

Recruiting one Tutor into the Resistance was a risk – one that led to her execution and that of half the Resistance leaders. It would be madness to try again – but then, Jonis never was one to play it safe.

**Iron and Silk: A Story from the World of *Sword and Verse*
by Kathy MacMillan**

“He says not to do it, Jonis,” whispered Deshti as she heaved a crate of candles into my arms. I balanced the crate on the stack next to the house and went back to the cart for more, ignoring her.

She pattered behind me, as though she didn’t want to be left alone near the house. She was always fluttery when my master was home from sea. But I knew that Horel Stit had been out late at the alehouse with his first mate last night, and wouldn’t be roused from his bed until the temple bells called at midmorning. I knew this because he had clattered into the house in the middle of the night and poked me with his walking stick until I awoke, then ordered me to make him tea. By the time I had stumbled to the kitchen, heated the water, and returned with his blasted tea, he was snoring in the armchair in the front room. I’d drunk the tea myself, then heaved him up and helped him to bed, earning a few drunken punches in the process. Strange that a man as deadly as Stit could be sober was such a foolish, ineffective drunk.

Deshti was hissing again about Tabor’s orders, and I entertained myself by imagining her as a goose. When the cart was completely unloaded, I faced her.

“I know what Tabor says,” I said softly. Though Stit couldn’t be awake yet, there was no sense in courting danger. “But I have to try. You know that.”

She bit her lip, a tiny vertical line appearing between her eyebrows. “But after...after...”

“Tyasha,” I said, dropping my voice even lower. Deshti flinched. “I take responsibility for that. But it will be different this time.”

Deshti’s dark eyes blazed. “That wasn’t your fault.”

“It was,” I murmured. It had seemed like divine assistance, when the Tutor-in-training had agreed to teach the language of the gods to the Resistance. Tyasha had taken surprisingly little convincing – so little that some had suspected she was working with the Qilarites, that it was all a setup to capture our leaders.

Back then, Tabor had just been one of the men who hovered around Altan ko Sekton, the Resistance leader of nearly forty years. Tabor had once chafed at Altan’s focus on small, secret acts of rebellion that preserved the anonymity of our members. Tabor had pushed for the Resistance to do more, to take a stand and force the king and the Scholars Council to change the unjust laws that kept our people enslaved. He’d been behind my plan to approach Tyasha ke Demit, to fight back against the Qilarites by educating the Arnathim. But seeing Alton ko Sekton

and other longtime members of the Resistance executed beside Tyasha had done something to Tabor; he'd become nearly as skittish as his predecessor.

I wouldn't believe that Tyasha had betrayed us, or that she herself had been fooled by the High Priest of Aqil, as some said. No, it was far more likely that someone had said something rash, let slip something to their master. Or that Tyasha had let someone see something they shouldn't – maybe that older Tutor, Laiyonea ke Tirit. That one was far too cozy with the king, and probably would have turned Tyasha in without a second thought. Loyalty to your own kind didn't mean much to slaves like that, those who were far too interested in gaining their masters' favor for themselves.

A cart clattered along the road, and I knelt by the side of the candlemaker's cart quickly, as though inspecting a loose wheel. Deshti did the same, flicking her straight dark hair back and leaning forward intently. The cart on the road passed, but Deshti moved closer and said softly, "I don't think this girl is anything like...Tyasha. I doubt she'll help us."

Something in her voice warned me to tread carefully; I knew she still resented the fact that she, despite her training for the role, had not been selected as Tutor. She had never said so, but I sensed that she felt Raisa ke Margara had usurped her rightful place.

Supposedly the gods made the selection. But then, Deshti would probably challenge the gods themselves, if she felt she was in the right. Yet another reason it was probably a bad idea for Deshti to know too much about the movements of the Resistance. I'd told Tabor that, and yet he still sent her with messages like this.

Infuriating.

"I have to try," I said again, hoping my tone was firm enough to shut her up.

She gave me a worried look, but didn't respond. I took that to mean she wasn't going to be difficult - this time, at least.

I sighed. "I'll need a lookout."

The way her pale face lit up was almost painful. I saw then that she hadn't really cared whether I tried to recruit the new Tutor-in-training; she just wanted to be involved.

I should have seen it sooner. Maybe if I had, I wouldn't have been manipulated into giving her what she wanted. That's how she had worked her way into the Resistance in the first place, using my guilt over her brother's death to extract a promise from me to let her in on what he had been doing. Loti would be appalled that I had given in to her, that she had been sent on the most dangerous mission imaginable, into the very palace itself. Only the intervention of the gods – or perhaps the protective spirit of an older brother in the spirit realm – had selected another girl and put Deshti back in the candlemaker's shop, where at least her mistress was kind and the work was light.

I told her where to meet me at the temple, then sent her on her way. I still had hours of wood chopping to do before Stit woke up. As I was planning a controlled disappearance during the pantomime later, I wanted to minimize his displeasure as much as I could. After all, if my

mission that afternoon was successful, things would be too interesting just now to risk being laid up for days after a whipping.

By the time midmorning bells rang, I was the picture of an earnest, devoted Arnath slave, soaked in my own sweat and standing next to a pile of wood as high as my shoulder. When Stit came to the doorway, all he did was squint at me and then bellow an order to get cleaned up and put on something presentable for the trip to the temple.

The temple wasn't far, but Stit insisted on taking the carriage. I kept my mouth shut and did as I was told, but I smiled when I looked out over the horse's rump less than a mile from the house at the throngs of people clogging the roads, the carriages jockeying for position, and the soldiers ordering the crowds back in preparation for the king's procession to the temple.

"Master, the roads are blocked," I called meekly. "The soldiers aren't letting carriages through."

Stit swore and stood up. He threw a black look at me, as if the hold-up were entirely my fault. "Fine," he said at last. "Kelia, get down. Looks like we have to walk. Erala, help your mistress." Given that Erala was old and stooped, Mistress Kelia was actually helping *her*, but that fact seemed lost on Stit. He jumped down from the carriage step after the women and turned on me. "Take the carriage back and put up the horse. Then go down to the temple."

I nodded and start to turn the horse around, but Stit reached up and gripped my arm, hard enough to leave a bruise. "No funny business, mind. Tatch's Racta will tell me if you don't show up."

"Yes, master," I said quietly. I managed to hide my grin until he had turned away. Racta was a newer recruit to the Resistance, whose most important job was to maintain a spotless reputation as an obedient house slave to Stit's first mate, so that he could provide me with alibis as needed. So far he was doing beautifully.

I got the horse and carriage back to the stable in record time – indeed, the mare seemed confused to be back so soon where she had started. I slipped through the back streets to the Temple of Aqil, hardly believing my luck. Instead of having to give Stit the slip in the middle of the festival, I had a perfectly logical excuse for being separated from him and his wife: I could hardly be expected to find them in this throng.

Most of the city had turned up for the pantomime. The benches were filled with Scholars and merchants, with peasants and slaves lined up behind them. The back corner was a mass of green. Of course; that was where there was hardly anywhere to stand because of the trees, so it was nearly impossible to see what was happening on the stage. I suspected that many of the slaves didn't mind not having a good view; we were forced to watch this story played out by the Scholars every year on the Festival of Aqil, as if we didn't get daily reminders of how the gods had punished our ancestors.

Today, though, I actually wanted a better look at the stage – or at least, at one of the players. I swung myself up onto the lower branches of a sycamore and automatically scanned the crowd for Stit; survival dictated keeping track of where he was at all times.

Stit and Mistress Kelia were on the far side of the crowd, safely ensconced on a bench and facing the stage. I didn't like to ascribe things to the gods they way my mother always did – there were just too many horrible things they seemed responsible for too – but I might have to lay an offering on someone's altar for this. If Stit'd had to stand during the pantomime, as some of the merchants were doing, he would have descended into an offended rage that he would have taken out on me for days.

Next I found Racta nearby and exchanged a nod with him. He pointedly turned away, probably so he could later tell his master truthfully that he had seen me in the tree and hadn't seen me leave it.

At last I turned my attention to the stage. The pantomime had already begun, and even though it was the same story told every year, the High Priest of Aqil had clearly taken pains to make it more of a spectacle since the prince was playing Aqil. A contraption running across the back of the stage made the players seem to fly; it took me a moment to realize that it was on wheels. I looked more carefully at Raisa ke Margara as she balanced on that platform and spoke to the actors playing the ancient chieftains.

I didn't realize until that moment that I had expected her to remind me of Tyasha. Not in appearance – I knew that this Tutor looked more typically Arnath than Tyasha had, as that had been a topic of much conversation in the city after her Selection. But there was something about her that I hadn't expected, something that seemed to emanate from her even across the crowd. A softness that did not bode well. She seemed to have to shout to make her voice heard, and even then it was reedy and breathy.

Two scenes later, she came out on to the stage bound and gagged, and the prince shoved her to the ground and stepped on her back, in imitation of the oh-so-glorious statues of Aqil and Sotia. I felt the collective cringe that ran through the Arnathim around me. The Tutors were the only Arnathim who weren't cut off from the language of the gods, the thing that had made us who we were back on the islands. Seeing her like that was exactly the insult the Qilarites intended it to be.

Then I thought about the chain of events that had to have happened for Raisa ke Margara to be playing that role. I knew from my discussions with Tyasha that the Tutors had a different life from most slaves; they didn't have to do anything but learn to write and teach the next heir to the throne. Tyasha had even boasted about how the Tutors were treated like equals to the royals, at least within their precious courtyard. So if Raisa ke Margara was up there lying on the ground with a gag over her mouth, it was because she had agreed to, even though she, unlike other slaves, could have said no.

I frowned. Maybe Deshti was right – maybe this girl didn't have what we needed. Maybe she was too friendly with the royal family, too taken with her own title, to even think about helping us. But then, Tyasha had grown up with Prince Mati. By all accounts, especially her own, they had been like brother and sister. And she had betrayed him without looking back, once

she had understood what was at stake. Surely any girl who had actually learned the language of the gods would be smart enough to realize that such power is pointless if not put to good use.

Unlike Tyasha ke Demit, this Tutor had grown up a regular slave. Tyasha had embraced lofty ideals and big plans – hadn't shut up about them, as a matter of fact – but she had never really known the humiliation of the green tunic. Kiti had worked beside Raisa ke Margara in the palace slave quarters for years, and he had insisted that she wanted the things the Resistance wanted.

And more than any of that: the Resistance was crumbling, lost and aimless and fearful since Tyasha's execution. The Qilarites seemed to think that they had routed the Resistance; they were almost right. All of the major leaders had been executed alongside Tyasha, leaving only old men like Tabor and young men like me to make what we could of the scattered remains of an almost-movement. Our attempt to trade with the Jokar family for weapons had ended in disaster.

But if we could recruit Raisa ke Margara to help us, applying the lessons we learned when Tyasha was caught...what an inspiration to the Arnathim that would be. Our ranks would swell again. The slaves of the city would rally to her – after all, the Tutors were the only Arnathim with any measure of power here. Where Raisa ke Margara went, the Arnathim would follow.

I sighed to myself. I was repeating the same arguments and justifications I had given Tabor the day before. The truth was, I did blame myself for Tyasha's execution. I should have paid more attention to what Tyasha was doing and who had been watching her. But I'd been so enamored of the idea of attacking the Qilarites from the inside, I hadn't been smart. And now eight Arnathim were dead because of me.

Nine. Loti too.

Loti himself would have denied that, I knew. He would have said it had been just the opportunity he'd been waiting for, to draw off the soldiers while I led those escaped slaves to safety. He'd known there was no way he could outrun them.

And I'd had to explain to Deshti what happened to her brother.

The old anger rose up in me, the anger that used to turn my vision black and make my shoulders shake when I was young. I took a deep breath, lacing my fingers together, and envisioned the hot magma of anger cooling into a dull white stone. I pushed it down, forcing it to my will. Fury wouldn't help me; I had learned that long ago, when my father was sent away to the mines and my mother's growing belly showed what our master had done to her. All my fury had done then was get me sold to Stit.

Once the rage had been pressed into a gleaming pebble in the pit of my stomach, I jumped down from the tree.

Deshti was right where I had told her to be, at the edge of the crowd. Her green dress had lace at the front and ruffles at the sleeves. I shook my head at the sight. Deshti must have been one of the best-treated slaves in the city, more like a distant relative than a slave. And yet an ardent supporter of the Resistance for all that.

I frowned at the basket hanging over her arm. The guards would probably think it was suspicious – and there were so many guards flanking the crowd, more than I had ever seen at an event like this. The extra security was probably just a precaution, because the prince was performing. After all, we'd been careful to lie low ever since Tyasha's execution. Tabor had made sure of that.

"Stay here," I murmured to her.

"I can't be a lookout from here!"

"Sure you can," I said. "I'll need eyes out here. If anyone moves toward that side door," I jerked my chin toward the door in question, "scream and faint or something and create a distraction." Odds were I wouldn't be able to hear anything once I was in the temple, but it would give her something to do, and staying near the crowd was the safest thing for her.

She narrowed her eyes; she knew what I was doing. But then she nodded and whispered, "Good luck."

I patted her cheek and eased along the edge of the crowd. It was only a hundred feet to side door of the temple, but the door was in sight of at least three guards, and I had to cross a bare stretch of grass to get to it. I decided to dart into the trees that lined the side of the temple and circled around to the front; maybe I'd attract less notice if I approached the door from there.

But no sooner had I taken a casual step toward the trees than a guard – short and stocky and with an expression like he was just looking for a slave to make an example of – blocked me.

"Where do you think you're going?" he snarled.

The heads of the merchants seated in the back rows nearby turned at the sound of the guard's voice, despite the way Annis Rale was bellowing up on the stage. I kept my head down, and shrunk as small as I could, praying that Stit was too far away to see. "Please, sir," I mumbled. "My master is in the temple and he sent for me." This excuse wouldn't get me far if the guard chose to pursue it, but it might at least get me into the temple, where Patric Kone was hopefully distracting the temple steward, and he could cover for me.

The guard sneered and looked me up and down. "What's he need you for?"

It took a moment for his implication to sink in, and when it did, my ears rang and my hands clenched into fists. I clamped my teeth together so hard that my jaw ached, holding in the words that would probably get me killed right here.

"I've found the ones that dropped, Dunn," said Deshti, appearing at my side, rooting through her basket. "One rolled away under the bench and I practically had to fight this little girl to get it back –" She broke off with an exaggerated start as she looked up at the guard. "Oh, pardon me, sir, we've been sent with extra candles for the temple."

The guard looked *her* up and down, a different leer on his face now, and I clamped my teeth together even harder. "Candle delivery in the middle of the pantomime?" he said.

Deshti nodded. "Master is worried there won't be enough for the offerings. He's heard that..." - she leaned in closer - "the temple steward has been too *distracted* lately to focus on his job." I tensed; she was taking an awful risk, insinuating something like that about a Qilarite, and

to a guard, no less, but within thirty seconds it was clear that she had the measure of this particular guard. His mouth opened in a little circle of delight, and I could practically see the gears in his mind turning as he tried to figure out how best to use this little tidbit. Deshti widened her eyes innocently. “Would you mind escorting us, sir? I know it’s not far, but I wouldn’t want anyone to think we were doing anything but what our master asked us to do.”

The guard grunted and led us around to the front of the temple without any more questions, and deposited us with Comi, an elderly slave at the front door. Comi wasn’t with the Resistance, but was sympathetic enough to our cause to look the other way when necessary. Which was fortunate since I now I had to sneak halfway through the temple instead of down one short hall as I would have if I had gotten in the side door. Deshti barely managed to suppress her gloating smile as she whispered that she would distract the steward with candle-talk. I didn’t have time to argue with her, so I sprinted down a side hall and took the steps to the basement two at a time.

“Kiti!” I hissed at the figure hovering by the side door.

His look of surprise was almost comical. He looked back at the door he’d been guarding, as if wondering how I had gotten through it without him seeing. “I was waiting for the knock,” he said.

“Change of plans,” I said. “Is she here yet?”

“No, but any minute now. I just heard a lot of noise out there – think it was her exit, with the fire and all. Go on in.”

I nodded and dove through the door he indicated. The room reminded me of Mistress Kelia’s dressing room, though it was far larger, and the array of priest’s robes and wigs hanging from pegs along the walls were far more varied and sumptuous than anything she owned. Idly I ran my fingers over a silk robe, wondering how much it would fetch from the black market traders Stit swore he never dealt with – a saltbrick or two, at least. How many weapons would that buy for the Resistance? I briefly considered smuggling a robe or two out with me under my tunic.

No, not today. I was taking a big enough risk talking to the Tutor as it was.

The doorknob rattled, and I dashed to the chair by the changing table, assuming a bored pose. I couldn’t let her see how nervous I was about this. I already suspected that she was skittish; I couldn’t seem anything less than confident.

She stopped dead when she saw me. Recognition flickered in her eyes. That confused me, and terrified me – did she know I was with the Resistance? How did she know? What had she seen?

I was out of the chair in a heartbeat, the casual façade gone as I grabbed her and slapped a hand over her mouth. I didn’t know if she would actually call for the guards, but she struck me as the kind who might.

She tried to pull away from me, but I grabbed her wrist. “I only want to talk to you,” I said, in as reasonable a tone as I could muster with my heart pounding like the hooves of an out-

of-control stallion. “But I can’t have you calling the guards. If I let go, will you listen to me?” My voice sounded desperate to my own ears – could she hear that?

Her eyes widened. She nodded.

I let go and took a step backward. “You know what Tyasha ke Demit did?” I began. I didn’t have time to drag this out. Either she’d help us, or she wouldn’t, and I had to find out which it was as quickly as possible.

She didn’t answer, and I seethed with impatience, “Well, do you?” I barked.

She only nodded again. It was like she didn’t even have a voice. This was hopeless.

“Then you realize you have an opportunity to serve your people as she did,” I snapped.

“Serve . . . my people?” she said, like the idea was completely foreign to her.

This was the grand hope of the Arnath Resistance? This was the one who had been chosen by the gods? No wonder Deshti was annoyed. “Of course,” I said slowly, lapsing into the tone I used with my four-year-old sister. “You can give back the knowledge that the Qilarites have taken from us. Do you really think those idiots were the first group that Tyasha taught? She went years without being caught.” Yes, it was a lot of bluster. And I may have exaggerated how many Arnathim Tyasha taught—it was probably fifteen or sixteen total, and only a few had learned more than a ten-year-old Scholar.

“And you want me to . . .”

“I want you,” I said, taking a step toward her, “to help your people.” Kiti would say that I should soften my tone, be nicer to her. But the Arnathim were suffering and dying? We didn’t have *time* to play nice.

“You want me to become a traitor,” she said, and the unexpected hardness in her voice put me on edge.

“If not, you betray the Arnathim instead.”

She shook her head and stepped away from the door, where she had been hovering as though she might run out any moment. My eyes fell with distaste on the ropes looped around her wrists. Part of the costume she had *agreed* to wear, *chosen* to wear.

“Need help with those?” I said, letting every bit of my disgust seep into the words.

She heard it. “No, I can do it myself,” she snapped. Clearly I was making an excellent impression. I had to get my anger under control. I took a deep breath as she tore the ropes off her hands and picked at the knot of the gag that hung around her neck.

“Here, let me,” I said, in an attempt to be nice. She eyed me warily, but let me undo the knot. It only took a moment; I’d learned a thing or two about knots when I had been Stit’s cabin-boy, before I had been permanently left in the city after he had caught me looking at a scroll on the scribe’s cabin.

She didn’t seem too grateful though. The moment the gag came apart she spun to face me and said, “I won’t help you, so you might as well leave now. The less I know about you, the better.”

“Interesting,” I said. “You’re not planning to tell anyone about me being here. Not what I expected from a qodder willing to humiliate herself in a Qilarite pantomime.”

Her cheeks reddened. “What does it matter? In case you haven’t noticed, the Qilarites are in charge.”

Did she really not see her privilege? Her *responsibility*? “It matters,” I said, “because the rest of us don’t have a choice about being humiliated for the pleasure of Qilarites. *You* do.”

Her face darkened. “Get out. I’ll scream for the guards.”

“No, you won’t,” I said, my tone much more certain than I felt. “You’d have to explain why you were talking to me. I’ll swear to Gytia that you’ve been helping us.”

“No one will believe that.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I snarled. So much for being nice. “It’d still be the end of your cozy life in the palace. Do you think the king doubts you’d betray him? You’re Arnath, whether you like it or not.”

Her eyes blazed. “I know what I am.”

I was shocked at how much she infuriated me, this little slip of a thing, the girl I had pegged as being so quiet and meek. I advanced on her, as if she were every Arnath in this city who cowered behind a masters’ door hoping the Resistance would succeed but unwilling to risk helping it do so. “So you don’t *care* about anyone but yourself. You don’t mind if Arnath children are worked to death or Arnath women are raped by their masters or Arnath men die in the quarries, as long as *you’re* comfortable in the palace. You don’t care if the rest of your people die in ignorance. And you, born on the Nath Tarin. The Learned Ones would be ashamed.”

Her face went slack, and then she shoved me with unexpected force. It threw me off balance and I hit the floor. I pulled myself to my feet, but before I could say anything more, there was a sharp knock at the door. We both froze.

“Jonis?” said Kiti’s voice from the other side.

I crept closer and said, “What is it?”

Kiti opened the door and poked his head in. “Rale’s on his last speech. You’d better get out of here.” Kiti smiled at Raisa. “Shinings, Raisa.”

She replied to the greeting, but seemed distracted – probably at finding out that Kiti was part of the Resistance. I scowled at Kiti as he shut the door – I’d explicitly told him to stay out of sight, and I suspected that he had purposely let Raisa see him, either because he thought it would sway her to our side, or because he’d been eavesdropping and had decided I was being too harsh.

What was the good of moving up in the Resistance if no one actually did what I told them to do?

Anyway, I’d done all I could do here. I grabbed the Tutor’s arm, not missing how she flinched at the contact, and said, “You think the knowledge you have is a gift. But you wear shackles too, even if they’re silk instead of iron.” I’d practiced that line just for this occasion, so I’d be damned if I didn’t use it. I followed that with something I’d seen Tyasha do: I grabbed her hand and traced the symbol *freedom* into it. “We haven’t forgotten what it means,” I said. “A

messenger will come to you, and will say these words: ‘The rains are coming off the ocean.’ If you will help us, answer, ‘Yes, from the islands.’ If not . . . the gods help you.”

I gave her a hard look, then let go. It was up to her now. I didn’t look back as I went to the door and knocked twice. At Kiti’s returning knock, indicating that the coast was clear, I dashed out and down the hallway to the side door where I should have entered in the first place.

“Is Deshti still upstairs?” I asked Kiti.

“No idea,” he said. “What was she doing here?”

“Long story,” I said.

The pantomime was over now, and it was easy to slip into the crowd milling outside the door. I attached myself to an elderly Qilarite merchant, walking with my head down close enough behind him that the guards would assume I was his slave. I needed to either find Stit or get back to the house before he did, but I had to make sure Deshti was safe first. I threaded my way through the crowd, sticking close to various Qilarites, until a leathery-faced woman slapped me and told me to get away from her daughter. I mumbled apologies and slipped away before she drew the guards’ attention, and finally hoisted myself up on to the back of the stage so I could get a better look at the crowd.

There was Deshti, standing behind her mistress as she flirted with the oilseller. Deshti caught my eye and gave me a brief nod, the corners of her mouth curling up. I nodded back, knowing that I should be grateful for her help, not annoyed. With Deshti those things often seemed to go hand-in-hand.

And then I caught sight of Stit, not far from where Deshti stood. He’d seen me, and his face was stormy.

I dropped to the ground and pushed my way through the crowd toward him, though every instinct told me to go in the opposite direction.

“What were you doing up there?” he snarled.

“I couldn’t find you, Master, and I thought –”

“And where were you?”

“I was in that tree watching the pantomime, and –”

Stit looked doubtfully at the tree in question. “I’ll find out if you’re lying, boy. You ought to know that by now.”

“Yes, Master,” I said with my eyes on my boots, my fingers firmly laced together in front of me.

“Horel, can we leave?” said Mistress Kelia. “It’s too hot out here for Erala.”

Stit’s face grew fractionally softer when he looked at her – his tolerance for his weak, whiny wife might have been his only redeeming quality – and said, “Of course.”

I slipped my shoulder under Erala’s arm, relieving Mistress Kelia of the duty, and we all followed Stit as he bullied his way through the crowd. I gave one last glance at the temple, praying to any god who might be listening that what I had done here today wouldn’t turn out to be a huge mistake.