

Lesson:

A Story from the World of
Sword and Verse and Dagger and Coin
by Kathy MacMillan

Lesson

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First Edition

Lesson

Loris

This story takes place on Longa (one of the islands that make up what Qilarites call the Nath Tarin), a season before the battle in Sword and Verse.

“A DYER LEAVES his vat unattended while he deals with a dispute between his children,” Calantha began.

“What kind of dye, exactly?” I asked, setting her mug of tea down on the table in front of her.

Calantha wrapped her hands around the mug. “Good. Lantana dye.”

I nodded. “Poisonous. He should know better.”

She shook her head. “He has a fence, with a gate and latch.” I flinched as she downed the steaming tea in one long gulp.

I sat on a stool across the table from my mentor, thoughtfully swirling my own tea to cool it faster. “Any responsible dyer would, of course, especially if he had children.” Hoke, the dyer in the neighboring village, had such a gate. I’d seen it a few Shinings ago when the market had been hosted there.

Calantha stared at me, waiting, and I went back over what I’d said, examining it for flaws as she had; Calantha ke Bri could find the flaw in anything and always took pains to do so.

“Ah,” I said at last, annoyed at myself for missing something so obvious. “Is the gate actually latched?”

Her expression did not waver; of course not. Calantha would never show something as encouraging as pleasure at her apprentice getting something right. “Got there, did you?” she said. “Yes, the gate is latched.”

“So then what?”

Calantha picked at the grass stuck to her shawl from when she’d been working in the garden earlier, and flicked the grass into her empty teacup. “The neighbor’s goat gets in,” she announced.

“Through the gate?”

Calantha nodded.

I frowned. “How?”

Calantha shrugged. “Suppose it is a particularly intelligent goat. Suppose it can open gates.”

“Did the neighbor train it to open gates?”

Calantha looked up at the ceiling, in one of those particularly stubborn gestures of hers. “Unknown. Would it make a difference?”

I sipped my tea, then set it down after nearly scalding my tongue. How could the old woman drink it down like that? Her mouth must have been made of iron, the way the villagers whispered about behind her back—the only kind of mouth, they said, that could survive such a sharp tongue. I rested my hands on my thighs, thinking over the scenario she had proposed so far. I’d been given at least one of these dilemmas to ponder every day for the last three years, but I still couldn’t tell whether she thought I was progressing or not. Sometimes the situations were laughably easily to solve, and sometimes they were next to impossible. I’d have thought that, if she was testing me, she would have given me progressively more difficult situations to work my way through. But then, nothing about my apprenticeship with Calantha ke Bri had been as I had expected, including the fact that I spent more of my time cooking her meals, sweeping her hearth, chopping her firewood, and cleaning her dishes and clothes than learning about the business of the Learned Ones.

“If the neighbor had specifically trained the goat to open *that* gate, it might make a difference,” I said. “But that is unlikely. “

Calantha raised one eyebrow.

“Of course, to say so is a premature judgment,” I added quickly, before she could. “What does the goat do once it gets in?”

The ghost of a smile tugged at her lips as she continued. “Drinks from the vat, of course.”

“And dies?”

“Yes, but not before the neighbor’s son milks her. The children are sick for three days, and the baby nearly dies of it.”

“But doesn’t die.”

“No.”

I sipped at my tea again, pondering this. The temperature was more reasonable now. “Are there any other relevant details?” I asked.

“Relevant in whose estimation?” she said at once.

I inclined my head in apology. “If I were to ask the dyer what is important to know, what would he say?”

“That he took all reasonable precautions and that his neighbor needs to watch her animals more carefully. That the animal fouled his yard and its slobber must have been what ruined the batch of dye.”

“And the neighbor would say?”

“That poisonous dye should never be left unattended. That it might have been one of her children who stumbled into his yard instead.”

I frowned, imagining the scene to be like one of the painted glass balls that the glassblower on Vas made. In my mind, I held it up and examined it from every angle, from every perspective: the dyer’s, the neighbor’s, even the goat’s. I spoke aloud my observations as I did so, in between sips of my slowly-cooling tea, all the while watching Calantha’s face for hints that I was on the right track. As usual, she betrayed frustratingly little.

“Are there any precedents in the Book of Years for such a situation?” I asked at last.

“Most likely,” she said airily.

I sighed and changed my wording. “What precedents exist in the Book of Years for such a situation?”

She smiled thinly. “A boy on Mada left the well uncovered and another child fell in and drowned. The boy had to work for the family for five years in recompense.”

“To take up the work of the child that was lost.” I nodded.

Calantha slapped a hand on the table. “And to keep him and the family from avoiding one another. There is always more than one reason for the judgments of the Learned Ones.”

There was no scolding in her tone, just dispassionate observation, but it was a rebuke nonetheless. As unpleasant as Calantha liked to make herself to me, the villagers, her fellow Learned Ones, and basically anyone she met, she was also always acutely aware of the emotions running behind any encounter—something I often forgot to consider in the comforting grip of cold facts.

But I'd had enough of these conversations to know where she was headed. "So the ongoing relationship between the neighbors must be taken into account. A solution that allows them both to be compensated while limiting hard feelings between them."

Calantha inclined her head the tiniest bit, as if she couldn't quite bear to encourage me but couldn't help acknowledging something correct. Her eyes gleamed, and my guard immediately went up. "Well, you'd best identify that solution quickly," she said, "because they will be waiting outside by now."

My cup hit the table with a thunk. "What?"

She let out a laugh that was almost a cackle. "Couldn't wait for the Learned Ones to decide, these two. So I told them they could have immediate justice, as long as they agreed to let my apprentice give the verdict." She stood, pulled the leather-wrapped Book of Years from her belt, and tossed it to me. "Make it a good one, because whatever you tell them will be binding. Record it carefully. And remember: they don't have to like you. It has nothing to do with you."

"But...I..." I spluttered, but Calantha just stepped past me and out the back door. "Where are you going?" I called after her.

"Oh, I want some nettles to make a salve. My knees are bothering me again."

I narrowed my eyes as her voice moved away from me. She never gathered her herbs herself—that was yet another task that usually fell to her apprentice.

Voices at the front of the house. Calantha had timed her exit perfectly. I took a deep breath and ran my hand over the textured leather cover of the Book of Years. She was really leaving me on my own.

I drained the cup of now-cold tea and pushed myself up off the stool. When I opened the front door, Hoke, the dyer from the next village—the one whose yard I had pictured even when I had thought the scenario imaginary—stood under the acacias with his arms crossed. An improbably fat woman stood across from him, a black-haired baby slung on her hip.

I ignored the way they glared at each other and greeted them quietly. "Shall we walk down to the creek as we talk?" I asked. I realized as soon as I said it that it was the wrong thing to do—the woman was so large she would be uncomfortable, and she was holding the baby on top of it. But I was afraid that if I contradicted myself I would look weak, so I didn't take it back.

They nodded at me with more deference than I had ever gotten from anyone on this island since I had come here to live with my grandmother at age four. I almost took that as

mocking, but then I forced myself to remember what Calantha had said, what she always said to me: *"It has nothing to do with you."*

It turned out that shockingly little in the world had to do with me.

So I clutched the Book of Years awkwardly and led them toward the creek. I'd thought it would be easier, walking, because I wouldn't have to look at them, but it wasn't. I still had to think of something to say. I was trying to formulate something when the woman saved me the trouble.

"He nearly killed my baby," she announced, clutching the cooing child on her hip. The baby looked healthy enough to me, and happy enough. He started crying, though, as soon as I glanced over at him, so I suspected that the woman had pinched him.

That is an assumption, I cautioned myself.

Hoke started to respond angrily, but I lifted up my hand. "Tell me what happened," I said to the woman.

She did, huffing between each sentence, and when she was done I asked Hoke to tell his side. I didn't realize until halfway through his clipped narrative that the woman's name was Teda, and that I had completely forgotten to introduce myself or ask their names at the beginning. I grimaced at my own stupidity.

"What is it?" said Hoke.

I am not a part of this, I reminded myself. "Nothing," I said. "Go on."

The details were the same that Calantha had given me, but they were hardly recognizable under the layers of anger and disdain the two of them exuded.

"I still don't understand," I said, "how the goat got in."

"Obviously *he* didn't latch the gate right, did he?" said Teda.

"That gate was latched!" Hoke shot back. "I made sure of it. And it's not the first time her goat has gotten into my yard. Ate all my wife's greens last time."

I looked at Teda thoughtfully. "Can the goat open the latch?"

Her cheeks went pink. "Of course not! It's a goat!" She suddenly became very interested in tending to the baby, though he hadn't fussed or cried at all.

"How many children do you have?" I asked her.

"Five. No thanks to him and his poison dye."

"And which of them looks after the goats?"

“Bria. She is ten.”

I continued to watch her, thinking through what I wanted to say next. She must have taken my silence for accusation, because she abruptly shifted the baby to the other hip and said, “Fine! Bria is a mischievous one, and she taught the goat to unlatch the gate.”

I tried to keep the surprise out of my expression, as if I had expected her to crack all along. “And did you warn your neighbors about this?”

She looked away and Hoke spluttered in indignation behind me, all the answer I needed.

“But he still shouldn’t have left poisonous dye unattended!” she burst out.

I looked at Hoke. “That is true.”

His face was red. “You’d punish me, when she admits her brat taught that goat to—”

“Now, now,” I said, in the same chiding distracted tone I had heard Calantha use with petitioners. “No need for that.” I turned the Book of Years over in my hands and continued down the path, forcing them to follow. It was easier to think when I was moving. “You made a mistake,” I said to Hoke, and before he could respond I turned to Teda. “And so did you.”

“Everyone makes mistakes,” she snapped.

I nodded. “True. And sometimes mistakes have consequences we cannot foresee.”

“So you’re saying it’s my fault?” grumbled Hoke.

“No. Whose fault it is does not matter. What matters is that the situation is repaired, and two neighbors get over their anger and learn to live side by side again.” I took a deep breath. “Teda, you and Bria will replace the gate latch with one the goat cannot open. And Hoke will take care of the goat for seven days, to better understand the troubles it gives you. And the two of you will work together to build a locking cover for the dye vat.”

“But what about my family’s illness?” said Teda.

“And my ruined dye?” put in Hoke.

I shrugged. “You have each lost something. Would you like to lose more?”

They didn’t like it, but I saw in the look they exchanged that they were both too afraid of Calantha to dispute my judgment when they had agreed to be bound by my decision. It was clear that neither was happy, but they seemed to be directing their annoyance at me instead of each other, so that was something.

They don’t have to like me, I reminded myself. In fact, in this situation, it seemed almost better that they didn’t; as we walked back to Calantha’s house, their shared irritation at me

seemed to bond them more than anything else, to the point where Hoke even offered to carry the baby when Teda paused, panting, on the path.

Calantha came through the back door not two minutes after I sat to write down the results of the meeting, which made me suspect that she had been watching for me to return. Her face, as usual, betrayed nothing when I told her what I had done.

“Why today?” I asked. “You’ve been giving me made-up scenarios for years. Why did you do this today?”

If I had hoped she would say some encouraging words about my progress or my intelligence, or me being ready for some mysterious next step in my training, I was disappointed.

“Oh, Loris,” she said, shaking her head. “They’ve never been made-up. And today, because you needed to see the people behind the situation. You always do.”

I frowned. “I don’t think the consequences I gave them made much of a difference.”

She shrugged. “Perhaps not. But Hoke and Teda have been feuding over one thing or another for years. Perfect justice in this one instance would not change that. You can’t always make things right because—”

“Because more often than not, it has nothing to do with me,” I finished for her.

Calantha actually smiled. “There, see? I have taught you something. Now, finish writing that, and go chop more firewood.”

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.