

After the First Assassin:

A Story from the World of
Sword and Verse and *Dagger and Coin*

by Kathy MacMillan

After the First Assassin

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

After the First Assassin

Jonis

*This story takes place during
Chapter Three of Dagger and Coin.*

IT WAS PAST seventh bell when I knocked, but I wasn't at all surprised when Mati answered, and I saw the lamp burning on the desk in the anteroom behind him.

"You're leaving early tomorrow. Shouldn't you be asleep?" I said.

"Might be easier if people didn't knock on my door in the middle of the night," he tossed back, running a hand through his shaggy hair.

I grinned. "Knew you'd be up." Didn't add that anyone with eyes could see that he probably didn't ever want to sleep again, after what had almost happened to Raisa that evening. The great love story of Mati and Raisa was easy to mock, but even I had to admit that his devotion to her was unyielding. I held up the jug of ale I'd brought from the kitchens. "Drink?"

Mati motioned me in, then crossed the room and shut the door to the bedroom, cutting off the glimpse I'd had of Raisa's bare leg poking out from under a blanket on the bed. He turned and faced me, eyeing the jug. "Thanks, but...does that comply with Councilor Gamo's rationing program?" His mouth quirked.

I shrugged. "You two won't be using up any food while you're gone. Besides, there's got to be some advantage to my mother being head of household." Mother hadn't minded giving me the ale, when I'd told her what it was for. She, like me, had a soft spot for the man who had saved her daughter's life.

I threw myself into one of the two rickety chairs. They, along with the desk and a small braided rug, were the only furniture. Made a stark contrast to the way Soraya had decorated her room across the hall, putting in all kinds of fancy, colorful things, even though most of what was available was chipped or cracked or water-stained. Like she couldn't let go of her old Scholar life.

Mati seemed to have had no problem discarding the stuff of royalty. He wore faded brown trousers and a tunic with a hole in the sleeve, and his feet were bare. Of course, he'd probably been in bed for hours before Raisa fell asleep and he'd come out here to brood, or guard her, or

whatever he'd been doing. I grimaced and pushed the thought of what went on in their bedroom out of my mind. I liked Mati more than I had ever thought I could like a Qilarite, but there were still some things I couldn't stand to think about.

Mati laughed. "Soraya's probably already redone the rationing chart to account for us leaving." He sat down across from me and reached for the jug. Before I could offer to uncork it, he balanced it against his leg with his maimed right hand and pulled the cork off with his left. Then he swung it up and took a drink.

"Gah," he sputtered. "What is that? Are you sure you're not trying to assassinate me?"

Of course he'd make light of it; that was what he did. I hadn't understood, when I'd first met him, that his joking exterior hid a deadly earnest man. That was why his enemies had misjudged him when he was on the throne. He was easy to underestimate, if you didn't look beyond the surface.

"Seed whiskey," I answered. "Never said it was any good. Blame Councilor Gamo's rationing." I took the jug and tilted it to my mouth, managing not to make the noises Mati had. "Think all the good stuff got traded away for grain."

He nodded and reached for the liquor again. I watched him take a more controlled gulp. Figured he could use something strong tonight.

"How is she?" I asked, nodding toward the bedroom door.

Mati shrugged and handed me the jug. "Rattled, but not as much as she should be. She still doesn't think that anyone would target her especially." He shook his head.

"She never did realize how other people see her," I muttered. When I'd first tried to recruit Raisa to the Resistance, I'd thought her hesitation had only been about fearing for her own skin; now that I knew her better, I understood that it was also about her being unable to fathom that anyone see her as a leader. Even now, when she gave off a practically ethereal glow, so that even a cynic like me had to wonder if the stories about the goddess Sotia showing her favor might be true. Or maybe it was just that she no longer had to hide who she was, that she had found a way to reconcile the parts of her past that had held her prisoner for so long.

Yes, I'd spent a lot of time thinking about it—far more than I should have spent thinking about someone else's wife. Not that Mati had any reason to worry; Raisa had made it very clear how she felt about me when I had kissed her at the tombs. And she'd never wavered in her

support of Mati, even after the news had come about him sending the raider ship to the Nath Tarin. She'd believed in him so hard that it had made other people believe in him too.

And if I'd ever had a chance with her, it had disappeared forever when, believing she'd betrayed the Resistance plans to attack during the royal wedding, I had tried to kill her.

From the look Mati gave me, I suspected he knew all this. But it was one of those things we never mentioned, in the interest of trying to make the new Ruling Council work, trying to set an example for peace. Things like him sending guards after Patic and Ris, and me giving the order to assassinate his father.

Well, most of the time we didn't mention those things. Funny how an assassination attempt had brought out those old suspicions so readily tonight. I frowned, thinking of what he'd said before and wondering if it had been a joke.

But then, he'd drunk the whiskey.

"Getting Raisa out of the city will help," I said, "but she's likely to be a target in Lilano too."

Mati nodded. "I know. But I won't let anything happen to her." His voice was steely, and I didn't doubt that he meant it. He inclined his head at the bedroom door. "First time I've been glad for the bars on those windows. At least I know no one's getting in there." The room he and Raisa shared had been Mati's room when he was younger, and the windows still bore the bars his father had installed on them after he'd been caught sneaking out to see her. With all the other repairs in progress, removing the bars had been a low priority item.

We passed the whiskey back and forth in silence for a few minutes, then Mati said, "Look out for Soraya, will you? She'll hate being stuck in bed. Make sure she listens to the doctor."

"Oh, I'll keep an eye on her," I said, thinking of the key in my pocket. I'd already taken an impression of it and would be slipping it back into her room before she slept off the medicine. Then there was a smith down in the Web I'd be paying a visit to tomorrow. If Lady Gamo wanted to keep her room locked, fine. But I wasn't going to take the chance that she was hiding evidence of betrayal. Raisa might trust her, but I didn't. Of course, the same could once have been said of Mati, and Raisa had been right about him...

Mati frowned at my tone. "Not what I meant. You two have got to find a way to work together."

Didn't mean to roll my eyes, but I couldn't help it. He sounded so much like Raisa when she'd been lecturing us like children.

Not that I had rolled my eyes when Raisa had said it.

Mati shook his head. "You're wasting your energy on the wrong things. Soraya was a victim of her father's plans, too."

Maybe that was true. But he hadn't had to listen to Miss High and Mighty wax on about his questionable parentage and the myriad ways her father was going to gut him. I'd held Soraya Gamo captive for fifteen days, and it had been a job to keep the others from killing her—she knew how to rile a room.

And she still did. There was something so slippery about her—always more going on behind those pretty dark eyes than she let on. Raisa was like daylight, open and trusting and unable to hide her reactions. Soraya was the opposite, a veiled night full of secrets. The only genuine emotion I had ever sensed from her was irritation. That one I recognized, because it was the reaction I got from her most often.

"Doesn't exactly try to make friends, though, does she?" I muttered, taking the jug back from Mati. I shook it a bit before taking a small sip, and grinned. Most of the liquor was gone, and I'd made sure that Mati had gotten the larger share. Only felt a little twinge as I handed it back to him and realized that most Qilarites, even now, would probably have died of thirst before sharing a jug with an Arnath like this.

Mati sighed. "She's scared, though she'd jump in the Aqorin during flood season before she'd admit it. She's still trying to find her place. Remember, she lost her father and her sister." He started to lift the jug to his lips, then, seeming to notice how little was left, he offered it to me. Always the gentleman. I indicated that he should finish it off, and he tipped his head back and drained the jug.

I studied him, wondering if he had mentioned her sister's death to make me feel guilty—after all, he was the reason my own sister was still alive. I'd had many reasons to hate him, but he had obliterated all of them in the moment he stepped between Jera and Rale's fire-stick.

No, I decided, as he lowered the jug and I saw the unfocused look in his eyes. He wasn't being manipulative, just being earnest, as usual.

Mati sagged back in the chair a little; the liquor had driven the stiffness from his shoulders. I grinned. It was time.

“Once you’ve met with the southern vizier, what will you do?” I asked.

“Meet with Commander Gage and get the South Company on our side. Same with the Lilano Resistance.” His eyes slid closed, and he sighed contentedly.

“I see,” I said casually. “No other Scholars you’re planning to bring in?”

Mati frowned, his eyes snapping open. “Is that what this was about? Trying to get me drunk and make sure I’m not betraying the council?”

I waved this off as though it wasn’t exactly what I had been thinking. Mati was a sharp one, had to give him that. “You’re not, though, right? So what does it matter?”

“It matters because the four of us, at least, have to trust each other.”

I lifted my eyebrows at that. It was a nice thought, but...

Mati shook his head and lifted the jug to his lips, then looked ruefully into its empty depths.

“You weren’t exactly trusting the rest of us, when you went off and made arrangements to leave for Lilano without talking to us,” I said. I didn’t realize, until I heard the bitterness in my own words, how much this had bothered me.

Mati’s lips pressed together in a thin line, but he didn’t say anything.

It hit me, suddenly, that his actions hadn’t bothered me because he had acted without consulting us, but rather, because none of the things he had done to protect Raisa had even occurred to me.

Because she’s not your wife, I told myself. Let it go already.

“Soraya knew what you were doing,” I said abruptly. “Called it before you even walked into her room.” I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees. “You’ve grown predictable, Your Majesty.”

That got a reaction. “Don’t call me that,” he said sharply. “Not even in jest.”

“You’ve got to think about it, though. Everyone knows what you’ve done to protect her. They might target her for her own sake, but they might also do it to get to you. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Are you saying that you should go with her instead? Because I assure you, that’s not going to happen.” The look he gave me was a reminder that not so long ago he could have casually ordered my death. It also made me one hundred percent certain that he knew about my feelings for his wife, even if she—I hoped—remained oblivious.

I wasn't sure why I kept talking, and was even less sure why I chose to say anything about her. A smarter man would have kept his mouth shut.

But then, I had never claimed to be smart.

"She's a lot stronger than you give her credit for, you know," I said.

I could practically hear his teeth grinding together. "I know how strong she is."

"Just don't spend so much time protecting her that you forget that she is a councilor."

"And you don't spend so much time suspecting Soraya that you forget to work with her."

"Yes, yes, it will be absolute rainbows of cooperation." He was trying to move the subject away from Raisa. Didn't like discussing her with me, because he knew I was right.

Mati set the jug on the floor with a thunk. "I'm serious. Soraya's never had anyone to look out for her. She's even less trusting than you are."

Now that was saying something. I didn't like the way he compared me to her, but as usual he was right. Much as Soraya Gamo infuriated me, I agreed far more with her cynical view of the world than with Mati and Raisa's cloud-addled belief that everything would work out fine if people were just nicer to each other.

"She looks out for herself," I responded. That was the problem; near as I could tell, looking out for herself was her top priority.

"No," said Mati softly. "She doesn't. How can you say that, after the way she saved Raisa tonight?" Guilt dripped from his tone, oozed out of his pores. I recognized it, because I felt the same way. Why hadn't I realized what was happening sooner, moved faster?

"Maybe," I allowed. "But he might have gone after her next, so she was still saving her own skin."

Mati gave me a disappointed look. "You know as well as I do that a person's true intentions come out in moments like that." I shifted uncomfortably, thinking—as he no doubt intended me to—of the moment when he'd had me at his mercy, after I had wounded Raisa, and the way he had chosen to reason with me instead of killing me. "Whatever she wants us to think of her," he went on, "whatever walls she puts up, she has a good heart. Just remember that. She agreed to be on this council. She wants peace, too." He rested his forehead in his hands and shook his head, the gesture so full of despair that I stared.

"What is it?" I asked.

“I’m so in her debt now,” he said, his voice muffled and slightly slurred—from emotion or liquor or both. “There was already nothing I could say or do to make up for treating her like a pawn just like her father did.” He looked up at me, his eyes red-rimmed. “How can I ever repay her for saving Raisa?”

I frowned. Soraya had been Mati’s betrothed for nearly a year, during which he, no doubt, had been sneaking around with Raisa. But Soraya had been living a charmed life in the palace all that time, at least until we had kidnapped her and hosted her in slightly less accommodating circumstances. It hadn’t occurred to me that Mati might actually feel guilty about any of that, nor that Soraya Gamo was someone to feel sorry for.

She would hate to see pity in anyone’s eyes; it occurred to me, suddenly, that this was why she behaved like such a shrew whenever there was a danger of someone feeling sympathy for her. It unnerved me, that glimpse of understanding.

“You can make it up to her when you get back from Lilano,” I told him. “If I haven’t strangled her, of course.” He tossed me a look, and I held up a hand. “A joke. I think.” I pushed myself up out of the chair, suddenly feeling the need to move. It had been like that, too, in the tombs. Sometimes I would just need to get away, walk around for a bit and put my thoughts together, and Mati had given me some things to think about. “Get some sleep,” I told him. “I’ll meet you at the stables before you leave.”

Mati blinked and stood up, nearly tripping over the empty jug at his feet. “Blow out the lamp, will you?”

He stumbled to the bedroom door and disappeared inside. I heard the rustle of the mattress as he climbed in beside Raisa. Low voices—his, then hers. Couldn’t make out the words, but the tone was unmistakably tender. I blew the lamp out and left before I could overhear any more.

I was glad that the liquor would help him sleep—gods knew he wouldn’t have gotten any rest tonight without it. I was surprised to realize that this had been at least half of my reason for bringing it to him.

I sighed. How was I supposed to sort out everyone else’s motivations, when I couldn’t even understand my own?

~**~

I awoke before dawn, in the room across the palace that had once been Raisa's, back when she was Tutor. That wasn't why I'd chosen this suite though—truly. I'd chosen it because it had two connecting bedrooms and a sitting room. Some might think it odd that a young man would want to live close to his mother and sister when he had another choice, but we'd had so little time together as a family; I'd been sold away to Stit when I was fourteen and Jera just a newborn.

The irritated voice that had woken me came through the door again, followed by a snuffle, and I sighed, already pulling myself out of bed. Here was the other reason I stayed close by.

I pulled a tunic over my head and rapped lightly on the door connecting our rooms, then pushed it open. I'd removed the lock-bars from the door before we had moved in; my mother had spent enough time behind locked doors for one lifetime.

In the dim light of the lamp, I saw Jera kneeling in the corner.

“—keep them out of the way,” my mother was saying impatiently as she tied an apron over her gown. “If not, I will chuck them out.”

“What's wrong?” I asked, over another sniff from Jera.

Mother waved toward the corner. “Her collection is getting out of control. It's underfoot. Leave that alone, now, Jera. Get dressed.”

I stepped over to the corner where Jera knelt, and found her staring down at a broken seashell in her hands.

So “underfoot” had been a literal complaint.

Easy to see how it had happened—Jera's collection of shells, bits of colorful glass, stones, and pottery shards, once contained in the corner, now snaked out along the walls and into the center of the room. She called them her “pretties”; she had found plenty of them in the wake of the quakes and flooding in the city.

I leaned down and squeezed Jera's shoulder. “You go on downstairs,” I said to Mother. “I'll get Jera ready. She can help Deshti in the Library today.”

That earned me a watery smile from Jera, and a sigh of relief from Mother. She pulled her curly hair back under a scarf and kissed my cheek, then left in a much cheerier mood. I probably should have told her about the assassination attempt on Raisa—she'd already been in bed when

everything had happened last night, as she routinely woke before first bell to ready the household—but Mother was...fragile right now.

“Fragile” was a strange word to apply to my mother; I had come to think of her as a rock that no storm could move. She was the one who had taught me to tamp down my temper when I was a child, to keep my head down and work hard and not complain no matter how unfair the punishments our cruel master meted out. And I had done it, too, until Master’s wife died, and he sold Father to the quarries, and he dragged my mother behind a locked door that didn’t cover the sounds of her crying and begging.

My rage had grown as hers had lessened; she had retreated behind a wall of unshakeable serenity even as her belly had swelled with Kladel Ky’s child. She had taught Jera to be meek and quiet so that her master—her father—wouldn’t find reason to beat her, but of course such a man as Ky never needed a reason. And yet Mother had refused to say anything against Ky even after I had gotten her away from him, as though she could erase his cruelty by ignoring it.

She should have felt free now—she was free. But maybe she had spent so long holding herself together—for my father, for me, for Jera—that now she was starting to crack. She grew irritable over small frustrations, lost her temper easily with Jera. I had assumed that she would settle in well as the head of the household—it would give her a purpose, and gods knew we needed her. But now I wondered if we ought to have sent her and Jera to the Valley of Qora, where she could live quietly, and maybe heal some of the heart-wounds she had suffered.

I gritted my teeth, realizing that such a thing was now, of course, impossible. I’d warned Mati that his desire to protect Raisa could be used against him. Our enemies could use Mother and Jera against me in the same way.

That was the third reason I stayed in the room next door. I hadn’t been allowed to protect them before. I’d be damned if I wouldn’t do it now.

“This was my favorite one,” said Jera mournfully, holding up the broken shell.

I knelt beside her and took the shell, a horn-shaped thing with spots. It had been broken into three pieces. “Why do you like collecting these things so much, Jera?”

Jera leaned back on her heels, her eyes moving lovingly over her collection. “They stay,” she said simply. “Other things don’t.”

I nodded slowly. Of course; Jera had only just turned five, and her life had been turned upside-down twice in the last year. Even if her life before that, as Kladel Ky's youngest slave, had not been pleasant, it had at least been predictable.

And I doubted that Mother had ever once raised her voice to Jera before they'd come to the palace. She hadn't had the luxury of irritation, then.

But I couldn't expect Jera to understand that.

"Well, I think they're beautiful," I told her. "But they are taking up a lot of room. Perhaps we could find a pretty pot to keep them in?"

She nodded, and I put my arm around her shoulder and squeezed.

"Mother doesn't like me anymore," she whispered.

I bent down and looked into her face. "That's not true," I told her. "Mother loves you. When she gets angry like that, she isn't angry at you. She's sad about other things that are happening."

Jera looked up at me, her eyes bright. "Like what?"

"Grown-up things."

Jera opened her mouth, probably to tell me that she knew a lot more about grown-up things than I thought she did. That was true, unfortunately. She'd been through far more than a child her age should have.

I spoke first. "Why don't you get dressed while I find a pot for your pretties, and then you can show your collection to Deshti after breakfast."

Jera brightened—she liked Deshti—and then she said, "Can I show it to Raisa too?"

"We'll see," I answered, with an uncomfortable vision of the look that would come onto that little face when she found out that Raisa had left the city without saying goodbye to her. But it couldn't be helped; Mati and Raisa had to leave in secret.

I found an ugly sort of vase-thing out in the sitting room—Mother must have put it there to spruce up the bare room, but the only such items left in the palace were the hideous ones that couldn't be sold. Then I helped Jera transfer her collection to it and I carried it down to the dining room. Not many people were awake this early, but I was able to leave Jera with Adin—she laying her collection out on the table for him to admire, he nodding and exclaiming over each one with enthusiasm worthy of a pantomime—while I nipped out to the stables.

At first I thought I had missed them—the eastern sky was already a pale orange—but then I saw that one of the grooms checking the horse’s harness was Mati. He dressed so much like everyone else these days that no one would recognize him as a councilor or former royalty.

I crept up behind him and poked him in the spine. “Watch your back,” I muttered.

He whipped around, startling the horse, which neighed and tossed its head, breaking the hushed silence of the stable. His hand was on the handle of his knife, but he stopped in the midst of drawing it when he saw it was me. I noted that he had two knives at his belt, and, judging from the lump on his inner arm, another at his wrist. I nodded in approval.

“Raisa going to be armed too?” I asked as Mati soothed the horse.

He nodded. “Whether she wants to be or not. And we’ve got swords in the carriage. Four guards with us, two in the cart behind.” He indicated an enormous cart full of sacks. “We’ll deliver grain to the villages along the western road along the way, then cut north and row out to meet this ship. The supply wagon is the cover.”

I eyed the cart. “Can we spare all of that? Did you check with—”

Mati grinned. “Councilor Gamo’s rationing program remains intact. This was all slated to go to the villages anyway. And our trunks are at the bottom. Can’t go to Lilano without court clothes.”

I was more interested in the weapons. “How many swords?”

“One apiece.”

“Good. Raisa knows how to use a sword, don’t let her tell you otherwise. Helped train her myself.” I was not sure why I said this, and from the way Mati’s eyes flickered I wished I hadn’t, both because it was a reminder of the time she had spent away from him, and because he, of all people, knew my weaknesses as a swordsman.

I turned sideways, and, in the guise of double-checking the harness, said in Mati’s ear, “Are these the six guards?”

Mati dipped his head in a nod. “Think they’re all right?”

I glanced at him. Gods, he really wanted to know my opinion. How the world had changed. I looked over the six men. Three of them were tying an oilcloth over the cart, two were readying the horses, and the last was rubbing dirt on the carriage. I wondered at this, until I realized that it wouldn’t do for Raisa and Mati to leave town in a carriage that was too clean and shiny. Mati had thought of everything.

He'd even taken care to make his small guard force equal—three Qilarites, three Arnathim. The three Arnath guards I knew—they'd all been staunch members of the Resistance, and I was especially relieved to see Cauti among them. He knew what to do in a fight, and he would make sure the others did too. The Qilarites I was less sure of—there was one only a few years older than I was, whom Kirol spoke highly of, so I supposed he was fine. Another was a scribe who had taken the chance to join the guards as soon as we had opened up spots, claiming that his father had forced him to become a scribe and he'd always wanted to be a soldier. And the third was the son of a merchant who rarely smiled, but was reputed to be deadly with a blade.

I realized with a jolt that I didn't know nearly as much about the Qilarite guards as I ought to. I hadn't even spoken to any of them.

Still, I didn't know any reason not to trust them, and that was something. "Look good to me," I said, and Mati nodded. "Where's Raisa? You need to get on the road."

Mati busied himself adjusting the sheath of his knife. "Went up to say goodbye to Soraya and get her letters."

I raised my eyebrows. "You didn't go with her?"

"Too much to do down here. Raisa will handle it." He ran one hand nervously through his hair. I might have mocked him—in jest or something sharper—for his sudden discomfort, if I hadn't seen last night how truly indebted he felt to Soraya.

I had a feeling she would take his staying away as scorn. Maybe one day, if I was feeling generous toward her, I would tell her what Mati had said about her after a jug of seed whiskey. But it was hard to imagine a situation where I would feel that generous toward her.

Raisa came up behind us so quietly that I wondered if she had been watching us for a while. I knew she did that sometimes. It practically made her glow, to see Mati and me getting along. She had a basket in one hand, from which the smell of freshly baked muffins arose. I closed my eyes briefly; Mother would ask the cook why she had risen so early to bake, and when the story of last night came out, she'd be angry that I hadn't told her.

"Soraya's feeling a bit better," Raisa said, taking Mati's arm, sliding herself in beside him in that utterly natural way they had. Like they were broken pieces of pottery that fit perfectly together. "But she won't be able to walk for days yet. You'll have to help her."

I snorted, and she laid a hand on my arm. “Don’t get so wrapped up looking for enemies that you forget to look for friends.” Her expression was so earnest that I swallowed the rest of my protest and just nodded.

“Jonis will handle it,” said Mati. “I trust him.” He threw me a meaningful look.

“Be careful on the road, and in Lilano,” I said, suddenly nervous. The four of us had not been separated since beginning the council. For the first time, I wondered if Soraya and I could do this. How would we keep the city together, without Mati’s calm experience, without Raisa’s serene optimism? “Write as often as you can. Let us know what’s happening.” I frowned. “Are you sure you don’t want to take more guards? We could send a small force down later and—”

Raisa shook her head forcefully. “This is a diplomatic visit,” she said.

“And we don’t want to attract too much attention,” added Mati.

I nodded, knowing they were right. I just didn’t like the idea of sending them out into the world so unprotected.

Cauti appeared at Mati’s elbow. “Ready to go,” he said, and if he spoke more to Raisa than to Mati, he at least didn’t make it glaringly obvious.

Mati gripped my hand and pulled me into a one-armed hug. “Take care of yourself,” he said.

I’d stiffened when he first grabbed my hand, but relaxed when I realized that the gesture was sincere. I squeezed his hand before I let go, and nodded.

Raisa stepped forward and kissed my cheek—I tried not to dwell on the fact that her lips left a circle of warmth there. “Work with Soraya,” she said softly. “Promise me.”

Promise me. The same words she’d hurled at me in the courtyard as she’d pointed at Mati’s burned body, begging me to get him to safety while she raised the floodwalls. Well, I hadn’t let her down then, had I?

But this was a trickier thing she was asking of me. “I’ll work with her as long as she works with me,” I said carefully.

Raisa narrowed her eyes and pulled up the hood of her cloak. “You were very good at change,” she said. “Show that you can be good at stability too.”

I nodded, rolling my eyes a little at her tone—but only because that seemed to be what she expected of me. She smiled and took the hand Mati extended to help her up into the carriage. Mati clapped me on the shoulder once more and then climbed in after her.

I followed the carriage and cart out of the stable and watch them leave through the side gate. And then I was alone, ruling the city beside a woman I couldn't stand.

~**~

I returned to the dining room to find that Deshti had joined Adin and Jera, and Jera was completely neglecting her breakfast as she showed each piece of her collection to Deshti. Adin was nodding over his plate of eggs; he'd been out all night looking for answers about the boy assassin and had come to eat before he went to bed. The dark look and shake of the head he'd given me when I first came in told me that he hadn't found anything, so I would wait until later to get his full report.

I helped myself to a bowl of porridge and an orange from the table in the corner and dropped onto a bench beside Deshti, interrupting Jera's explanation of how she had found the round glass piece, which might have come from the same place as the long glass piece, because they were the same color...

"Eat your breakfast, sweet," I told her, tugging the glass out of her hand and pointing to her bowl. "And let Deshti eat hers. You can show her the rest after that bowl is empty."

Jera made a face at me—unlike Mother, I felt relief when she did that, because it showed that there was still a little girl with spirit in there somewhere. But she turned to her food without complaint.

"I thought you were leaving today," said Deshti as I started on my porridge. She leaned in closer.

I leaned in too, so Jera wouldn't hear. "Change of plans," I murmured.

Deshti made a small sympathetic noise, and reached over and briefly touched my leg. I realized that I was still leaning close to her, my forehead practically touching her temple, and I abruptly straightened. Adin's eyes flicked back and forth between me and Deshti. Though there had been plenty of witnesses to the attack last night, we'd agreed to tell as few people as possible about Mati and Raisa going to Lilano. I resented his expression, which suggested that I might forget that agreement and tell Deshti. Of course, I had never intended to tell her about the

Resistance either, but the girl know how to use guilt to her advantage. I'd promised her brother Loti, my best friend, that I would take care of her, and I would. She was safe now, and happy—head of the new Library, in fact.

She'd accused me of underestimating her back when I'd run the Resistance, not letting her fully take part. But, gods, I'd let her go after the most dangerous mission of all—she'd been sent to the Palace to try for Tutor after Tyasha's execution. Perhaps "let" was a strong word to use in that case; I'd actually fought with Tabor, our then-leader, about it, and had even tried to lock her in her mistress's cellar the day they rounded up the orphans.

Ironic that I had begged Raisa to take my sister when the next Selection came. What would have been a pit of vipers for Deshti, working as a spy for the Resistance, had become the safest place for my little sister once we had decided to plan an attack.

Deshti had smashed a window and escaped the cellar, but was back in the candlemaker's shop two days later. The gods had not selected her. Or, more likely, knowing what I now knew about the Selection, Laiyonea ke Tirit had not selected her. Of course not. Deshti was smart, and smart-mouthed, and had never been in a place where she'd had to behave otherwise. Easy to see why the elder Tutor would have wanted someone meek and pliable like Raisa. At least, that was Raisa on the surface. Laiyonea probably hadn't counted on the steel underneath.

And suppose Deshti had been chosen, instead of Raisa? Would we have succeeded sooner? Would Deshti have fallen in love with Mati? The thought made my stomach writhe. Or would she have been found out, put to death like Tyasha had been? That thought was unbearable.

I realized I was gritting my teeth, and that Deshti was still staring at me, seeing way too much as usual, so I looked down and focused on my porridge for a bit. It had gone cold, but I didn't really taste it—there was too much spinning through my mind. I was surprised at how much I wanted to confide in Deshti, not because I thought she could help find out anything about the assassin, but because she was a friend. She was a warm, solid place to deposit cares. She'd always offered that, and I so rarely took advantage of it, because of my guilt over her brother's death and the oath I had taken to look after her. I couldn't keep her safe if she knew too much. And there were certain feelings I was not allowed to have, not when it came to Deshti.

I cleared my throat. "Can Jera help you in the Library today?"

Deshti's face took on an odd expression. "Oh, I'm...going out, actually."

"This early? Where?"

Deshti took a bite of bread and chewed and swallowed it before answering. Stalling. Now she had my full attention. What was she up to?

“To see Mis—to see Tana,” she said at last. “I promised I would visit today, and I thought early, before things get busy in the Library, would be best.”

I tore into the rind of my orange, shaking my head. “You don’t have to do that,” I said.

“I promised,” she said stubbornly. “And I want to. I...I miss her.”

She missed her former mistress, the woman who had kept her as a slave for years. Granted, Deshti’s mistress had been mostly kind to her, had treated her like a niece and let her come and go freely as long as she did her chores and was home before curfew. But how she could feel any obligation to that woman—

I tore my orange apart so fiercely that it squirted juice into my eye. I swore and blinked, rubbing at the eye with my tunic, and by the time I could see again, Deshti had taken my orange, peeled it, and broken it into neat sections.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Finished,” said Jera across the table, holding up her bowl for my inspection. I nodded and she launched into a description of the next piece of her collection. Deshti leaned forward and pretended to be interested, and I watched her, wondering if she pretended like that with her former mistress, and why she bothered. We were supposed to be allowed to be ourselves now.

“I’ll come with you,” I said, interrupting Jera’s description of the twentieth piece of glass that looked, as far as I could tell, just like the nineteen before it. “I have business in the Web anyway.”

Deshti smiled. Nice to see that somebody liked my company—though, I reminded myself, I wasn’t allowed to like hers so much. “Wonderful,” she said. “It will be a fine morning for a walk.”

Adin rumbled to life across the table. “Which guards will you take?”

I frowned. “Hadn’t planned to take any. It’s only down to the Web and back.”

He glared at me. “Then you’ll take me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, you’ve been up all night. You need sleep.”

“Me, or guards,” he said.

I sighed. He was right, of course; I had no business sneaking around the city unguarded, especially not with Deshti at my side, but I found it hard to believe that anyone would target me. Maybe I suffered from the same delusion Raisa did.

I really didn't want to take any guards though, as my errand was one I preferred to keep private. After I had left Mati last night, I had sneaked the key back onto Soraya's dressing table—pausing for a moment to grin at the way she slept with her mouth open and drool hanging down her chin—and then had wandered the corridors into the night, finally heading for bed as the muted tones of eighth bell sounded. Though I had gotten less than three hours of sleep, I felt alert, invigorated.

And ready to have the impression cast into a copy of Soraya's key. Who knew which guards were in her employ? Paying off the guards for news was the kind of thing her father would have done—gods, it was the kind of the thing the Resistance would have done too, if we'd had the money. This key would be insurance. If there was nothing to find in her room, then fine. But I couldn't take the chance of not looking.

“All right, you can come,” I said to Adin.

Deshti was looking shrewdly at both of us, but she all she said was, “Jera can stay with Arlin until we get back. Then she can help me dry scrolls.”

Jera didn't like the change of plans—she had been intractable about changes lately—but she brightened when she realized that Arlin hadn't seen her pretties yet. I knew that Deshti hadn't let go of her suspicion, but she didn't say anything else until we were walking along the Cut, the hilly road that ran down from the main road and into the heart of the Web, intersecting each of its curving streets like the spokes of the spider web that gave the area its name. She'd taken my arm like the Qilarite women did when walking with a man in public—I noticed that all the Arnath woman had started doing this, as though throwing off the chains of slavery meant they also had to take on Qilarite manners. Wasn't sure how I felt about it, but it seemed to make Deshti feel proud, to be able to walk along that way, so I said nothing. Besides, it made it easy to talk softly, our heads inclined toward one another, without feeling like every word was being overheard by Adin. He stalked along behind us, wearing a sword openly at his hip, looking every inch a bodyguard.

“So why are you really going to see her?” I asked. I hadn’t yet found a comfortable way to refer to her former mistress that didn’t make her give me disgruntled looks, so I just trusted that Deshti would know who I meant.

Deshti’s mouth tightened. “What’s your errand?” she shot back.

I shrugged. “Council business. Can’t tell you. Sorry.” Not strictly true, and if word got back to Soraya I would have to make up some story, but I trusted Deshti to keep her mouth shut. It occurred to me that I could tell her about my suspicions about Soraya—she might even be able to help me keep an eye on Lady Gamo.

But no—I couldn’t let Deshti get wrapped up in anything that hinted of danger. I had promised her brother. Better that she didn’t know. If I was tempted to tell her my troubles, that was just my own selfish need to share the burden.

Deshti’s lips pressed together, and I sensed she was about to protest, to give me a list of reasons why I should trust her, and I was dangerously close to believing them already. So I repeated, “Why are you going to see her? This isn’t just a social call, I take it.”

Her eyes widened. “How do you know that?”

I grinned. “I didn’t, until you said that. What is this about?”

Deshti looked away, and her arm grew tense where it linked with mine. “Fine. The new girls she’s hired are not keeping up, and she’s gotten behind on her orders. I offered to help her catch up.”

I stopped and stared at her. “You’re working for her?”

Deshti threw me an irritated look and pulled me along. “No, don’t be silly. It’s just one day. Or maybe two, depending on how much we get done today—”

“But she’s paying you.”

Deshti took a deep breath, but didn’t answer.

“Deshti!”

She gave me a defiant look. “No, she’s not paying me. I offered to help.”

I had to unclench my jaw to speak. “You are not her slave any longer.”

“I know that! She does too. I just offered to help her, as a...friend.”

I scoffed at the word.

Deshti pulled her arm out of mine. “I can’t believe you! How dare you judge me?” She stamped her foot, which caused passersby to stare at her. Adin, who’d come to a stop a few feet

behind us, looked amused. “You’re not my father, and you’re not my brother. Why do you even care what I do?”

I just stared at her, unable to put together a coherent sentence.

She scoffed. “I’ll see you later,” she said stiffly. “I’ll go the rest of the way myself.” She turned and stalked off down one of the curving streets.

I looked at Adin, bewildered. “What was that about?”

Adin shrugged. “Women,” he said sagely.

I stared at him. The way he said it, it was almost as if he thought that Deshti and I were— but no, he knew better than that.

I didn’t have time for this now. “Come on,” I said, leading him further down the Cut toward the ironsmiths.

Why was it, I wondered, that every woman I came into contact with, from my mother and sister to my fellow councilors to even Deshti, caused nothing but frustration?

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.