

A Man Gets

What His Actions Earn Him:

A Story from the World of

Sword and Verse and Dagger and Coin

by Kathy MacMillan

A Man Gets What His Actions Earn Him

Copyright © 2018 by Kathy MacMillan

All rights reserved.

No part of this story may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First Edition

A Man Gets What His Actions Earn Him

Gelti

This story takes place between Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen of Sword and Verse.

“WAKE HIM,” I told the valet.

“What is this about?”

“Wake. Him.” No use answering his question. None of his business.

The valet was a head shorter than I was, but he crossed his arms, stood in front of the door.

“I’m sure it can wait until a more reasonable hour.”

Steel in his voice. Didn’t he know who I was?

Keep the tone even. No good wasting anger on lessers. Like Mother always said. “King Tyno wants him.”

There, let him chew on that. The valet’s eyes widened. He opened the door.

Soft voices inside. The valet, speaking gently. No wonder the boy was so soft, if his people spoke to him like that. Did the king know? I grimaced.

I stood stiffly outside the room while the prince dressed. Every minute he delayed was an affront to the father who called for him, and I bet he knew it. Finally he emerged, eyes red-rimmed, hair sleep-tousled.

Of course. He’d been out and about last night. I almost laughed out loud at the way his face went pale as a slave’s when he saw me.

But he didn’t look frightened, so he must not have known yet that he had been seen. Best to let the king deliver that news.

I indicated the way to his father’s study and let him take the lead. Didn’t want to, especially now, but I wouldn’t disrespect his position the way he did. When we arrived, I opened the door for him and ushered him through. Couldn’t help a bit of curiosity, though. Was the Arnath girl that enticing, or was he just that stupid? No wonder the High Priest of Aqil had suggested naming a Regent.

I followed the prince inside and bowed to the king. King Tyno didn't acknowledge me, but I was used to that. He was the kind of man whose neglect was a greater compliment than his attention. Went to stand next to Rotir Ots, who looked nervous. Probably thinking the king would punish him for bringing the news about his son sneaking into the Tutor's room.

Probably right.

Because Rotir's older brother Parker was an old friend of mine—we'd joined the guards the same year—I'd tried to avoid naming which of my men had made the report. Should've known that wouldn't work. The king had insisted on questioning him personally, having him here when the prince came.

The king was still in his dressing gown. I had to fight a smile. He'd had plenty of time to get dressed—he was making a point to his son, showing him how much he'd been inconvenienced. The elder Tutor was there, too, sitting in a chair opposite the desk. I rested my hand on the hilt of my sword. Never liked it, the way King Tyno allowed that Arnath woman to get so close, to sit like an equal. Told him so, as a matter of security. But I valued my skin too much to keep saying it. It wasn't smart to make a habit of telling King Tyno things he didn't want to hear.

King Tyno didn't tell his son to sit, even though there was another chair. "This guard claims to have seen you leaving the bedroom window of Raisa ke Margara last evening," he said, tone clipped. "Is this true?"

The boy flinched, but he met his father's eyes. "Yes," he said. "It's true."

The king glowered. "And what were you doing there?"

"We were just talking."

If it had been one of my men, I would have let out a snort. No one in that room believed the boy hadn't been getting up under that dirty Arnath girl's dress. Some men were like that—there were whole brothels in the city full of Arnath slaves. Never touched one of them myself. I'd sooner have the Emtirians or even the odd Pylan. But there was nothing wrong with a good Qilarite whore.

The king's expression was dangerous, though his idiot son probably didn't see it. It was the look he'd had right before he'd banished Longdin and Kel, after the first traitor Tutor was caught. "You can talk to her in the courtyard or the banquet room. You don't need to sneak into her bedroom to do that."

The boy practically stank of fear. I thought he might piss himself right there on his father's fancy flowered rug. But then he said, "Perhaps I needed to speak to her privately."

King Tyno's face darkened. He cut his hand at me, and I didn't need a verbal order—he wanted Rotir out of the room. Bad enough a soft-hand like him was the one to see the prince sneaking on the walls; no need for him to see just how big a disappointment the heir to the throne really was. I hustled Rotir out to the anteroom and shut the door behind us.

King Tyno's raised voice carried right through the closed door. "How long has this been going on?"

Rotir's eyes were wide. He'd only been holding a sword for a few Shinings. That guard rotation on the walls would have been one of his first. His brother Parker was moody and sullen, but Rotir was a lively, talkative type, the one who drew a crowd in the garrison. My cousin Kirol liked him a great deal. He was a decent fighter too. Might have moved up through the ranks almost as quickly as Kirol.

A shame, that.

"See that no one disturbs the king," I barked at Hull, who was stationed outside the door. Then I jerked my head to the left and led Rotir down the hallway to the small guardroom there. I shut the door behind us and sat down on the one chair inside, leaning back and resting my right ankle on my left knee. I knew what was coming, even if Rotir was too stupid to see it. Didn't mean I liked it, but what was I supposed to do? King Tyno had his ways.

"Captain, I—" Rotir said.

"Quiet," I barked. Wasn't surprised that he didn't know when to keep his mouth shut. He was too much like the prince, always ready to tell a joke. Wouldn't help him now. I contemplated his babyish face—probably hadn't shaved more than a handful of times in his life. The silence made him twitch, so I let it stretch out, reminding him who was captain here. When I'd stared at him so long that sweat was beading on his brow, I said, "The western vizier and his daughter are coming today. The king won't be in the mood for nonsense."

Rotir's eyes were wary. "Yes, sir," he said, obviously not understanding where this was going.

"You'll keep your mouth shut about what you saw."

"Of course, Captain."

I pursed my lips. Would it be disloyal to the king to mention how “spare the messenger” wasn’t in his vocabulary? Probably. But if this one stayed out of the way, he’d be fine.

I stood, towering over him. “Go down to the kitchens and relieve Kaison guarding the rear door. Send him up to me.”

Rotir stared at me. “The...kitchens, sir?” It was a rotation strictly for trainees. An insult, really, for any man wearing the uniform of the palace guard to stand there. But the order was for his own good. He needed to be out of sight for bit.

“Was my order unclear?”

“No, sir.”

I indicated the door. He hesitated, then left. I sighed and thought about what I would do with Kaison when he arrived. I’d have to invent a job for him. I’d be relieved once that one finally failed his third unarmed combat test and we could send him home.

But first, best be prepared. King Tyno would have orders, once he was done with his son, and as he’d already be in a wrath, the less reason he had for irritation at me, the better. So I decided to go back and make a show of questioning Hull about what he’d seen while guarding the king’s door, so I’d be nearby when the king called for me.

As I approached the study, the door opened and the prince came out, accompanied by the elder Tutor. She moved stiffly, but her eyes flashed at the prince, as if she had any right to have an opinion on what a Qilarite had done. I gritted my teeth. One day one of those Tutors would push too far, would give the king a reason to put them down in their proper place. Maybe the younger one already had.

No use getting hopes up though. The High Priest of Aqil had promised, when he let the last Tutor meet with the Resistance right in his temple, that it would be the undoing of the whole Tutor system. He’d slowly pulled the net tighter around her, and the stupid Arnath didn’t even realize. And then he’d chosen just the right moment to have me and my squad burst in and find her in the midst of teaching a bunch of filthy slaves to write.

But at least Rale had been able to keep one of his promises, I thought, touching the golden captain’s epaulets of my uniform. Didn’t have to ask what he would want me to do now, but then, it wasn’t hard; it was also my own inclination anyway. I’d make sure the king connected the younger Tutor’s behavior with the last one’s, but subtly, without actually saying the word “traitor”. Surely he’d send her away—couldn’t imagine he’d want an execution to mar the

betrothal day. But then, accidents happened on the road—carriage robberies gone wrong or collisions or nasty falls. Shouldn't be hard to arrange.

I slowed my pace, timing my arrival at the king's door with the moment the prince and elder Tutor turned the corner up ahead. "Anything to report?" I asked Hull.

He stuttered back a noncommittal reply—though I commanded the loyalty of my men, I made many of them nervous, especially the older ones like Hull who wondered how I had ascended to captain so quickly. But I was not really listening; at the edge of my hearing, I heard a hissing voice around the corner. I couldn't make out the words, but I could identify the speaker—the elder Tutor, and she seemed to be scolding the prince. My hand went from resting on my sword to gripping it. Those Tutors needed to be taught a lesson. How dare she speak to any Qilarite like that, let alone the prince?

Hull's eyes widened, whether at my expression or at my grip on my sword, I didn't know, and I forced myself back to composure. Wasn't easy when I caught the prince's soft, pleading tone in response to the Arnath woman, before they mercifully moved out of earshot.

To think, that would be our king one day. Unless Rale's plan succeeded. I reminded myself that Gamo's daughter was coming today. The prince would be out of the way soon enough.

I stayed near the office, reminding Hull of orders he was already perfectly aware of, until a shout of "Guard! Bring me the captain!" came from behind the king's door.

I held up a hand to Hull, indicating that I would go, and saw the relief in his eyes. He feared me, but that was nothing to the terror he had of the king. I saw gratitude, too—he probably thought I was trying to spare him. Well, let him think that. It didn't hurt to make him a little more loyal to me.

I entered the king's office and stood before his desk. He didn't look the least bit surprised that his captain had materialized at precisely the moment he had summoned him. But I supposed that men like him were used to getting what they wanted.

"Your orders, sire?" I said, careful to keep any hint of emotion out of my voice.

"I want extra guards on the boy," barked King Tyno. Not "my son". Not even "the prince". How was anyone supposed to take the prince seriously as the heir to the throne when his own father couldn't even do it? "Outside his room, with him at all times. I don't even want him going to the toilets without an escort."

I nodded. "Yes, sire. My men will report at once if he tries to slip away."

The king eyed me. “If he has a chance to slip away,” he said coldly, “that would mean that your men are not doing their job.” And, his expression implied, that their captain is not doing his.

I swallowed. “Of course, sire. He will have no opportunities.” I hesitated, wondering if I should point out the obvious flaw to this plan.

King Tyno saw my expression—too often I forgot how perceptive he was. “What is it? Speak.”

“The boy—”

“The prince,” the king corrected grimly. “He is still your prince, Dimmin, even if he is a soft-spined liginet.”

I blinked at the insult, which, had it been uttered by anyone else in the kingdom, would have been an invitation to a death sentence. I bowed my head. “Of course, Your Majesty. I am sorry. I only wanted to point out that the prince escaped his room by the window before. Shall I station guards inside his bedroom as well?”

The king smiled grimly. “I’m not as stupid as you think I am, Dimmin.” I opened my mouth to protest that I thought no such thing—though, in truth, his tolerance of the Arnath women made one wonder. “I’ve already thought of that,” he went on. “And that is why you will make sure that iron bars are fitted on all of his windows immediately. He will be contained until the wedding.”

I nodded. “Yes, sire. It will be done.” Iron bars on his own son’s windows. I was a hard man, I knew, but King Tyno was harder. For the first time, I wondered if Rale’s plan could actually succeed.

“And one more thing. That guard, who reported all this—remove him.”

I looked at the king, hoping he didn’t mean what I thought he meant. “Sire?”

“I want him out of the palace. Send him for a rotation at the tombs. And if he can’t keep his mouth shut, I trust you will find a way to shut it for him.”

“Yes, sire,” I said, but I had to hold back a sigh. It was one thing to take out Resistance spies or defiant council members, but to punish my own men for simply doing their jobs stretched the boundaries of justice. And made it damn hard for a captain to get his men to do their jobs, but of course I couldn’t say that to the king.

I didn’t like it, but, then, I hadn’t gotten where I was by only doing things I liked.

The king waved his hand in dismissal.

“Sire?” I asked, confused.

“You may go,” he said, already dipping his quill into an inkpot, his eyes on the page before him.

“But—pardon me, sire, you have given no orders about the girl.”

King Tyno didn’t look up. “I thought you had already made all the preparations for Lady Soraya’s security.”

“No, sire...the other one. The Arnath girl.”

He looked up, but didn’t correct me as to her proper title. “Oh,” he said vaguely. “Laiyonea has that matter well in hand. You needn’t worry about that.”

“Sire?” Surely he wasn’t saying that the girl would receive no punishment whatsoever. That wasn’t possible.

The king glared at me. “It is taken care of. Laiyonea will keep her away from the prince, and everyone can forget this whole unpleasant business.” He pointed at me. “I don’t want a word of this to reach Del Gamo’s ears, do you understand?”

I nodded woodenly. “Of course, sire...but with the...other one’s betrayal happening so recently, wouldn’t it be prudent to at least send her away?”

The king’s mouth pressed into a thin line—he did not like reminders of that previous Tutor’s treachery. Nor, for that matter, did any sane man like to remind him of it, but I couldn’t seem to help myself; surely he wouldn’t let that little chit off without consequences.

“Use your brain, Dimmin, if you’ve got one in the merchant-born head of yours,” he said. “Punishing her starts gossip, and that’s the last thing I need today.” He tilted his head and looked at me, a nasty smile playing on his lips. “Strange that Laiyonea understood that so quickly, and I have to explain it to a Qilarite.”

My face burned at the insult, but I managed to choke out. “Of course, sire. You are right, sire.”

King Tyno made a sound of disgust and waved me away. “See to your duties, Captain.”

I let myself out and vented my feelings by barking needless reminders at Hull and ordering Kaison to spend the afternoon blacking boots. Then I took the long way down to the kitchens specifically so I could check up on Peron, an older guard who always had at least one uniform infraction and was far too soft-hearted with the palace slave children.

Only after giving Peron a thorough dressing-down over the state of his jacket—in front of two younger recruits, so they would see exactly what they had to look forward to if they didn't follow regulations—did I head down to the kitchens to see about Rotir.

Shouldn't have delayed—I caught the whispers about the prince's nighttime wanderings as soon as I stepped into the kitchens, though the servants all shut up as soon as they saw me. Deliberately I strode over Rotir, pretending I didn't notice the trio of kitchen wenches who slid away from him, as if they hadn't been listening, enthralled, to his tale a moment before.

I informed him of his new assignment—loudly, so that every single servant would hear and understand the consequences of gossip on a day like this. Rotir's face went slack; he didn't even seem to understand what was happening as I escorted him from the kitchen and into the care of two men in the guardhouse who would deliver him to his assignment at the tombs.

Rotations at the tombs ordinarily lasted a Shining and a Veiling at most—it was a deadly dull assignment—but I doubted I could bring him back before the wedding, if at all. I'd have felt guilty about this, if he had kept his mouth shut like I told him to.

But, I thought as I went to make arrangements for the bars on the prince's windows, a man gets what his actions earn him.

About the Author

KATHY MACMILLAN is a writer, American Sign Language interpreter, librarian, signing storyteller, and avowed Hufflepuff. Her debut young adult novel, *Sword and Verse* (2016) was a finalist for the Compton Crook Award, and its companion novel, *Dagger and Coin* (2018) has been called a “complex feminist fantasy” by author Heidi Heilig. Kathy serves as the co-Regional Advisor for the Maryland/Delaware/West Virginia Region of the Society for Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators. She is also the author of the *Little Hands Signing* board book series from Familius Press, as well as eight resource books for educators, librarians, and parents, including *Little Hands and Big Hands: Children and Adults Signing Together* (Huron Street Press, 2013). She lives near Baltimore, MD. Find her online at www.kathymacmillan.com or on Twitter at @kathys_quill.