in tattered black robes and carrying a staff topped with three interlocking circles, the crystal set amongst them blazing from the power it had just expended.

Ullarth leapt to his feet, cat-quick, *Queen's Bitch* hissing from its scabbard as Myrka lurched erect, armour clattering. The two Scholastic Guards stationed by the door, unscathed by the explosion of magic due to their heavily-warded shields, swiftly moved to intercept the intruder. Hypatia fought

down a sudden burst of fear and forced herself to stay seated and calm.

“Lady Ritala!” she exclaimed, as brightly as she could manage. “To what do we owe this visit? It is usual to make an appointment to speak before the High Seminar.”

“For that matter, it is usual to knock.” said Ullarth.

“She did.” chuckled Thelir. “Just a little too enthusiastically, by the look of it.”

“Take one more step towards our mother and I will kill you.” said Myrka, flatly.

Hypatia's heart swelled with pride even as she reflected on the irony of the situation. Yes, Ritala had borne these children, but it was she, Hypatia Tydask, who had raised them, trained them, and yes, loved them, and now they stood between her and danger without hesitation or fear. Of course, there was little reason to be afraid- even though Ritala had somehow escaped from the remote manse in Manadar that had been her prison, no Magister could get past two Scholastic Guards and still retain enough power to threaten her, especially with the backing of the entire Senior Faculty. As it was, Ritala, her red hair lank and plastered to her skull, her robes tattered, ripped and stained with blood, stood leaning on her staff as if it were all that was keeping her standing. And yet, she still took that single, fatal step forwards.

With a terrible scream, Myrka hurled herself towards Ritala, even as the Scholastics closed in on the renegade. Seemingly blind with rage, she swung the huge, solid steel mace she had crafted for herself, but at full charge the ungainly weapon was almost impossible to control and crashed with terrible force into the nearest guard. The enchanted armour was sturdy, and proof against magical threats, but neither was any real protection against a solid lump of mundane metal, swung with Aether-enhanced strength, and the guard was sent sprawling into his fellow. Uncaring of this disaster, Myrka tried to recover her footing for another swing but Ritala simply gestured and flung her away with a surge of power, to land in a clattering heap on the Seminary desk, which true to its solid construction gave not one inch. The Magisters, many of them still seated, were thrown into momentary confusion, though each had reflexively brought up their own defences and none were harmed.

Hypatia was shocked, but forced herself not to show it. Ritala had to have used up the last of her strength to deal with Myrka in such a fashion, though with so many Magisters in the room it was difficult to tell for sure. And yet, Ritala took another step, and spoke.

“Hypatia Dane, thief of my children. Hypatia Dane, thief of my liberty. Hypatia Dane, thief of my love. I am here for you and all that you call yours.”

Hypatia's blood boiled, and she spat back almost without thinking.

“My name, Ritala, is Empress Hypatia Tydask, and I have stolen nothing from you! All that you had, you gave Adramion willingly, and all he had is now mine. He turned to you for.. for a *service*, but returned to me for love. You are no Magister, you have no right of Challenge, and if you do not surrender yourself to the custody of the Guard, I will destroy you, and I will have the entire High Seminar at my back to do it. You will obey, or you will die!”

Ritala smiled, and suddenly all trace of weariness seemed to leave her. “Who said anything about a Challenge, you child-snatching witch?”

The attack was so sudden that Hypatia barely parried it. Usually, Magisters fought with blasts of elemental power- fire, lightning or occasionally, ice. Ritala's attack, however, was a simple, focused lance of pure Aether, aimed squarely at Hypatia's very Pattern- a literal attempt to take her apart piece-by-piece. It was the most primal of attacks, allowing for no subtlety, and even as Hypatia threw her own Aether against it she could tell Ritala was the stronger by far. Still she fought back, desperately, and within seconds the rest of the Senior Faculty came to her aid, some pouring their own Aether into the counter-strike, whilst others attacked Ritala directly with a barrage of every conceivable magical assault. Yet, somehow, Ritala still stood, even as she gradually gave ground. Ullarth and Thelir alone were uninvolved in the struggle, and Hypatia glanced towards them, hoping to ease their confusion. She saw none. Ullarth, clear-eyed and calm, smiled reassuringly

back at her, and stepped to her side, a supportive gesture that none watching failed to witness. None save Ritala herself saw *Queen's Bitch*, now held low to Ullarth's side, reach out to lightly touch Hypatia's skin.

The effect was sudden and deadly. At the touch of that terrible blade, Hypatia's defences utterly collapsed, and a single, ravenous tendril of Ritala's power, driven by pure hatred, snaked into her Pattern and tore her mind apart. Even as she died, as she collapsed, writhing, into her stolen son's arms, Hypatia heard his hissed whisper.

*"We always knew."*

Near simultaneously with Hypatia's death, Ritala's own defences finally gave way. Fire and lightning blasted savagely at her body, and a terrible scream that was equal parts agony, despair and triumph filled the air. When the smoke cleared, there was nothing left of Lady Ritala Daran save a few smouldering scraps of black cloth.

Ullarth spoke into the silence. "As the oldest living issue of Lady Hypatia Tydask here present, and a member in good standing of the Lily College, I hereby take on the role of Arch-Chancellor of Lore. Are there any objections?"

"My apologies, Lord Ullarth, but as an Acolyte, you are not yet eligible for the role of Arch-Chancellor." replied Gheris, stepping forward.

"Do you doubt my power?" shouted Ullarth, a wild look coming to his eyes, "Do you doubt my right?"

"I doubt neither, my Lord," replied Gheris, "but were we to announce you now as Arch-Chancellor, the Symposium would never accept it. As an Acolyte, you are not yet protected by the Right of Challenge, so as soon as you entered the chamber the entire assembly would be permitted to slay you on the spot, and none save Thelen himself could withstand such an assault."

Fire flashed in Ullarth's eyes, and he drew breath for an angry retort.

"All of you, be silent!" hissed Gisela Dar, holder of the Chair of Sherenith and High Chirurgeon of the city. "We have lost the Empress, and if you do not help me, we may lose her daughter too!"

"M-Myrka?" stammered Ullarth, and his brother suddenly lost his smirk, which seemed to have survived his mother's death intact.

"Yes, Myrka! Do you have any other sisters, boy? The impact with the desk when your m- Ritala threw her aside has broken several of her bones, one of them in her neck. That damn armour of hers did as much harm as good, but now it might help us save her life. If any of you has any Aether left, give it to me, now!"

Even Ullarth dared not argue with the High Chirurgeon when she took that tone, not with the life of his sister at stake. Together, they poured what power they had left into Gisela as she worked, seeking not to repair the massive damage to Myrka's body, but to stabilise the worst of it. Then, with the greatest of care, she fused the hinges and bearings of the young woman's armour, turning the entire suit into an improvised full-body cast. By the time this was done, other Magisters and Healers from the Infirmary had reached the scene, and soon the Crown Princess was being gently floated away on a levitating litter, followed by another bearing the shrouded form of the Empress. Ullarth and Gheris watched the Healers leave, Thelir skulking at their heels. Most of the Chairs went too, amongst them Orton Belus who was accosted by a battered young Magister of his House called Anneke, who breathlessly recounted the tale of how Ritala had stormed the processional corridor and nearly killed her in the process. Orton made appropriately sympathetic noises, and shepherded her from the room as she clung to his sleeve and chattered.

"Vice-Chancellor." said Ullarth as they disappeared from sight. "I believe you were about to explain how the succession could be smoothly assured?"

Gheris opened his mouth to reply, and was momentarily taken aback by the menacing rasp of

Ullarth slowly returning *Queen's Bitch* to the scabbard. Ullarth hadn't let go of it since Ritala had entered the room, and even now his hand rested on the blade's ruby-encrusted hilt.

"I- er, yes, Lord Ullarth. As the appointed heir of Emperor Adramion, you are, beyond any doubt, now the head of House Tydask, regardless of your status as an Acolyte, but you cannot yet take the position of Arch-Chancellor."

"I understand. What do you suggest? I will not see the Lily Throne ascended by one not of the Tydask line, and you and I both know that none of the current Tydask Chairs have the strength to hold it. Deleth Adaran, for one, is ambitious and powerful, far more than my aunt Marike or that weakling Dekan."

*That 'weakling' is a six-Leaf Magister, you upstart,* thought Gheris, but looking into Ullarth's eyes, he saw that the young man knew full well the power of those he mocked. Knew it, and did not fear it. *This youth will be the greatest Arch-Chancellor in centuries, if he doesn't kill us all just because he can.* He gathered his scattered thoughts. "I suggest, my Lord, that I head the Council in your stead, continuing in the role of Vice-Chancellor whilst you complete your formal studies."

"A Regency." said Ullarth, immediately. "Much like the arrangement in 1722, when Emperor Ratheram died in battle against the Abelians whilst his son was still only thirteen."

"Ah, yes, my Lord." replied Gheris. He had had no idea there was a precedent for such a thing. Indiria, who had stayed seated at the Seminary desk to recover her strength, chuckled dryly. "A quick study, our young Emperor, eh, Gheris?" Ullarth gave her a short bow.

"As I recall, Magister Indiria, Vice-Chancellor Tomas Thule refused to relinquish power when Pentus Tydask came of age, and was killed in the ensuing Challenge in 1726."

Gheris blanched. "M-my Lord, I-"

"They called it the Blood Star Duel, if I remember, owing to the especially painful fate Tomas suffered." continued Ullarth, mercilessly. Indiria chuckled again.

"Have you ever noticed, Vice-Chancellor, how the Twigs always latch on to the most bloody parts of our history? Yes, there are many green shoots on this one, and he will sprout a fine crop of Leaves in time!"

"You honour me with your praise, Magister Indiria." said Ullarth, gravely. "Vice-Chancellor, I accept your proposal in the spirit it was offered. Please do not mistake my.. passion for history for anything other than an honest desire to excel in my studies in front of the Chair of Leaves. Now, I must find my brother, and make arrangements to mourn the- my mother. Excuse me." He turned smartly on his heel, and marched out of the room. The two Chairs watched him go.

"Magister Indiria." said Gheris, quietly, when he was certain Ullarth was well out of sight and earshot. "Did that seem to you to be the manner of a fifteen year old boy who had just seen his own mother killed in front of him?"

Indiria laughed again, but this time the sound was flat and mirthless. "Vice-Chancellor, that was the manner of a young man who only prevented himself from killing almost everyone else in the room by a supreme act of will. What is the first stanza of the first Book of Thelen?"

*"Strive not for power, but for control. Power without control is useless. Control without power is a beginning."* replied Gheris, automatically.

"That," said Indiria, sadly, "is the only lesson of Thelen that Ullarth Tydask has not yet mastered."