

No One's Side:

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

by Kathy MacMillan

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First Edition

No One's Side

Gelti

*This story takes place during
Chapters Forty-three to Forty-five of Sword and Verse.*

A NURSEMAID IN a captain's uniform—that's what I had become. Who escorted the king to every council meeting, made sure the king visited with his fiancée every afternoon in the gardens, cooled his heels in the anteroom of the king's chambers at all hours? That was me, captain of the palace guard. Once I'd thought that post had some power in it, but now I knew—the only power came from those who had given it to me.

Yes, given it to me. I knew I hadn't earned it, saw now how utterly arrogant and idiotic I'd been, to buy into Rale's lies about how my superior quality had allowed me to rise to such heights. Rale, as my cousin liked to remind me, had bought me outright, and I hadn't even held out to make it much of a sale.

Kirol wasn't speaking to me these days, which made things damn awkward as I was still his superior officer. He was one of the very few guards who remained stubbornly loyal to King Mati, even now, and no matter how often I had privately begged him to at least pretend to take Rale seriously, he ignored the High Priest entirely.

Rale wouldn't stand for it, I knew, though in the days leading up to the royal wedding he'd been biding his time. Of course. By all appearances, the king had been broken by the news his fiancée brought back from the tombs, that the former Tutor had betrayed him entirely, given herself over to the Resistance and her heart—or at least her body—to their leader. No wonder the king had meekly agreed to marry Soraya Gamo. What choice did he have? Rale and Gamo controlled most of the council and nearly all of the guards. Technically Rale could have seized the throne already—King Mati, as he liked to joke loudly within the king's hearing, wasn't doing anything with it. But marrying the king to Gamo's daughter gave a whiff of legality to the whole business, one that made the councilors less nervous and decreased the probability of riots among the merchants and peasantry.

Or so I suspected. I wasn't privy to the great plans of the High Priest of Aqil and the western vizier, and the only time I'd observed council meetings in the last Shining was when I had

escorted the king to them. It was common knowledge in the palace that the council met without him now more often than not, so there was plenty being kept from him.

And from me. Ever since the whipping—where I'd done nothing but follow Rale's orders—I'd been shunted aside as surely as the king had been. Because of Kirol? Or because Rale knew that he had me neatly boxed in, so that I could not do anything he did not approve?

Or perhaps he had made me the royal nursemaid to punish the king, to make him deal daily with the man who had whipped his lover.

The king had taken on an icy, regal manner with all the guards, but especially me. He had not actually looked at me directly since that day in the courtyard. It was a shock, how much I felt the loss of that polite, sometimes joking manner, even though I had scoffed at the unkingliness of it before. King Mati's regard was not something that I had realized I wanted, until I lost all hope of retaining it.

In the days after the Tutor's escape, he had retreated into silence and solitude. "Grieving," the guards said to one another in disgust. "Worse than he did for his father, and all for a tialik."

But when Soraya Gamo returned, he came out of his room, washed and dressed in royal gold. He listened to her tale at the council meeting with an expression of stone, and when he read the message the Arnath girl had sent, his eyes registered nothing. It was as if he had suspected all along that Raisa ke Margara would betray him.

And when the other councilors gave long speeches about her treachery, the High Priest of Aqil even mocking some small mistake she had made in her writing of the letter, the king lifted his head and smiled. There has never been a man who was not heartened by hearing ill words of those who have wronged him, and kings are no different.

The king rose in his place. "Enough talk of the tialik," he said, and though many councilors flinched at hearing that base word in their chambers, none doubted the conviction with which he spoke it. Whatever had propelled the king to stand between her and the whip had burned away in the aftermath of her betrayal.

What did you expect? I wanted to say to him. She was Arnath.

And so the wedding was back on, and with the information Soraya Gamo was able to give us—the tialiks had apparently thought that a Scholar's daughter would be as stupid as they were, and not recognize the place where she was being held—we'd sent a force to clean out the tombs and slay them all. We'd sealed the tomb so that any who might have escaped our swords would

die in the airless underground rooms. My men had enjoyed themselves with that—though I, of course, was guarding the king as he watched from a carriage at the entrance to the valley, holding his fiancée’s hand. He’d watched every moment with interest, but his fiancée had spent most of her time eyeing the walls of stone around the carriage, only glancing at the battle below periodically. Awfully skittish, for a Gamo, I thought. But then, she had been held captive by those brutes. Probably made her nervous, being so close to them again.

But of all the waiting around I had done in the last Shinings and Veilings, today was by far the worst. The high collar of my dress uniform itched something awful, and I dared not sit and take the chance of creasing my tunic. I’d been standing at attention outside the king’s chamber for almost an hour, and he was taking his sweet time getting ready for the wedding. Having second thoughts? Or just nervous?

I smirked. Maybe he’d never had a Qilarite woman before, and was worried that they didn’t have the same parts as the slaves. But whatever the problem, he’d have to get over it. I was under orders to escort him to the gardens before midday bells, and that I would do if I had to carry him. Once this confounded wedding was over and done, Rale would control the throne in earnest, and surely I and my men would be able to go back to luxuries like leave and shifts that lasted nine hours instead of fifteen. Things had been quiet enough in the city since the raider ships had set out—rumors of them had spread through the Web and the Reach even ahead of the council’s official announcement. By all reports, any among the Arnathim who might have considered taking up where the dead Resistance had left off were frightened into silence.

BOOM.

The floor shuddered in the wake of the sound, which seemed to have come from somewhere below in the palace. I caught myself on the doorframe as a lamp fell off a side table and shattered on the bare floor.

Rian, who’d been standing at the other door, had lost his balance entirely and was pulling himself to his feet. “What was that? A cart crash?”

I didn’t bother to respond to such an inane suggestion—as if a cart crash could have shaken the floor. It had been some time since the city had experienced an earthquake, but I remembered huddling with my mother when I was three, as her prized painted plates fell from shelves all around us. That had to be what this was.

“Make sure this floor is cleared out,” I barked at Rian. “Send everyone outside.” As he sprinted down the corridor, I banged on the king’s door. “Your Majesty!”

No answer.

I banged harder and shouted louder, pushing at the locked door. I wasn’t sure if my sudden panic was worry for the king—protecting him was my foremost duty, after all—or fear of what Rale would do to me if anything interfered with the wedding.

But now wasn’t the time to think about that. I pulled the ring of keys from my belt and unlocked the door, then shoved it open. Rian skidded into the room behind me. “This floor is clear, Captain. Everyone’s down in the garden already.”

The king’s chamber was empty. “Your Majesty,” I called again, my puzzlement quickly morphing into dread.

There was a sound behind me, and the king’s valet emerged from the dressing room. He stopped, wide-eyed, at the sight of my sword—I didn’t remember unsheathing it, but I was uneasy enough that I was glad to have it out. I pushed the man aside with the flat of my sword and stared into the room behind him, but all I saw were rows of tunics and boots.

“Where is the king?” I growled, rounding on the valet.

He looked around. “He was out here, enjoying a moment of peace before his wedding,” he said.

As if the gods themselves were pointing out his lie, there came another BOOM from below, and the walls shook. I braced my legs farther apart to remain upright as a table fell over and splintered to my left, and several items of royal attire tumbled to the floor in the dressing room beyond. The valet grabbed the footboard of the bed. Rian managed to press himself up against the wall to avoid another fall.

When the shaking had stopped, I narrowed my eyes at the valet. He was a slight, wiry man, about ten years my senior, and I suspected that he had covered up for the king before. He’d never liked me, and the feeling was mutual.

“The king,” I said, letting the pace of my words, rather than my tone, carry the threat, “is due at his wedding. Where is he?” The valet opened his mouth again, but I held up my hand. “Think carefully before you speak, for my patience is quite thin. Rian, if he lies again, run him through.”

“Yes, sir!” said Rian, a little too enthusiastically. He stepped closer to the valet and pointed his sword at him.

The valet looked nervously from Rian’s sword to me. “I honestly don’t know, sir, he was here just a few minutes ago—” His words ended in a strangled yowl as Rian’s sword entered his gut.

“He’s lying, sir,” said Rian flatly, as he pulled his sword out of the man and watched him crumple to the floor.

“You idiot,” I hissed. “Of course he was lying, and he was going to keep lying until I found the right threat to get him to tell the truth.” The valet let out a strangled cry, and a rush of blood came from his mouth. Rian, who’d been wiping his sword on the man’s tunic, leapt back to avoid being splattered. I rolled the valet toward me with my foot. Rian’s swordwork had been lethal—the man would never say anything useful again.

“Dispose of that,” I told Rian in disgust. There would be consequences for this, consequences I should probably try to shield Rian from, as the superior officer who had given the order, but I was disinclined to do so in Rian’s case. The valet made a horrible, strangled sound and tried to sit up, but Rian put his sword neatly through the man’s heart. He wiped it on the now-dead valet’s tunic and sheathed it, then bent and threw the body over his shoulder.

Somewhere far above, the palace bells rang. Panic surged through me—it couldn’t be midday bells yet—but the bells didn’t stop, just tolled on and on, one peal quickly following the last. Fear, fire, foes. What was happening? Had Rale discovered that the king was gone? Or had someone panicked over a few earth rumbles?

“Get down to the garden and stall Rale,” I shouted at Rian. Then I ran to the window and looked out, cursing my own stupidity. The king had been known to scale the walls of the palace before, though he been watched so thoroughly that I knew he hadn’t used that skill in years. But there was the king’s seat, the sheltered alcove atop the roof where the monarchs of Qilara had watched their navies in battle for thousands of years. My guards in the floodwall towers had often seen King Mati up there. Somewhere in this room was the ladder, but I had no time to find it. So I swung myself out onto the windowsill and leaned back as far as I could, to get a view of the high seat.

It was empty.

I cursed aloud. If he hadn't gone up, he must have gone down. I looked at the stone canopies that sheltered the Adytum below; the farther side had fallen in on itself—from the quakes?—but the nearer still held. The stone of the palace was rough and uneven, filled with crags that caught the sunlight and made it gleam like a jewel. If the king could climb it, I certainly could.

I heaved myself out the window and shimmed down the wall, muttering all manner of foul names for the king. Why did he have to run? He could have married the Gamo girl and had a life of ease, if not power. Now I'd have to drag him to his wedding by force, and I was surprised at how little I liked the idea.

I slithered across the Adytum roof like a lizard, holding on with my fingertips when the earth shook again, praying that the stone would hold. It wasn't until the quake subsided and I dropped, hard, onto the paving stones of the sacred courtyard that I realized that I was breaking the law as surely as Rale had done. Only the Tutors and Heir and King were allowed in this space. I said a quick prayer to Lila, patron goddess of soldiers, begging forgiveness and protection, and peered around for any sign of the king's trail. How long ago had he left?

That's when I saw the hole in the wall, under the fallen stone canopy. Something—the quake? But how was that possible?—had blasted the wall away, and I could see right into the Library of the Gods.

It was a mess. Scrolls littered the floor, statues lay in pieces, and the far doors hung from their hinges. When Rale took possession of it, he would be livid.

In the hallway beyond, people raced by, and I could hear shouts and the clang of swords. What was going on? Had the Emtirian emperor discovered the chaos in the Qilarite court and attacked? Or was this part of Rale's plan, staging a battle in which he could do away with all who opposed him, and assassinate the king while making it look like an outside assault?

That seemed like something Rale would do, but he wouldn't do it before the damned wedding. I reminded myself that it wasn't my job to sort out what was going on. I had to find the king, or at least find Rale or Gamo and learn their orders.

Unless the attack was meant to mask my death as well. Maybe Rale and Gamo were cleaning house, taking out as many of their co-conspirators as possible so there would be fewer who could blackmail them later.

I slipped down the steps and out the gate, and my steps turned into a run across the shuddering earth as I realized: the known loyal guards, like Kirol, would be among the first they would target.

I drew my sword as I ran into the garden, alerted to what I would find there by the grunts and clashes of steel that sounded over the hedges. The bridal bower lay in ruins, the bride's litter broken on the ground, the bloodied bodies of her slaves still tied to it. The fighting had moved off to the other end of the garden, only broken chairs and debris and bodies left here. A good number of the bodies wore the white uniform of the palace guard, but I couldn't stop to take a full account. I only looked at each of my fallen men briefly enough to make sure that Kirol was not there; he'd been assigned to the garden today, but he must have gotten away. Whoever the attackers were, they had come on my men quickly, the killing strokes delivered, in some cases, before the men even drew their swords. My heart darkened with hatred for such cowardice.

And then I saw something that made me stop in my tracks—there by the bridal bower, in a clearing of bodies, as though in his dying fury no one could even touch him, lay Del Gamo, the western vizier. He lay face down, his head turned to one side, his arms stretched out as if he had tried to rouse himself, to crawl forward even in his death throes. Another body lay ten paces away, armless, its head sliced open. The hideous expression arrested me, not only because it spoke of the horror of this one's death, but because I recognized the Arnath scum. He'd been captured down near the docks a few Shinings ago, suspected of being involved with the Resistance. I'd conducted his questioning myself, been convinced that he knew nothing about the damned Resistance and that Gamo's man who'd arrested him was incompetent. I'd released him to the spice merchant who come in complaining loudly about his property rights being violated, but I'd left him a nasty cut on his chest as a reminder of what would happen to tialiks who dallied with rebellion.

I kicked the maimed body over in frustration. He had been with the Resistance—the damned spice merchant had probably been a half-blood slave posing as a Qilarite. That's what this was. Not an invasion—a rebellion. They'd fooled us, somehow. Had they kidnapped the king?

I turned away from Gamo's lifeless body and headed toward the courtyard, smoke blowing into my face. I threw myself down as the ground juddered beneath me, and heard screams and shouts up ahead. A slave in a green tunic ran drunkenly down the path and tripped over me.

Before the earth had even stopped moving, I pushed myself up, ripped the sword from his hand, and, with a grunt of satisfaction, plunged mine into his heart.

The ground rumbled again as I skirted the few fights in the garden and entered the courtyard. The sky was unnaturally bright, the sun blazing down as though Gyotia had sent the sky-fire to earth.

He has, I thought dazedly, when I saw the hedges on fire. Then I saw Rale up by the gates, with a weapon that shot flames. He shot the fire at any slave he could reach, his face split in a malevolent grin. Then I saw his eyes land on Pritt, and he shot the flames at him too. Pritt went down, rolling and screaming.

The thought formed diamond-hard in my mind: This is what I chose to follow. Gamo was gone, so I couldn't even pretend there was any honor in this anymore.

But what was I supposed to do? Fight Rale? As the damn fire-stick showed, he had all the power and always had.

Wouldn't it be better to die in clean battle like my father had, than to live as Rale's dog?

As soon as the thought whispered into my mind, I snorted aloud. What could be better about death?

Still, I suppressed a wave of self-loathing as I fought my way across the courtyard toward Rale, so I could learn his orders. Well, perhaps "fought" was not an apt word—rather, I hewed down any stinking rebels foolish enough to hinder my path. Fury they might have, but skill they did not.

Like a candle being extinguished, the sun slipped behind thick gray clouds, leaving Rale's firebursts the only illumination.

And then, through the knots of fighters, I saw my original quarry—the king. I changed course, struck down a man in a servant's tunic who might have been Qilarite, or might have been Resistance posing as a servant, but in either case he was in my way. I charged out between two other fighters, giving one of them a slice on the arm with my sword, and froze when I saw what the king was doing. He was locked in a duel with Rian—Rian, who had taken an oath as a palace guard to protect the king above all else—and he wasn't losing.

I couldn't make sense of it. When had the boy prince learned to fight like that? My men had taken it in turns to spar with him since he was ten, and no one had ever reported anything like this. Rian pressed him hard, but the king held him off, fought with a fury that drove Rian back,

away from the palace and deeper into the courtyard. Gone was the defeated slump that had crept into the king's shoulders of late, and he fought like a man possessed of a singular purpose. What, I wondered, drove him?

And then I saw her, peeking out from behind the very pillar where I had whipped her into unconsciousness: the Tutor. Former Tutor.

My hand fell to my side. He was still defending her, even after her escape and defection. Or had he ever stopped?

And suddenly it all made sense. The king was in on this, because of her. He'd thrown his lot in with the Resistance.

I'd taken an oath to protect this king, but he'd betrayed Qilara. Was I his to command, or Rale's? The captain's epaulets seemed to burn on my shoulders, urging me to step forward and defend my king. It was damned inconvenient, having a sense of duty, when I'd already sold away my honor.

The king fought with fury, but Rian was more than a match for him, was one of the best fighters in the guard, and known for dirty tricks. Rian feinted to the left, then stumbled—or pretended to. I saw the sly look he aimed at the king, saw the way his sword sliced down while the king held back and waited for him to right himself, and still I hung back, undecided.

But someone flashed past me and slammed into Rian's shoulder as he swung his sword up at the king, and then there were two swords pressing Rian back. Kirol fought at the king's side, hardly as skilled as either of the other two, but enough to tip the balance.

Finally shaken from my indecision by the sight of my cousin—Rale be damned, I wasn't going to let Kirol die, even if he was fighting for the wrong side—I took a step forward. But the shout that escaped my lips turned to a grunt as something white-hot hit my left shoulder. The shock propelled me to my knees, and I dropped my sword and reached for my shoulder—a knife handle was sticking out of it. My left arm hung limp and useless, but I stared at the knife, my mind unable to connect it with the utter lack of pain—utter lack of anything—that I felt. I tried to wrap the fingers of my right hand around the blade, to pull it out, but they didn't seem to work properly. I looked around, unsure who had thrown the knife. The courtyard behind me was a mess of movement.

A shout up ahead. Kirol, my mind screamed, and my gaze narrowed to him, everything else in the courtyard fading to haze and murmur. Rian was on the ground now, staring lifelessly upwards, blood spreading across the front of his uniform, and the king clasped Kirol by the hand.

“The city is going to flood!” he shouted. “I’ve got to get the floodwalls up. Get everyone to the temple hill.”

“But, sire,” Kirol shouted, “Rale’s hemming everyone in!” He pointed toward the front of the courtyard.

The king followed his gaze, and his expression went grim. “Someone needs to stop him.” He put a hand on Kirol’s shoulder. “I’m counting on you, Lieutenant.”

“No!” I shouted, but they didn’t hear me over the shouts and screams and clanging of weapons all around. One man against Rale and his fire-shooter was a suicide mission, and, from the king’s expression, he knew it.

The set of Kirol’s shoulders said that he knew it, too, but he drew himself up and said, “I won’t fail you, Your Majesty.” Then he bowed and turned toward the front of the courtyard.

I was barely aware of the king running toward the orchard. I launched myself forward and caught Kirol around the leg—a ridiculous, childish move, but the best I could do with the knife still sticking out of my shoulder.

Kirol looked down at me, his mouth dropping open. “Gelti! I mean, Captain—”

“Shut up,” I told him. He knelt beside me and examined the knife, then, his mouth twisting with apology, he wrenched it from the wound. I shouted and punched at his arm, but he held me away from him and waited for me to stop. I could feel blood soaking the back of my dress uniform, dripping down my back.

“Can you walk?” said Kirol’s voice close to my ear. “I’ll get you out of the thick of it, over there near the trees, and then I have to go take out Rale.”

“You’ll do no such thing, Lieutenant,” I said, but the force of my command was somewhat lessened by the wheezing that punctuated every word.

Kirol wound his arm behind my back, sending fire screaming through my shoulder, and heaved me to my feet. He pulled me around the edge of the battle, craning his neck worriedly, checking on Rale, and I saw, suddenly, what he was thinking: every moment he spent on me, someone else was dying in Rale’s flames. Kirol didn’t care whether those deaths were Qilarite or Arnath. He just wanted to stop them.

“You’re better than I am,” I told him groggily. “You always were.”

He looked at me in alarm, probably worried that I was going into shock. He pulled me into the orchard and settled me against a tree, then handed me his knife. “Stay here. I’ll come back for you once I’m done with Rale.” If I survive, said his expression.

I grabbed his wrist, the same grip I’d used on him when he was skinny nine-year-old grabbing for too many corncakes. “We need to get out of here, Kirol. We don’t owe any of them anything. Let the Scholars all kill each other. What do we care?”

But my fingers were slippery with blood, and my grip was still weak. Kirol gently removed my hand from his arm and said, “I promised the king I would do this, and I am a man of my word.” He put his hand on my shoulder and looked into my eyes for a long moment, and then he was gone.

I cursed loudly and heaved myself up. The hole in my shoulder hurt like hell but it didn’t keep me from walking. I’d just figured that if Kirol was nursing me, he wasn’t throwing himself at Rale’s fire-stick.

But he outpaced me, and as I stepped out of the trees, the ground shifted. I threw myself against the nearest tree to steady myself, my shoulder screaming at the contact, but then there was a rumble and a crash, and the air was filled with dust—part of the palace roof had rolled into the courtyard, crushing half the fighters. I coughed and strained to see through the dust, my heart hammering, but there Kirol was, leaping over bodies, moving toward the front of the courtyard.

Only, Rale wasn’t there any longer. My eyes skipped over the dust-covered figures, even as the front doors of the palace caved in and more dust covered everything.

When I saw the few remaining pillars rocking as though they too were ready to fall any moment, I hustled farther into the trees, away from the fighting, away from the falling palace. I could help Kirol, I realized with a sickening flash. I could join him and take Rale down, and then I’d be free of that monster too. Why hadn’t that occurred to me sooner?

Because I wasn’t like my cousin, thinking about other people first.

The courtyard was much quieter now, the clash of steel only occasional and muted, the earlier shouts replaced by sobbing and piteous wails from the wounded. I peered out, looking for Kirol, and found him. He was over by the gates, but was heading in my direction, looking like an eagle that had sighted its prey.

Rale. Nearby, just on the other side of the trees, raising his fire-stick and aiming it at a tiny figure in a white-and-green dress.

But just before the fire hit, someone else was there. It wasn't until the cry of agony rent the air, until the figure fell writhing to the ground, until I saw the white and gold tunic on fire, that I realized it was the king. Kirol skidded to a stop in horror. I swayed on my feet.

“Go,” I said to my cousin, though of course he couldn't hear me at this distance. “Turn and run.”

Kirol's face hardened, and he stalked forward, even as Rale raised his fire-stick to finish the king.

But the Tutors got there first. The older one stepped in front of Rale, a sword in her hand, and said something to him, her expression as regal as any queen's, while the younger one—the former one, the traitor—fell to the king's side and beat out the flames.

I crept closer, as if I could stop Kirol's advance on Rale. The older Tutor's voice rang out. “You sent Tyasha to her death,” she said to Rale. “You used her in your plan to take the throne.”

He had. And I had helped.

“For Tyasha ke Demit!” cried another voice—Kirol.

“No!” I croaked, as Kirol stepped up beside the Tutor, hard hatred in his eyes as he leveled his sword at Rale. Others took up his cry and stepped forward too.

The Tutor kept her eyes on Rale. “No,” she said loudly, silencing them. “Her name was Tyasha ke Laiyonea.”

The meaning of her words took a long moment to sink in, even to Rale. But then the Tutor and her supporters were pressing him back, away from the king, and their swords swung so close to him that he couldn't work his fire-stick. He caught sight of me and called, “Dimmin! Here!”

But I stayed by the tree, clinging to the bark, watching the fighters harry him, watching Rale try, with increasing desperation, to aim his fire-stick at the Tutor. Kirol was right there beside her, slicing at his hand whenever it strayed near the control. The Tutor was speaking to Rale the whole time, in a low, calm tone. I couldn't make out her words, but they seemed to unnerve him.

Every drop of power I had came from Rale. I owed him everything. What kind of man was I, that I repaid that debt by cowering in the trees? And what would happen to me, if I allowed the tialiks to take Rale down?

But...Kirol fought with them.

The ground shook, and I pressed myself against the tree as the remaining pillars wavered and fell. One crushed Rale and the elder Tutor. Kirol and the other fighters leapt clear, a few knocked sideways by the other pillars.

I stared at the great pillar lying on the ground, the remains of the High Priest of Aqil flattened under it.

He was gone. Penta Rale was gone. I was free. And everything I had traded my honor for was smashed to bits.

Someone ran past me into the trees, so quickly that I didn't even have time to raise my weapon. That roused me enough that I moved into the courtyard, but the fighting was done now.

Of course it was. Rale pulled all the strings at this court, and he was gone. It was as if everyone, even the tialik rebels, knew that there was no reason to fight any longer.

Bodies littered the courtyard, most with green showing under the dust and debris, but I saw more bloodied guard uniforms than there should be. Maybe these rebels didn't have skill, but they'd had numbers. And guile, too, if they'd somehow gotten into this wedding, when my security measures had been so thorough.

Bested by the Resistance. In days of old, a guard captain who had failed to protect the palace would have publicly plunged his own knife into his heart, while begging the king's forgiveness, all to save his honor.

Fortunately I didn't have any honor left, so I felt no such urge. My eyes swept over the bodies, calculating odds. How many guards? How many rebels? Rale and Gamo were gone, and the king lay dying. I saw the body of Gamo's youngest daughter, staring lifelessly into the sky, a red gash at her throat. Was that what Gamo had been fighting to protect?

So few Scholar bodies among the dead. Of course—they would have fled at once, let the lower classes do their fighting for them. And they would, somehow, emerge from this battle with the power. Something tickled at the back of my mind, barely acknowledged: if the lower classes joined with the Resistance, it would be a formidable alliance against the Scholars.

Unthinkable. I must have lost more blood than I thought.

That realization propelled me forward. I had to get out of here, had to get Kirol out too. Wasn't sure who'd be in charge when this mess was cleaned up, but I knew that the penalties for Rale and Gamo's crimes were likely to fall on the nearest high-ranking non-Scholar, and I wasn't going to let that be me.

Money. I'd go to my mother's house, take the money I'd hidden under her parlor floor, take her and Kirol and go to Pira. Surely Gamo's sister or wife or daughter or whoever had survived this day would pay dearly to keep his role in all this quiet. I'd served Gamo well in the past, and Gamo was known for rewarding those who served him. By all accounts his wife didn't have the same honor, but maybe it would be the daughter—she was young and pliable, yes? And if nothing else, surely a man of my experience could find a post in the Pira guard.

All of these thoughts blossomed in my mind as I stepped over bodies and walked across the courtyard to Kirol. He was kneeling beside a blackened piled of rags—it was only when I got close that I realized it was the king's burned body.

I laid a hand on Kirol's shoulder. "Kirol, come with me, now. We have to get out of here."

He didn't look up from tying a strip of cloth around the king's arm. "Go get a cart from the stable. We need to load as many of the wounded as possible."

"They're vulture food, Lieutenant," I said, snapping into my captain's voice. "Leave them."

"This area's going to flood," he said, still not looking at me. "They're going to drown if we don't get them to the temple hill."

Something icy slid into my stomach. "All the more reason to get out of here. I have some money, we'll get my mother and find a carriage to take us to Pira—"

"If you're not going to help, then get out of here. I don't have time for this." He pointed to the gate. "Go. Go look out for yourself like you've always done."

I swallowed, and my shoulder burned. "Kirol, you have to come with me—"

He stood and faced me. "No," he said, "I don't. You run if you want. I'm staying here with my king." His eyes held me pinned, as if he knew all I had done and every bit disgusted him.

Someone called from behind him, and he turned. A curly-haired Arnath was pushing a wheelbarrow in between the bodies, and I watched as the two of them worked together to load the king into it. Kirol didn't look at me again, or speak to me—he had dismissed me from his notice.

The ground shook again, and, as if stoppers had suddenly been taken from my ears, I heard the angry roar of waves from the other side of the palace. Flooding, earthquakes, battle—it was as if the gods themselves were trying to wipe the city of filth.

Well, this bit of filth would oblige them and get out. I stepped backward, nearly tripping over a body, and then I turned and—didn't run. No, I wouldn't run. But I walked pretty damned quickly out of that place.

Get the money. Get Mother. Get out of the city.

Once I'd thought I would shape my own destiny, that the opportunities Rale gave me would raise me above others of my station, give me choices they'd never dreamed of.

And now running—or at least walking away quickly—was the only choice left.

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.